

Misfits of the Ton Novella

THE TAMING *of the* DUKE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EMILY ROYAL



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THE TAMING OF THE DUKE

Misfits of the Ton Novella

by
Emily Royal



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Text by Emily Royal

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P.O. Box 23

Moreno Valley, CA 92556

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Produced in the United States of America

First Edition November 2023

Kindle Edition

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CHAPTER ONE

London
December 1817

TWO MEN STOOD on the edge of the ballroom and surveyed the dance. The younger, Lord Lucian Horton, tapped the edge of his glass in time to the music while he watched the other guests—an array of brightly colored gowns weaving to and fro in precisely formed patterns.

His gaze lingered on a young woman sitting at the opposite end of the room. In a gown of soft pink, and with honey-blonde curls arranged elaborately on her head, eyes the color of cornflowers, and delicate features, she was the loveliest thing he had ever seen.

The woman next to her was a different creature altogether. Pretty—or at least, she would be if she smiled—her hair was a flame-red color if it contained a piece of the sun.

Or the fires from hell.

Sharp, green eyes surveyed the room with an expression of disdain. She'd emerged from the womb, already determined to hate the world.

Lucian sipped his drink and sighed.

“Is Lady Wilton’s champagne not to your taste?” his companion asked.

“On the contrary, Horatio, Lady Wilton furnishes her guests with the best,” Lucian said, “and tonight’s no exception.”

“If it’s not the liquor that’s disappointing you, dear boy, it must be the woman. And I’ll wager I know which one.”

“You think you can read my mind?” Lucian asked.

“A man doesn’t need to be a mind reader to know how smitten you are with Miss Blanche Parville.”

There was no point in denying it. Lucian drained his glass, then gestured toward the nearest footman, who scuttled over and took the empty glass.

“Another, Lord Horton?” the footman asked.

Lucian shook his head. "I've had enough."

The servant bowed and scuttled off.

"You should have another glass," Horatio said, "if only to enable summon the courage to ask the delightful Blanche to dance."

"I've no hope of securing a dance with Blanche while the *Spinster* guards her like a dog," Lucian said.

"Ha!" Horatio cried. "You're a coward."

"Cowardice has nothing to do with it," Lucian said. "Lord Parv declared that none shall court Blanche until her older sister has se suitor of her own. And, given that Catherine is not only on the brink o e floor. but she's the most unpleasant creature to have entered society sin e to the Almighty was in leading strings, I'd wager that Hades would turn d silks, block of ice before *that* happened. No man would want to put up w shrew—especially with no dowry."

"Why do you seek to court her sister?" Horatio asked.

"Because, despite being penniless, Miss Blanche is the sweetest c e, elfin; imaginable. I'm quite in love with her."

The dance concluded, and the couples dispersed, giving Lucian a enough view of Miss Blanche Parville.

olor, as What an exquisite creature she was! The exact opposite of the mis looking shrew next to her.

Perhaps now was the time to ask her to dance.

in, as if But before Lucian could make his move, another young man appi her. By the look of him, he'd indulged in too much of their champagne. He swayed from side to side and extended his hand to Bla

iked. A sharp voice spoke.

with the "No—my sister shall *not* dance with you!"

The young man flushed.

st be a "Miss Catherine, I only wished to request a..." he began, but he short.

you are "Save your breath, you fool! Do you think my sister would con anything other than purgatory to stand up with a man so far in his cu he's incapable of walking without bumping into walls?"

gestured "Ye gods!" Horatio laughed. "The Spinster Shrew has a tongu is. enough to tear a man to shreds. How can the lovely Blanche be rel such a creature?"

“They had different mothers,” Lucian said. “Blanche’s mother Eugenie, was Lord Parville’s second wife. It’s a wonder he didn’t marry you to third time, given that he has no male heir.”

“Perhaps after seeing two wives into the grave and losing his fortune *Shrew* the gaming tables, he’s lost his appeal as a suitor,” Horatio said. “A title alone isn’t enough to live on. And there’s no guarantee that a third wife won’t burden him with another daughter rather than furnish him with a son.” At that moment, another man approached the two women. Older than the first, his hair was thinning at the top and graying at the temples. The first woman swatted the first man with her fan, then turned her attention on the second man who bowed and offered his hand to her sister.

“That’s Lord Gremshaw,” Horatio said. “Surely he’s not going to throw himself to Miss Catherine’s sharp tongue?”

She inclined her head in the manner of a monarch acknowledging a subject. Then, Miss Blanche stood, and let Lord Gremshaw lead her to the dance floor.

“What does Lord Gremshaw have that other men lack?” Horatio asked. “A wife,” Lucian said, “not to mention an advanced age. An unattached man has little chance of success securing a position for himself on Miss Blanche’s dance card, while her older sister is so thoroughly desirable.” He let out another sigh. “If only someone could be persuaded to marry Catherine, then I might have a chance at courting Blanche.”

He glanced at Horatio, as an idea formed in his mind.

Horatio shook his head. “Oh no—don’t even *think* it.”

“Think what?” Lucian asked.

“I’m not a fool, Lucian,” Horatio said. “You were going to suggest I court to Catherine long enough to persuade her father to permit you to marry Blanche. But I wouldn’t do it if you paid me.”

“Not for ten guineas?”

“Not even for a hundred! I’m not so desperate for cash that I’d consider it myself to even a moment in that unpleasant creature’s company. Besides, what makes you think Miss Catherine would accept a man’s suit? I’ve never heard her speak a civil word to anyone. It would take a very particular man to secure her affection.”

“Are you saying that you don’t possess the charm and wit to secure the affections of a lady?”

; Lady Horatio snorted. “Lady, indeed! Just because her father’s a villain doesn’t mean she’s a *lady*. Ladies should be alluring, tender, and delicious.”

“You make her sound like a filet steak.”

Lucian snarled. “Miss Catherine’s more like a piece of scrag end,” Horatio said. “In all, it’s on the palate and guaranteed to ruin a man’s constitution for life. I’d rather have a poor wife and a poor son than a rich wife and a poor son.”

Lucian snarled. “Such as who?”

At that moment, a ripple of murmurs threaded through the ballroom. In a second, the atmosphere had shifted.

“I’ll be damned!” Horatio exclaimed. “I didn’t expect to see *him!*”

A newcomer stood at the entrance to the ballroom, flanked on either side by their hosts, Lord and Lady Wilton.

Tall and broad-shouldered, he wore a dark blue jacket and tightly fitted cream breeches, which clung to his athletic frame.

Daxton Hawke, fifth Duke of Petrush.

He stepped forward, and the company parted to make room for him. Several female heads turned, their feathered headdresses nodding in the direction of the nameblushing debutantes, desperate mamas—eager to catch a glimpse of a single eligible bachelor in England.

A slight sneer curled on his lips, as if he considered the company beneath him, and for a moment, he reminded Lucian of the expression on Catherine Parville’s face.

“Now *that* must be the Hand of Fate,” Horatio said.

“I don’t understand.”

“Dax is the answer to your problem. He’d have no scruples about pretending to court the Spinster Shrew. In fact, he’d delight in the challenge and would likely do it for sport rather than coin. Of course, it would be a form not to offer him a little stipend for his trouble.”

“You know him well?” Lucian asked.

“We were at Oxford together. Dax was the year above me at Christ Church College. He won the boxing match against Cambridge three years ago. In his third year, he flattened his opponent less than a minute in the first round. And, he’d be perfect to assist you in your time of need.”

“In what way?” Lucian asked. “Unless you’re expecting him to fight Catherine in the ring in order to clear the way to Blanche.”

discount, Horatio chuckled. "Of course not. But, in addition to boxing, Daxton is a champion in many forms of sport—especially the one which all men seek to perfect."

Lucian glanced toward the duke. The man carried an air about him that was not only the self-assurance which came with being the handsomest man in the room, but also the confidence which came with No, my room or with having a title of such distinction. But the very atmosphere seemed to bend around him, as if the world—and everyone in it—acknowledged his mastery.

A man like him would have the pick of every woman in the room, as if most likely, had bedded many of them already, given the sidelong glances he cast at the ladies as he walked past. And while Lucian, like most men of his acquaintance, had indulged in a mistress or two, he was not so naïve as to be unaware of the difference between a novice and a master of the sport which all men indulged in.

The sport of seduction.

"Daxton's reputation is unsurpassed," Horatio whispered. "He's perfect at the skill of removing a woman's undergarments with one hand, and downing a brandy with the other. If any man has a chance of persuading Spinster Shrew into a courtship long enough for her father to give you a dowry, it's Daxton. Most to court Miss Blanche Parville—it's Daxton."

At that moment, Blanche walked by on Lord Gremshaw's arm, and she glanced at Lucian and their gazes met. He smiled and his heart fluttered, and she returned the smile. She lowered her gaze, a delicate bloom spreading across her cheeks, then she lifted her gaze again, her eyes sparkling, and her heart was lost.

She was exquisite!

There was nothing he wouldn't do to have the opportunity to challenge her. And, if Daxton Hawke had the ability to help him, then he could not be bad price, and Lucian would empty his coffers.

Provided that the duke was willing to suffer the company of the Spinster Shrew.

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Horatio chuckled. “Of course not. But, in addition to boxing, Dax excels in many forms of sport—especially the one which all men seek to perfect.”

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Provided that the duke was willing to suffer the company of the Spinster Shrew.



CHAPTER TWO

CATHERINE SIPPED HER champagne in the hope that the cool liquid temper her headache. But, if anything, the pain increased, magnified an amorphous haze of noise in the ballroom.

She glanced about in search of her sister. The dance had finished, the penultimate dance of the evening. The rhythm of music and footsteps had been replaced by the harshness of chatter and gossip as the guests congratulated each other on their prowess. The ladies returned to their partners to be quizzed on the eligibility of their partners, and the gentlemen returned to their friends—fellow predators—to compare notes on their prey and the best to net them.

You've had too much champagne again, Cat.

The ballroom was overly hot, and she longed for a glass of water, but there was only punch to be had—which she loathed—or champagne, which was only marginally less loathsome.

Why was it that the hostesses of balls supplied so much liquor for their guests? Perhaps they wanted them to fall into a drunken stupor, to forget the dreariness of the evening and the ridiculous charade of tiptoeing around the opposite sex in order to secure a partner for life. Most gentlemen see their ability to consume as much liquor as possible without color as a signified their virility. Or worse, they understood that liquor rendered a woman less able to resist their advances.

Careful, Cat, you're sounding like a bitter spinster.

She glanced around the room and noticed a pair of young ladies whispering to her. They leaned toward each other, exchanged a few remarks, then looked away.

Society debutantes—creatures whose only function was to look pretty on the arm of a man. But, beneath the vacuous appearance lay a predatory instinct to rival that of the men. Most women viewed the rest of their sex as rivals for a man's affection. And that rivalry often took a dangerous turn. A

was not above leading her opponent to ruination if it paved the way
own success.

And, for a woman, there was only one measure of success.

Marriage.

Too often, women believed they possessed the power—by their al
use their beauty and fortunes like bait, to lure men into their traps. Bu
could never be enslaved. He merely devoured the bait, and, along with
l might woman's freedom.

by the Men such as the pair who'd been staring at Blanche all evening—
seventh Viscount Horton, and his friend, the ridiculously wealthy Mr
ed—the Lord Horton was just the sort of man to devour an innocent female
aps had been introduced to Catherine and her sister earlier in the Season, a
dancers showed a very marked attraction to Blanche—an attraction that Ca
mamas feared was reciprocated.

returned But Papa would never permit a courtship—not until Catherine had
nd how a suitor. Papa had made his desperation for a man to take Catherine
hands plain. And, given that Catherine had no intention of submitting
to a man's ownership, Blanche was, at least for the moment, protecte
er. But such a fate. Catherine feared her sister would hate her for it, but s
, which protecting Blanche out of love—saving her from the fate that both her
and Blanche's mother had succumbed to.

or their With a sigh, she set her glass aside. An excess of champagne
rget the brought on a bout of melancholy, and she was on her third glass.

und the Then, a couple approached—Blanche, on the arm of the silver
med to Lord Gremshaw—and Catherine's melancholy fell away.

lapsing Whatever Catherine may think of society—and the ladies there
lered a beloved sister, in her purity, shone like a beacon among the dull debut

Blanche had the sweetest disposition, her innocence only enhanc
wide-eyed beauty. She was the prettiest creature in the room tonig
atching fortune was almost non-existent—too small to attract fortune hunters,
giggled left her exposed to a different kind of predator.

Men such as *him*...

retty on But, in her innocence, Blanche had no notion of the world—a wo
r nature still viewed with the eyes of a child—and Catherine had no wish for I
vals for to lose her innocence.

woman “Cat!” Blanche cried as she approached. “Did you see me dan

for he didn't put a foot wrong."

"Of course, you didn't, Blanche dear," Catherine said. "You've practicing all week."

"I almost stumbled, but Lord Gremshaw was kind enough to stability tonight."

to a man "Nonsense, my dear child," Gremshaw said. "You dance beautifully, but he steered Blanche to the seat beside Catherine. "You must be thirsty."

Blanche—and Miss Parville—may I fetch you each a glass of punch?"

Lucian, "Not for me," Catherine said. Blanche glanced at her, then she bowed her head.

and he'd "Nor me, Lord Gremshaw," Blanche said, "but thank you for the drink."

and had "Then I shall leave you in your sister's capable hands and return to Catherine Gremshaw." He clicked his heels together and issued a bow, then disappeared into the crowd.

and found The musicians began to tune their instruments, and a number of couples lined up on the dance floor.

herself "Last dance," Blanche said. "Are you sure there's nobody you would dance with, Cat?"

he was Catherine shook her head. "I have no desire to dance."

mother "Would you mind if I..."

"There's no one suitable to partner you," Catherine said.

always At that moment, a gentleman approached. Dressed in a dark green embroidered waistcoat and highly polished boots, he cut a fine figure.

dark-haired Handsome enough to be considered dangerous, he stared at Catherine with overt admiration in his eyes. Then he shifted his gaze to Catherine. A look of

contempt shone on his face, and she could almost hear the voice in her mind.

ing her *There she is—the Spinster Shrew.*

ht. Her He resumed his attention on Blanche and bowed.

but that "Miss Blanche, what a pleasure to see you here tonight!" he said.

just saying to my friend how much I longed to see you. The comparison was the better for your presence, and I will regret it for the rest of my life if I

world she this opportunity to ask you to partner me for the final dance of the evening.

Blanche *Ugh.*

Catherine shuddered inwardly at the insincerity in his tone, which had been lowered to enhance the appearance of masculinity.

“Why is that, Lord Horton?” she asked.

His gaze reverted to her, and a spark of panic flickered in his expression. *Yes, you fool, I can see through your ruse.*

“Because your sister is the most beautiful woman in the room.”

“Have you nothing to say of her character?” Catherine asked.

“I’m certain that, with the face of an angel, your sister must be the most beautiful of creatures.”

“Is that certainty or speculation?” she asked. “You have, I believe, never looked at my sister once, when we were introduced at Lady Gray’s soiree last year.”

Or, have you ignored the rules of propriety and visited her unchaperoned?” He shifted from one foot to the other, and when he spoke again, the softness of Ladytone of his voice had disappeared.

“Ahem—I meant no offense, Miss Parville,” he said. “I’ve only been concerned with propriety, and would do nothing to compromise your sister. I was only coupllessaying that...”

“You were making an uninformed judgment about my sister’s character merely based on the fact that she’s pleasing to the eye.”

A flare of irritation crossed his expression.

“Are you impugning your sister’s character, Miss Parville?”

“No, Lord Horton,” Catherine replied. “I was impugning *yours*.”

“I...”

“If you wish to dance with a woman merely because you find her figure appealing, I suggest you find yourself another partner.”

“Perhaps Miss Blanche would like to answer for herself.”

Catherine exchanged a glance with her sister.

Remember Papa’s instructions, Blanche.

As if she understood the silent command, Blanche nodded. “I’m sorry I’m unable to dance, Lord Horton, but thank you for the invitation. Perhaps another time, when I’m in a position to accept?”

“I was sorry to hear that,” she said. “I’ll be glad to accept your invitation any time.” Before Catherine could stop her, Blanche offered her hand. Lord Horton took it and lifted it to his lips. “My dear Miss Blanche,” he said. “I shall be glad to accept your acceptance with anticipation.” Then he turned to Catherine.

“Miss Parville—a pleasure,” he said in a tone that implied anything but sincerity.

As soon as he’d rejoined his friend at the opposite end of the ballroom, Catherine’s sister hissed in her ear.

“Did you have to be so uncivil? He only wanted a dance.”

“It matters not,” Catherine said. “You know what Papa thinks.”
Blanche rolled her eyes. “Yes,” she said, exasperation in her tone. “I won’t let anyone court me until someone courts *you* first. But have you considered that I might have enjoyed dancing with someone as handsome as Lord Horton?”

“Beauty’s no guarantee of character, Blanche,” Catherine said. “Often, it goes hand in hand with a poor character.”

“A man cannot help how he looks, Cat, no more than a woman.”

“I disagree.” Catherine gestured around the ballroom at the brightly colored silks and feathered headdresses, some so tall that they were in deep danger of brushing the chandeliers. “You only need look at the prim debutantes prancing about—all trying to do each other to secure a coveted attention—to see that I’m right. We live in a world dominated by men, not merely women so insipid that they base their opinions on looks alone.”

Blanche folded her arms and let out a huff. “*You’re* the only one who bases your opinion on looks, Cat. Perhaps you’re as shallow as those you despise. Or maybe you envy their beauty given your lack of it?”

Catherine averted her gaze as the long-buried memory—of *his* words—resurfaced.

Who’d want to court an ugly little thing like you, Miss Parville?

A light hand touched her arm, and she turned to see Blanche looking at her out of wide, expressive blue eyes.

“Forgive me, Cat.”

“It matters not,” Catherine replied. “The Spinster Shrew has no feelings to remember?”

“It *does* matter, and you *do* have feelings,” Blanche insisted. “I’m not afraid to understand why you must conceal them. And I didn’t mean it when I said perhaps, I lacked beauty. You could have your pick of suitors if you tried—I only wonder why you don’t.”

“Believe me, Blanche, you’re better not knowing.”

“You’ve always been kind to *me*,” Blanche said. “You’re like the woman I never knew. In fact, when I overheard Miss Sandford telling Miss Horton that you had the disposition of a spider, I had a good mind to tell the whole ballroom, that...”

“Hush!” Catherine said. “It wouldn’t do to tarnish my reputation among those unbearable creatures believe me to be *amicable*. I’ve a reputation to maintain.”

uphold.”

“Very well, I shan’t pursue it,” Blanche said. “But will you c
ve you something?”

“Concede what?”

“That if a man is ever to know my character, he must first be perm
“More talk to me. Otherwise, he’ll only ever know me for my looks.”

Catherine sighed. Blanche spoke sense. How was a woman supp
learn about a man’s character? If a man existed who was worthy of Bl
rray of trust, how would she ever discover him without engaging in a little
y were conversation? And, the only acceptable setting for a private conversati
ped-up when partnered in a dance.

Blanche took her hand. “Perhaps, Cat, you might permit me to dan
en and Lord Horton at Lady Hardwick’s house party next week? After a
cannot expect me to spend the entire time sitting in the corner. And, th
basing acknowledge your inability to trust a man, I would ask that you trus
seek to take care of myself. You’ve said yourself that Lord Hardwick is
admirable character and would never knowingly invite a rogue i
ords—home.”

True, Lord Hardwick was an excellent man, and his wife was one
few women in society who Catherine could tolerate for more than
king at moments—she could almost say that she liked the woman.

“Very well, Blanche. I’ll give you leave to dance with Lord Ho
Hardwick House, if he asks you. But you must bear in mind that Pap
eelings, let him court you.”

“Not unless a man courts *you* first.”

Catherine laughed. “I’m hardly likely to find a man whose compar
aid you tolerate,” she said. “But, perhaps, if it would make *you* happy, I migh
nly ask an effort. But he’d have to be an extraordinary man, indeed.”

“Then I must be content with that,” Blanche said. “May I perhap
you a glass of punch to seal our bargain?”

“What bargain?”

“That if we can find an extraordinary man for *you*, then you’ll per
m both to court you so that I might get to know Lord Horton better.”

Before Catherine could respond, Blanche leaped to her feet and m
nd have way to the punchbowl, where a footman stood waiting.

Catherine smiled inwardly.

Incorrigible child!

Concede Then she checked herself. *Good grief*—she was sounding like an aunt. But that’s exactly what she was, despite being only ten years old. Blanche. Her own dear Mama had died giving birth to a son—a child allotted to survive for just a few days. In his desperation for a male heir, Papa had taken a second wife barely a few weeks after Mama’s passing, but Catherine had grown to love Lady Eugenie as a mother. When her stepmother had given birth to Blanche, Catherine had taken her baby sister under her private protection from Papa’s bitter resentment.

And she was protecting her now from the predators who circled London ballrooms in search of a woman to furnish them with heirs.

Catherine cast her gaze across the ballroom. Papa was nowhere to be seen, you—most likely still indulging at Lord Wilton’s gaming tables in the rookery. She caught sight of Lord Horton, drinking champagne and laughing, flanked on either side by two men. On the left, was Mr. Horatio Bond, and on the right...

Her heart skipped a beat, and her throat constricted.

The man on his right was the handsomest man she had ever seen. He was handsome, but *dangerously* so. With jet black hair curling under his crown, he carried a piratical air of savage brutality.

She caught her breath as she took in his strong, masculine features: angular cheekbones which might have been chiseled from marble, a nose bearing a slight kink, as if it had been broken in a fight, full lips which ignited a fire in her belly, thick, dark eyebrows in an angular arch across his forehead.

As for his eyes...

Oh my! His eyes—the color of sapphires—they were fixed on her.

She met his gaze, boldly. Men usually shied away from a woman’s fierce, daring look them in the eyes, but he held her gaze, his eyes darkening. His frank appraisal ignited a small fire in the pit of her stomach and, though she wanted to look away, her mind willed her not to—as if she were a woman transfixed by a predator’s stare. She drew in a breath to clear the fog from her mind, but to her shame, her breasts had grown heavy, and her sensible bodice beaded against the fabric of her gown.

Then, his glaze flicked down, and she let out a low cry and lifted her hand to conceal her décolletage. As if he read her mind, his lip curled into a

A sparkle ignited in the depths of his eyes, and her belly fluttered with an aged pulse of longing.

Blanche thought, Sweet Lord—how could a man ignite such a fire in her body with a look? Who'd look?

Blanche had said, *Stop it!*

The voice of reason echoed inside her head, and she drew a sharp breath and forced herself to look away.

Blanche thought, *What a fool I am!*

She had vowed never to be captivated by a handsome face again, but London's she was, at the first sight of a man—an undeniably virile-looking man turning into a giddy schoolgirl.

And, as she knew from experience, *that* was the first step on the path to the next heartbreak.

She closed her eyes, counting to three as she inhaled, then exhaled and counting to five. When she opened her eyes again, Blanche had returned with two glasses of punch. Catherine took one and sipped it. Then, she summoned the courage to look across the ballroom. The man was still there, but his attention

was not just focused on Lord Horton.

Good. Perhaps, Horton would tell the man of her shrewish nature and he'd avoid her like everyone else.

A voice whispered in her mind of what it might be like to be courted by a straight man such as him. But she had already trodden on that path and had no room to turn back.

Blanche

Blanche
thought. His
though she
was a rabbit
trapped in her
sensitized

her hand
with a smile.

A sparkle ignited in the depths of his eyes, and her belly fluttered with a little pulse of longing.

Sweet Lord—how could a man ignite such a fire in her body with a single look?

Stop it!

The voice of reason echoed inside her head, and she drew a sharp breath and forced herself to look away.

What a fool I am!

She had vowed never to be captivated by a handsome face again, but here she was, at the first sight of a man—an undeniably virile-looking man—turning into a giddy schoolgirl.

And, as she knew from experience, *that* was the first step on the path to heartbreak.

She closed her eyes, counting to three as she inhaled, then exhaled, counting to five. When she opened her eyes again, Blanche had returned with two glasses of punch. Catherine took one and sipped it. Then, she summoned courage to look across the ballroom. The man was still there, but his attention was focused on Lord Horton.

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CHAPTER THREE

DAXTON HAWKE, FIFTH Duke of Petrush, leaned against the wall and surveyed the dance floor.

Excellent timing.

The final dance of the evening had already begun, sparing him the fawning attention of eager debutantes and desperate mamas. Though he had resigned himself to the prospect of marriage, women, in his opinion, were better bedded than wedded.

And the company tonight was not the sort that preferred to be bedded.

The women in the ballroom carried an air of respectability about them which simply meant a lack of enjoyment and an absence of pleasure. No man wanted to shackle himself to a *respectable* woman for life—a beautiful creature who nodded and smiled at every opportunity?

No—Dax wanted a woman with fire in her belly—a woman to challenge him and keep him wanting. After all, the chase was always more pleasurable than the prize.

Unfortunately, the sort of woman to challenge him with the prospect of a sweet victory after a bloody battle was unlikely to be found in Lady V's ballroom. A Cyprian's ball was a better hunting ground. But, even there, the brightly painted, exotic creatures—delectable they might be—only dined on the coin. To them, pleasure was a means to make a living rather than something to savor, and Dax always tired of them in the end. He wanted a woman whose screams of ecstasy were *genuine*.

He continued to survey the room, and his gaze landed on Horatio, an old friend from his Oxford days.

At last—some congenial company.

Bond's grandfather had acquired his fortune through trade, but he wasn't about to hold that against the grandson. Bond himself had excelled academically at Oxford, but he lacked the conceit of most intellectuals. Dax wasn't ashamed to call him friend.

At that moment, a sharp voice cut through the dull fog of inane chatter.

“If you wish to dance with a woman merely because you find her appearance appealing, I suggest you find yourself another partner.”

Heavens! Though Dax relished the prospect of a woman who challenged him, he drew the line at wanting to endure the tongue-lashing of a woman. How else, other than an attraction to a young woman’s looks, was he supposed to determine whether or not to ask her to dance?

He glanced toward the source of the voice and suppressed a laugh. He surveyed milk-sop Lord Horton as he bowed before a young woman, hand outstretched in a gesture of exaggerated chivalry. The way he’d bent his legs to bow before her, suggested he suffered from an ailment of a digestive nature.

The woman was pleasant enough, if a man liked that sort of thing. She was a pretty creature with blonde ringlets and eyes the color of cornflowers.

As for the woman sitting beside her, the one who’d spoken...

The expression on her face was as if she’d just stepped in something that had just come out of the arse end of a horse.

While her companion looked to be the epitome of ladylike grace, she was anything but. Her hair was the color of fire—deep red with flashes of burnable gold, as if she’d been forged in the pits of hell. Sharp green eyes glared at him with contempt.

A veritable Medusa—had Lord Horton turned to stone, Dax wouldn’t have been surprised. Perhaps, if he moved closer, he’d see serpents in her hair. A pity. Had she seen fit to smile, she might have been quite pleasant. Her coloring stood out among the crowd, despite her plain dress, being a plain white muslin compared to the eye-wateringly bright silks worn by the other ladies.

Eventually, Horton shrugged as if in defeat, then crossed the dance floor to join Bond. Dax sauntered toward them.

“Oh, I say, Petrush!” Bond cried. “A delight to see you, old man. I noticed you turning all heads as you made your entrance—though you arrived too late to dance, I’m afraid.”

“By design rather than misfortune,” Dax said.

Bond let out a laugh. “Your design is the ladies’ misfortune. I’ve heard a collective sigh the moment you arrived. I daresay you’d no doubt want of a partner, even midway through the dance. Even if you cut a couple, the lady would, most likely, thank you for it.”

Bond gestured toward his companion. “You know Lord Horton.”

and her course.”

“A little,” Dax said. “I’ve seen him at White’s. Aren’t you challenged Horton?”

“There’s only one woman in the room that Horton wishes to please,” a man Bond said. “The Honorable Blanche Parville. But he’s failed endeavors.”

“The pretty creature in the white muslin?” Dax asked.

“Yes,” Horton said, his tone sulky. “The one sitting next to the shrub crouch.”

Dax smiled to himself at the petulance in Horton’s voice. In a world where men ruled, particularly those of their class—a viscount who had been humiliated by a rejection from a female—particularly a rejection delivered with such sting. He glanced toward the two women, who now appeared to be arguing.

“Are you going to ask him?” Dax caught Horton’s whisper and turned toward his companions.

“Ask me what?”

Horton had the grace to flush, and Bond cleared his throat. “Horton was wondering if you could assist him on a rather delicate matter.”

“Is he not man enough to ask me himself?”

“I’d make it worth your while,” Horton said. “What say you for fifty guineas?”

Dax let out a laugh. “You think I’m short of cash?”

Horton’s embarrassment deepened. “It’s for a bet, nothing more,” he said. “and it’d be the easiest fifty guineas you’ll ever earn.”

“If it’s such an easy task, I wonder why you’re at pains to pay and undertake it,” Dax said. “I don’t like the sound of it.”

“All you need do is court a woman,” Horton said.

“Good Lord!” Dax laughed. “Are you out of your wits? I’ve no interest in courting anyone. The fawning misses of London hold no attraction for me.”

“Not for real, you dunderhead!” Bond laughed. “Just long enough to convince the lady’s father. And, if you’re seen courting a woman, the other fawning misses will leave you be.”

“Now *that*, is the only advantage I can think of,” Dax said. “I take no interest in courting anyone.”

“suppose, once I’ve engaged her affections, I must seek a way to transfer her affections to me?” he shook his head. “If you want the Honorable B

why don't you just take her?"

"No, not her," Horton said. "You're to court her sister."

"*Good grief*," Dax cried. "You're saying that the woman next to her partner, *sister*? She looks more like an aunt—and an unpleasant one, at that."

Horton laughed, "I daresay she's old enough to be her aunt."

"They don't look alike," Dax said. "One's a ray of spring sunshine whereas the other's like a sharp frost."

"They're *half-sisters*," Horton said. "Different mothers. It was sort of a world of a scandal at the time."

"Really?"

"Their father, Lord Parville, is rumored to be most put out that he'd be furnished with a male heir," Horton continued. "Miss Parville's husband died giving birth to a son, and a month later, Lord Parville led her down the aisle. Which means," he lowered his voice, "the banns must have been read within days of him having buried his first wife."

"And the second wife?"

"She died giving birth to the delectable Blanche," Horton said. "Lord Parville was rumored to be so angry at being left a widower with only fifty daughters that he refused, at first, to acknowledge Blanche's existence."

Dax glanced toward the two women. Perhaps the Medusa had been angry at the world if she'd suffered her father's disappointment—though he said, didn't explain her sister's sunny disposition.

Unless, perhaps, she protected her sister from their father's disappointment. With an absent, disinterested father, it would have been up to the elder sister to take on the role of a mother.

Perhaps rather than being a Medusa, she was a tigress, using her cunning to protect her cub.

Another young man approached the two women, hand outstretched toward the Medusa slapped it away.

"Leave us alone!"

Bloody hell—Medusa or tigress, she was an unpleasant prospect for courtship, even a fake one.

"Perhaps fifty isn't enough," Bond suggested with a laugh.

"I'll pay anything to have a chance with Miss Blanche," Horton sighed.

Dear God—the man was smitten!

"You haven't told me why courting her sister helps you achieve your goal."

aim,” Dax said.

“Oh, that’s simple,” Horton replied. “Their father has made it plain that he’ll not permit any man to court Miss Blanche until a man has been courted by Miss Catherine.”

Catherine...

At that moment, she looked up and met his gaze. Her eyes which first, reminded him of a cup of poison, had a richness of color like the finest emeralds—an intense, dark green, which drew him in like a deep ocean. She blinked and parted her lips—full, red lips made for kissing. He let his gaze drift across her body and settle on her neckline, where the skin as yet to décolletage was the color of smooth, rich cream, and the valley between her breasts promised a softness beneath the neckline of her gown. Though the countess was unremarkable in every aspect, his manhood stirred with longing for the promise of treasures concealed beneath.

Then, she lifted her hand and placed it over her chest, as if to promote modesty.

When he lifted his gaze to her face once more, her cheeks were flushed with a delicate color of rose. Her eyes had brightened, until they almost shined in the candlelight. But they no longer bore the sharp, shrewish look he had seen directed at Horton. Instead, he detected something else entirely.

Vulnerability.

“What say you, old boy?” Horton asked. “I’ll raise it to a hundred guineas as I’m courting Miss Blanche.”

“Oh, very well,” Dax replied. “A hundred would be compensation for having to endure the company of a disagreeable shrew.”

The woman’s eyes widened, and a flicker of pain shone in her expression. Surely, she couldn’t have heard what he’d just said?

Then, she hardened her expression and looked away.

Dax resumed his attention on Horton, and when he next glanced in that direction, she was striding across the dance floor, toward the terrace door. A man grasped her arm as she passed him, and Dax recognized Lord Francis, evidently deeply in her cups. She wrinkled her nose, then drew out her hand and swatted Francis smartly across the wrist.

“How dare you, madam!” he cried.

“Oh, *do* forgive me,” she drawled. “Perhaps I should have removed the offending item with a knife.” She closed her fan with a snap and dis-

onto the terrace, leaving Lord Francis nursing his wrist.
ain that Dax couldn't help smiling in admiration. Lord Francis was a lecher
egun to best of times and had a reputation for forcing his attention on women
his cups.

"Bloody hell!" Bond cried, laughing. "What a hellcat! No wonder
had, at father's desperate to rid himself of her."

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"Bloody hell!" Bond cried, laughing. "What a hellcat! No wonder her father's desperate to rid himself of her."

"I suppose you'll be wanting *two* hundred guineas now," Horton said.

"No," Dax said. "One hundred will suffice."

He found himself intrigued. There was no doubting that the Honorable Miss Parville was an unpleasant creature. But the flash of pain in her expression intrigued him.

Not only did he wonder what she might look like if she smiled—but he wanted to be the man who gave her cause to smile.



CHAPTER FOUR

SWEET HEAVEN! WAS she to be plagued by every drunkard in the place Francis had a reputation for priding himself on the number of young women he'd compromised while avoiding the need to do the honorable thing? Though, in Catherine's opinion, being compromised by him and *not* having wed him was the lesser of the two evils.

Do you seriously think I'd even contemplate the unpalatable prospect of a wedding you?

Shaking her head to dispel the memory, she made her way toward the terrace doors. Having left Blanche in Lady Wilton's care, Catherine closed the moment to herself, away from the buzz of inane chatter and compliments.

A footman stood beside the doors and raised an eyebrow as she approached.

"It's very cold outside tonight, Miss," he said. "It's been snowing."

"And?" Catherine cringed at the sharpness in her voice, but at this evening in the company of men, she'd had her fill of being contradicted and countermanded.

He pulled open the doors, bowed as she stepped through, then closed them behind her.

The cold air hit her like a wall, but she took comfort in its freshness. She walked across the terrace, her footsteps crunching in the snow. No matter how Papa would remark on her soaked slippers, but he'd be admonishing her anyway tonight. One more transgression wouldn't make a difference. The tirade of admonishments she was expecting in the carriage home.

She drew her shawl around herself and looked out over the garden. The moon hung low in the cloudless sky, casting a soft blue glaze over the landscape. Despite the strains of music and laughter filtering through the terrace doors, the snow had cast a blanket of silence across the world, the silence she sought solace in.

Why was it that people always saw a need to fill silence with in chatter and inane remarks? There was something to be said for a com who was comfortable enough in one's presence to just let the silence b

A screech echoed in the distance. An owl, most likely, hunting fo Yet another predator—but the owl sought its quarry in order to survi predators inside the ballroom tonight relished the sport of it.

She shivered—not from the cold, but from the memory of anothe e? Lord almost ten years ago. Then, she'd been a wide-eyed rabbit, unw g ladies following the wolf toward his lair. And though she hadn't been devoi thing—every other sense, her innocence had been lost—replaced iving to understanding of the world ruled by men who used women for the ends.

spect of At all costs, Blanche must be protected from such a fate. Only worthy of trust would be good enough for her—if such a man existed.

ard the The doors creaked open again, and music and laughter filtered t raved at the air.

d false Dear Lord—could she not be given a moment's peace? Lord Fran been ogling her all evening—not due to her looks or her dowry wh as she most men pointed out, were both non-existent, but because she was t woman in the room without a single dance partner, and therefore, in t of most men, the most desperate.

fter an But when she turned to face the newcomer, it wasn't Lord Francis. ted and It was Papa.

He approached her, the moonlight throwing shadows across the closed planes of his face. Cold blue eyes glittered with disapproval—so un sapphire gaze of another that had captivated her only moments before.

ess and “I see you're not dancing, Catherine, but I trust you *have* danced o doubt and not spent the entire evening sitting in a chair?”

ing her “Didn't you spend the entire evening in the gaming room?” she ret

e to the He moved toward her with a speed that belied his thin frame, a winced as a bony hand caught her arm, and his cadaverous fingers tig en. Their grip.

ver the “Shrewish creature!” he hissed, and her stomach churned at the igh the stale brandy and cigar smoke. “Always such a disappointment.”

orld—a “Because I was born a girl?”

“Yes—and because you killed my son!”

cessant The arrow hit home, and she curled her hands into fists to st
panionmemory—Mama’s screams from behind her bedchamber door, pleas
e. her unborn child, while Catherine kneeled on the floor outside her ch
or prey, praying that her beloved parent would be spared.

ve. The But her prayers had gone unanswered.

Early pregnancy brought about by a fall, the doctor had said.
r night, which had occurred when Mama returned from a ride, and Catherine,
ittingly out to greet her, had spooked her horse.

ured, in “And what of Mama?” she asked.

by an He let out a snort of derision, and muttered something under his
eir own which sounded very much like the words she’d heard eighteen ye
when the doctor had tried to express his condolences.

a man *Wives can easily be replaced.*

She had no wish to be a replaceable commodity.

through “If you’re not dancing, then I see no need to remain here tonig
said. “Go and send for the carriage.”

icis had She glanced up and met his gaze—the sour expression of a m
rich, as before his time, made bitter through loss. But the loss of two wives
he only nothing to him. Papa’s bitterness arose from the loss of his baby sc
he eyes most likely, the losses sustained tonight at the card tables. An early ex
a party was his strategy for avoiding creditors.

She pulled herself free, and he made no attempt to restrain her. Th
dipped into a curtsy.

angular “As you wish, *my lord*,” she said. “I trust that, in that, at least, I
like the disappoint you.”

“Have a care, Catherine,” he warned. “I’ve been patient with yo
tonight last years. But now I’ve had to waste further funds on your sister’s co
my patience is running thin. You must do better, or I shall marry yo
orted. the first man who turns up at my door—whether he’s a beggar or not.
and she inquire as to whether Lord Francis is attending Lord Hardwick’s
ghtened party.”

She shivered at the thought of that lecher’s hands on her. “Papa, I..
odor of “Silence!” he roared. “I see I’ve been too lenient with you. No ma
a shrew for a wife.” He lurched to one side and began to retch.

“Papa!” she cried. “Are you unwell? Let me help you.” She
toward him, but he slapped her hand away.

em the “If you want to help me, then stop being such a damned shrew a
ling for yourself a husband!” he cried. “Any husband—just to get you off my
amber, Now, do as you’re bid and fetch the carriage!”

“Yes, Papa.”

“I’ll have to warn your husband to take a firm hand with you, w
A fall the unfortunate man might be.”

rushing She fled to the doors and reentered the ballroom.

“Are you alright, Miss?”

She glanced up at the footman beside the door.

breath, “Yes, I’m fine,” she said. “Would you be so good as to hav
ars ago Parville’s carriage brought round? My father is indisposed.”

The footman glanced pointedly toward the gaming room, then
and walked off.

Catherine crossed the dance floor, weaving her way around the
ght,” he who were still enjoying their evening. Preoccupied with searchi

Blanche, she didn’t notice the man before her until it was too late, a
an, old collided into a solid, muscular form.

; meant “Excuse me,” a deep voice said.

n, and, Large, powerful hands took her arms where Papa had gripp
it from moments before, and she winced. She looked up, and the breath caught
throat, as eyes the color of sapphires stared back at her.

ien, she *Sweet Lord*—handsome he might be from a distance, but at close
he was breathtaking. A man to be avoided.

[shan’t “Let me pass, sir,” she said.

“It would be uncivil of me not to at least introduce myself, Miss Pa

u these “I see I’m at a disadvantage, sir, given that you know who I am
me-out, said. “Perhaps you know me by reputation.”

u off to “As the most charming young woman in the room?”

. I must She let out a laugh of derision. “Ah—I see you’re lacking in wi
; house most men.”

“Perhaps,” he said, “though whether a man is in possession of w
..” my opinion, relative.”

n wants “Relative to what?”

“Relative to the woman he seeks to court.”

reached “I assure you, you’ll find no woman worthy of courting here,” sl
“unless you are yet another dungwit who is entranced by a pretty fac

nd findfat dowry.”

hands. Rather than show offences, his eyes sparkled with amuse-
ment. “Dungwit?”

Sweet heaven—that smile...

whoever Her stomach fluttered, and she drew in a sharp breath to dispel the
rising within her body. But her senses were assaulted by a rich aroma of
wood, spice, and man.

An unfathomable sensation pulsed between her thighs. Uncomfortable,
somehow delicious...

the Lord “Let me go, sir.”

“Before I do,” he said, “permit me to introduce myself.”

nodded He took both her hands and lifted them to his lips. A spark of
ignited in her as his warm breath caressed her skin.

dancers “Daxton Hawke, at your service, Miss Parville,” he said. “And,
in assurance you that I will *never* be entranced by beauty or wealth in a woman,
and shefact, I take great enjoyment in the exact opposite of both those qualities.

His mouth curved into a smile, and he parted his lips, His tongue
out, moistening his lower lip, and she fought to suppress the notion of
what that tongue might be capable of. What might it be like to be kissed by
it in her lips...

Then he released her again, and she suppressed a whimper at the sense of
loss.

He clicked his heels together and bowed.

“Miss Parville—I very much look forward to the *great enjoyment*
of seeing you again. Perhaps at Lady Hardwick’s house party next month
if you are in London,” she said.

“I know—and see—much, Miss Parville.”

Then he was gone, leaving her alone among the throng of dancers.

its, like Daxton Hawke...

The name suited him. A hawk capable of swooping onto unsuspecting
prey.

And how did he know she was attending Lady Hardwick’s house party?

She lifted her hands to her face, closed her eyes, and breathed in the
scent of spices.

He said, When she opened them again, he’d returned to his friends.

She and a It was only as she joined Blanche and ushered her sister out

ballroom to wait for the carriage that it dawned on her.
sment. The man who'd captivated her like no other had paid her no comp
In fact, she'd go as far as to say that he'd insulted her.
If anything, that made him all the more intriguing.

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ballroom to wait for the carriage that it dawned on her.

The man who'd captivated her like no other had paid her no compliment. In fact, she'd go as far as to say that he'd insulted her.

If anything, that made him all the more intriguing.



CHAPTER FIVE

Hampshire
January 1818

“PETRUSH, OLD CHAP—IT’S good to see you!”

As Dax climbed out of his carriage and admired the frontage building before him, a tall man approached, hands outstretched.

“Hardwick!” Dax cried. “You’re looking well. What’s your secret?”

Lord Hardwick might be at least ten years older than Dax, but an vibrancy surrounded him, as if he’d taken an elixir of youth. He could have been mistaken for a man in his twenties, were it not for the graying of hair around the temples. As for his apparel...

The Augustus Hardwick Dax knew favored jackets in muted tones and brown—not the vibrant green he saw before him, or, for that matter, the richly embroidered waistcoat. The man looked positively rakish.

Hardwick took Dax’s hand in a strong grip. “How long has it been years?”

“Four, I believe,” Dax said. “The last time I paid a call, the house was empty. You were abroad, or so I was told—unless you were hiding visitors.”

“I wouldn’t hide from *you*, old chap,” Hardwick said. “I apologize if you’d had a wasted journey.”

“Not entirely,” Dax said. “I took the opportunity of visiting Hurlingham Place, seeing as it’s only two miles away.”

“Leander’s seat? I didn’t know you two were acquainted.”

“He was my house captain at Eton,” Dax said. “Something of a rogue, but I’d rather hoped marriage would have settled him.”

“And had it?”

“Probably not. I’d have felt sorry for his wife, were she not of that ilk.”

“Ah—the insatiable Mrs. Leander.”

Dax lowered his voice. “She demanded I escort her for a walk in the gardens on pretense of something or other, then propositioned me behind the box hedge.”

“Tell me that’s not a euphemism!” Hardwick laughed.

“Fortunately not,” Dax said. “But Lord save me from boredom. It seems as if as soon as she furnished Leander with an heir, she began to travel her way round Hampshire society, collecting lovers the way a man collects birds in the shooting season.”

“And you plan to visit him while you’re here?”

“Not if I can help it.”

of the
” “If you do, I’d advise you take a woman with you and pass her off as your fiancée—that’s about the only way to keep Mrs. Leander from ripping your breeches off with her teeth.”

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“Don’t tell me she’s thrown herself in *your* path?” Dax asked.
Hardwick nodded. “After Beatrice gave me a son, Mrs. Leander doesn’t seem to think I’d be in want of a little variety in the bedroom. However, women are not merely for the procreation of male offspring.” He lowered his voice. “And, there’s none so skilled as my wife in the bedchamber—and, in any other matter, in many other rooms about the house.”

“Ah,” Dax said. “Now, I understand your secret of eternal youth.”

“It’s marriage, dear boy,” Hardwick said, his voice filled with contentment.

In most circumstances, Dax would have reached for the nearest chamber pot to vomit in, but Hardwick had suffered heartbreak and he desired happiness. His first wife had been—for want of a more respectable word—a harlot, and Hardwick’s motto was *once betrayed, never fooled again*.

Hardwick called out to a tall, elegant young woman who was greting a couple beside the main doors. She turned and smiled, and the ride was solved.

She was stunning.

“Might I introduce my wife?” Hardwick held out his hand, and a woman approached them and took it, then she regarded Dax with the color of liquid chocolate.

“Beatrice, my love,” Hardwick said, “this is my friend, Daxton Duke of Petrush.”

She dipped into a curtsey. “Your Grace,” she said. “A pleasure. As you have spoken much of you.”

“Oh, dear,” Dax said. “For that, I can only apologize. Most of it I’m afraid.”

“I sincerely hope so,” she replied with a smile. “I hear that undisciplined and somewhat rakish exterior—something I can see for myself from looking at you—that you’re the most loyal friend known to man.”

Dax felt himself coloring at her frank appraisal. “Your husband grossly exaggerated my qualities.”

“I trust not,” she replied. “My husband is known for speaking the absolute truth, and I would be most aggrieved to learn that he’d disappointed you with regards to you.”

Dax took her hand and bowed over it. “Then, let me concede to you, Hardwick.”

“Thank you,” she said. Then she glanced over Dax’s shoulder, and her face lit up with joy. “Oh! That’s Giles and Henrietta arriving. Do excuse me. Your Grace. Your room’s all ready for you if you’d like to freshen up before supper. And, I hope to see you dancing tonight—there will be plenty of young ladies in need of a partner capable of steering them across the floor without bruising their toes.”

She ran toward a carriage which had just drawn to a halt, her lithe figure reminding Dax of a deer leaping over a fence.

No wonder Hardwick was experiencing a return to his youth! “Don’t tell me I’m expected to dance tonight, Hardwick,” Dax said. Hardwick let out a laugh. “Of course not! But you must admit—dancing is the only *respectable* method by which a man can be acquainted with a young woman without enduring the company of a chaperone.”

“You were never much of a dancer, if I recall.”

“That’s because I hadn’t yet found the right partner,” Hardwick said. “One could say the same of marriage.”

“So, you’re finding life in the parson’s chains agreeable?” Dax asked. Hardwick laughed good-naturedly. “My dear boy, is that cynicism in your voice?”

“I recall a time when you were the most cynical man I knew.”

“Only because I’d not found the right woman. I’m most fortunate

Augustus my beloved Beatrice.”

“You’ve weathered much at the hands of a woman, if I recall,” Dax said. “That’s true, but those days are long gone,” came the reply. “My Beatrice is a different woman compared to her predecessor. She’s unlike any other woman I’ve known. I’ve never seen your father so happy. Dax glanced once more toward Lady Hardwick, who was embracing Lord and Lady Thorpe. Though she lacked the decorum expected of a countess, he couldn’t deny that her artless joy made a refreshing contrast to the cold civility of most hostesses. She was the antithesis of the other women at the ball, Miss Parville, but each of the two women was intriguing in her own way. The being utterly unlike the bland misses who paraded themselves in front of the guests. As for Hardwick himself...

Dax couldn’t help but compare the man to Lord Parville—and Lady Parville wanting. Hardwick, like Parville, had lost his first wife in childhood. He’d suffered the further indignity of knowing that the child was most likely not his. But rather than wallow in bitterness, he’d picked himself up and remarried—not purely to furnish himself with an heir but in search of happiness before it was too late. And he’d found it.

...the envy of all who saw him. *Lucky bastard.*

...a dance. Bloody hell, that’s all he needed—to be envious of the marriage status of others. Thrusting his hands in his pockets, Dax made his way indoors, where a footman was waiting to lead him to his chamber. There would be time to ponder on the benefits of a happy marriage over supper.

l.



...the night that

...became *THERE SHE IS.*

...of her. Dax’s quarry sat at the opposite end of the table between their father and Lord Thorpe.

...she was seated several places away from both her father and sister, who Dax said. She was seated halfway down the table, near to Mr. Bond. Horton sat directly opposite Miss Blanche—by manipulation or sheer luck, Dax couldn’t fathom.

...ed. He resumed his attention on Miss Parville. Her gown was as plain as the one she’d worn at Lady Wilton’s ball, but her eyes were as clear as ever and her hair shone in the candlelight, shimmering with red and gold. Miss Parville may never be described as *sparkling*, but at least there was no sign of dullness to have

shrewish incivility. He found himself wanting her to secure the good of
x said. of Hardwick—one of the few men of his acquaintance whose good
n angelheld any value.

n.” Given her reputation, Miss Parville seemed almost congenial. She
acing asimpered nor scowled but paid attention to her dinner companio
ected ofseemed engaged in a conversation that was not merely a trade of
changePerhaps her incivility depended on the company she kept.

prickly And on the distance between herself and her father.

n way, *Any husband—just to get you off my hands.*

of him. That’s what the bitter old man had said to her on the terrace a

Wilton’s ball. And not long after she’d almost run through the terrace
nd findreturning to the ballroom, her features lined with distress, until he
ldbirth.hold of her, and she’d composed herself almost in an instant.

st likely He’d almost admired her at that moment—the way she had ref
up andwallow in self-pity, choosing instead to trade insults with him. Her sp
love. stirred something that was not mere physical lust—though he had to
that a woman that spirited would be an exciting prospect to tame
bedchamber.

ate. *Sweet heavens!* He crossed his legs to ease the ache in his gro
where aconceal the cockstand in his breeches.

time to “Your Grace? Is something amiss?”

He drew in a sharp breath and turned to see his hostess staring dir
him.

“N-no, Lady Hardwick.”

She gave a soft smile, then glanced across the table. “Do you not
intriguing that the best matches are often the most unlikely?”

ost and Dax followed her gaze to where her husband and Miss Parville we
in conversation. His heart skittered in his chest as he saw Miss Parvill
’d beencurl into a smile.

pposite Though he found himself longing to see the expression in her ey
gaze was directed at Hardwick.

1 as the *Lucky bastard.*

ver, and “Yes,” he breathed. “You’re right, Lady Hardwick. I wonder if t
Parvillematches occur between complete opposites.”

1 of her “I’m so glad you agree, Your Grace. Augustus and I are an u
match. He’s always been so sensible, whereas I...” she let out a sigh, ‘

opinion always been a little young for my age, or so my cousin tells me. In
opinion world would never evolve if we were only matched with those like us.

“Oh—you and Lord Hardwick...” he hesitated, “...forgive me...I
neither no offense. I wasn’t intending to refer to...”

ns and “It’s quite all right,” she said, laughter in her voice. “I was only te
insults. She lifted her glass to her lips and took a sip, light dancing in her eye:

I’m so glad you agree, Your Grace.”

She rose to her feet and the rest of the company followed suit.

“Time for a little dancing, *mes amis*,” Hardwick declared.

at Lady A ripple of murmurs threaded through the company, and Lady Ha
e doors, giggled. “I’ve always despised the convention which dictates that t
caught must retire over cigars while the women are confined to drinking to

each other. After all, the purpose of a party is to enjoy each other’s co
used to is it not? Of course, it gives me a reputation of being somewhat risq
irit had better that than a dullard any day. Would you care to escort me
to admit ballroom, Your Grace?”

in the Unable to resist her youthful charm, he offered his arm, and she
The rest of the party followed suit, and when Dax glanced over his sh
oin and he spotted Horton walking next to Bond, ogling Miss Blanche, his
almost hanging out. Their host brought up the rear, arm in arm wit
Parville.

ectly at The ballroom was enormous—a high ceiling bearing murals deco
gilt which shimmered in the candlelight, and tall mirrors which magni
light. At the far end, a small group of musicians were tunin
t find it instruments.

Their host bowed to Miss Parville, then led her toward a row of ch
re deep the edge of the ballroom. Shortly after, her sister joined her. Horton sa
e’s lip over toward Dax.

“Well?”

yes, her “Well, what?” Dax asked.

“You know jolly well what,” Horton said, irritation in his voice. ‘
your chance. Lord Parville’s in the room. Persuade the shrew to danc
he best she’s watching, and Miss Blanche will be fair game.”

Dax glanced at Miss Parville, who was talking to her sister, and h
unlikely ached at the expression of love in her eyes. However shrewish she mi
“...I’ve she clearly cared deeply for her sister.

But the “Be quick, man!” Horton hissed. “Thorpe looks like he’s going
” her.”

I meant “Thorpe’s no rival,” Dax said, “given that he’s married.”

“So?” came the reply. “You want to earn your hundred guineas
:asing.” you?”

s. “But, “Hush!” Dax hissed. “I don’t want the whole room knowing I’m a
seduce a woman for a bet.”

“Who said anything about *seduction*?” Horton laughed. “You on
make a pretense at courting her. Though, if you’re able to part th
ardwickthighs, I’ll throw in an extra hundred.”

he men “Good Lord, man—are you so smitten with her younger sister that
ea withlost all decorum?” Dax cried. “Even *I* know it’s not the done thing t
mpany, about a conquest until it’s been achieved.”

jué, but “So, you’re going to ask her?”

to the Horton was worse than a nagging harpy.

“If only to rid myself of your persistence,” Dax replied. He strode
took it. the ballroom, waving away a footman who approached him with a
oulder, glasses, until he stood before Miss Parville and her sister.

tongue At this close quarter, he could see the resemblance. Though only
th Missthe two ladies possessed the same stubbornness about the chin. Oth
that, they were strikingly different. Where Miss Blanche’s eyes were s
rated inpleasant, her elder sister’s eyes carried a fire deep within—a fi
fied thethreatened to engulf a man.

g their Dax found himself wanting to be engulfed.

He clicked his heels together and bowed. “Miss Parville—would
airs onme the honor of partnering me for the first dance?”

entered The two women exchanged glances. His quarry raised her eyebrow
younger sister’s eyes widened, then she shook her head and lowered h
and her cheeks flushed a delicate shade of rose.

“You must forgive my sister, Mr. Hawke,” Miss Parville said. “She
“Now’s “And you must forgive me, Miss Parville,” he interrupted. “It’s
e whilewish to dance with, not your sister, charming as she might be.”

“Me?” Her eyes widened in astonishment, then he caught a flash
is heartfear he’d noticed at the Wilton’s ball. “I’m afraid, I...”

ight be, “I insist,” he said, taking her hand.

“I’m disinclined to dance with a man to whom I’ve not been p

to ask introduced,” she said. “Such an offer shows a distinct lack of propriety

“I beg to disagree,” he said. “We were introduced at Lady Wilton’s
at least, I introduced myself. Perhaps I did not follow propriety as I o
s, don’t it pleases you, Miss Parville, permit me to rectify the insult now.”

“Perhaps you’re unused to the rules of society?” She continu
about to which case, you must be forgiven. Our charming hostess has a reputa
befriending all manner of individuals. I quite understand her conces
ly need receiving you through the front door rather than the tradesman’s entrar
ose icy “Cat!” the young woman next to her let out a squeal of horror. B

Parville, aware—almost proud—of the insult she’d leveled at Dax, i
you’ve her sister’s exclamation, and met his gaze with defiance, challenge
o boast expression.

Challenge accepted, my dear Little Miss Shrew.

Still holding her hand, he bowed over it and brushed his lips aga
skin. Then he looked up and fixed his gaze on her. Her expression b
e across confusion. She had, perhaps, expected him to retreat like a coward or
tray of off like an adolescent nursing his ego.

“Miss Parville, I humbly beseech you to do me the great ho
r slight, partnering me for this dance. But before I lead you to the dance floor
er than introduce myself in a manner which befits your station? My name is
soft and Hawke...”

ire that “I already know that,” she said.

“...Daxton Hawke, fifth Duke of Petrush, at your service.”

Her sister let out another squeal. Miss Parville remained silent,
you do color drained from her face. She opened her mouth to speak, then c
again.

ws. Her Seizing the opportunity, he grasped her hands. She made no atte
er gaze, resist, and he pulled her upright and led her onto the dance floor. A
approached the line of couples, she stumbled and fell against him. She
e’s...” her fingers round his, and his breath caught as a crackle of desire
s you I through his body.

She drew in a sharp breath, and he glanced down to see her starin
1 of the him, an expression of shock and bewilderment in her gaze...

...and a spark of desire to match his own.

Maybe the notion of seducing her was not so unpalatable after all.
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CHAPTER SIX

WHAT WAS SHE doing? How the devil had she ended up in the arms of—a dangerous man at that?

And a *duke*.

By the time Catherine collected her wits, the dance had already and though insulting him was not something to fear, she had no doubt embarrass Lady Hardwick—a woman who'd welcomed her warmly in home and treated her with genuine affection. Not to mention Lord Hardwick who'd proved a most interesting dinner companion, regaling her with his travels around Italy. Most men spoke of their exploits as a means of declaring their prowess to the world. But Lord Hardwick took a great delight in describing the architecture and history of Rome.

Catherine had enjoyed a conversation in a social setting with a man who treated her as an intellectual equal.

She glanced up at her partner and found herself in a situation she'd never experienced before. She fought the urge to apologize for her earlier rudeness, though a wicked demon on her shoulder giggled at the notion of a duke dancing with the tradesman's entrance.

He seemed unaffected by her faux pas—which, if anything, discomfited her even more. He must have some purpose for wishing to dance with her even after her having insulted him, and she found herself wondering how far lengths she could go.

"Are you enjoying the dance, Miss Parville?" he asked.

"Not particularly, Your Grace."

He let out a chuckle and drew her closer, and her senses were assuaged by the familiar aroma of wood and spice.

"Why is that?" he asked, his voice reverberating in her chest.

"I lack the accomplishment," she said. "My sister, Blanche, is by far a better dancer."

"You impugn your talents, I'm sure."

How disappointing! Clearly, he was a flatterer, who expected swoon with gratitude that he'd condescended to dance with her.

Feigning a stumble, she slipped forward and stamped on his foot.

He drew in a sharp breath, but did not relax his hold. If anything tightened it, as he whirled her around in a circle. Then he stumbled and slipped against her.

"It seems as if we match each other in terms of our level of accomplishment," he said. "I myself was a hopeless dancer. My poor mother despaired of me. She declared that her life would be made eternally miserable for knowing that there was not a single person in the world more flattered than I."

"And was it?"

"My mother still lives, Miss Parville," he said. "Though, her delusions are very real. She regularly declares me to be the worst dancer in all England and that it's a punishment to be seen on the dance floor with me."

"Are you saying that you're subjecting me to *punishment*?" she asked.

"On the contrary," he said. Her belly fluttered as his lips curled in a genuine smile. "It's no punishment at all."

"How so?"

"Why," he said, his voice filled with delight, "you've brightened my world—at least for Mama. For, at long last, I believe that Mama's misery is at an end. I cannot wait to tell her about you."

At that moment, they were separated for the next few bars, and Caroline glanced across the couples to see Blanche partnered with Lord Hortons. Her concerted pleasure in her sister's expression tugged at her heart, and she smiled at herself. Across the dance floor, Papa stood, talking to Lord Thorpe. His gaze was focused on both her and Blanche, dancing. And, though she had never hoped to see anything resembling pride in his expression, at least the disappointment which permanently resided in his eyes had lessened. It was all her father could give her, then she'd gladly take it.

Her partner took her hands for the final steps and claimed her again. She glanced up and met his gaze. His frank appraisal assaulted her, and she moved to trip against him.

Then she checked herself as her understanding slid into place.

I believe that Mama's misery is at an end.

Heavens—he'd just insulted her!

her to The dance concluded, and the couples dispersed. The time had passed stamp on his foot once more to provide further proof that she'd taken the crown as the most flat-footed dancer in all England.

ing, he Her partner returned her to her seat, then bowed again.

led and "Would you like something to drink, Miss Parville? A glass of perhaps?"

level of "I loathe punch," she said.

r mama "Nevertheless, I insist on bringing you some refreshment."

iserable She opened her mouth to refuse, then she nodded. Her throat was closed. She had no intention of suffering merely to spite him. Sickly-sweet it might be, but it was better than going thirsty. Perhaps she could trip against him and soak his pristine jacket with Lady Hardwick's punch.

spair is "Yes, thank you, Your Grace," she said with a smile.

ngland, His eyes narrowed as if in suspicion, then he bowed and disappeared.

Not long after, the musicians tuned their instruments, signaling the start of the next dance. Catherine spotted Lord Horton talking with Papa in a corner, Blanche at his side. Shortly after, Horton led Blanche across the dance floor. A frisson of fear rippled through Catherine, but she could not deny the delight in Blanche's eyes, and the benign devotion in Horton's. If only Horton could be trusted to treat Blanche with kindness, then he was a poor prospect.

Papa would leave her be, if he could be persuaded to permit Blanche to marry. Blanche wouldn't want a spinster sister getting under her feet. Catherine could shift for herself, somehow. After all, she'd brought in a new maid, taking the place of the mother she'd never known. There must be some families in need of a governess.

She only need convince Papa that she was being courted by a man, and he'd permit Blanche to be courted by Horton.

If that "Miss Parville."

She glanced up to see the Duke of Petrush staring at her, holding a glass filled with an opaque liquid, a glint of mischief in his expression. What the future looked somewhat bleak, at least in the present, she could enjoy the sport with him.

She eyed the glass. "What's *that* you've brought?" she asked. "It doesn't look like punch."

"Alas, I have sad news to share." He gave her a pained expression,

glint in his eyes remained.

ken his “Sad news?”

“The punch is of such poor quality, that I insisted a more suitable one be made, especially for you.”

punch, She took the proffered glass and held it to her lips. His eyes widened as his body stilled as if he’d caught his breath. What mischief was he up to?

She took a sip.

Ye gods—she’d never tasted anything so bitter! Lemonade mixed with vinegar.

It might So—he wanted to toy with her, did he?

She took another sip, this time prepared for the acrid taste, and she conceded that she preferred it to the sickly punch she’d been expecting.

His lip curled into a semblance of a smile, as if he fought to restrain himself. His mirth. Returning the smile, she swallowed a mouthful of the liquid, and his eyes widened.

in a far “I wouldn’t drink it too quickly,” he warned. “It may not be suitable for you.”

“On the contrary,” she said. “It’s perfect—why else would you have brought it? It’s so clever of you to have made such an accurate judgment of my preferences.”

He shook his head, a bewildered expression in his eyes. “I beg your pardon?”

“I loathe overly sweet foods and drinks,” she said. “Too often at parties, the men get to indulge in drinks that are infinitely more interesting than the women must make do with syrupy substances that destroy the palate and rot the teeth. It’s as if mankind is of the opinion that women have a constant need of sweetening.”

“Do ladies not desire sweetness?” he asked.

“Good heavens, no!” she cried. “I prefer the bitter to the sweet. Bitter is honest, for it has no need for subterfuge.”

His smile slipped. “You have a somewhat bleak view of the world, Parville.”

She took another mouthful, and he winced. “The world is not kind.”

Grace,” she said, “neither is it fair. Of course, someone of your station is unlikely to stumble across evidence of imbalance. A sweet layer will often conceal a rotten heart—in a similar manner by which the overly gentlemanly demeanor will conceal nefarious intentions.”

“Are you saying that you despise sweetness and an excess of
because you cannot trust it?”

He continued to stare at her, his dark eyes searching, as if attempting
penetrate through to her soul.

If she weren’t careful, he’d come dangerously close to stripping b
hard outer shell she’d formed around herself.

And that simply would not do.

She raised the glass to her lips once more, and he reached out as if
her.

“Perhaps I should bring you a glass of champagne instead,” he said

“I’ve no need for champagne, Your Grace.” Meeting his gaze in f
tipped her head back.

“Miss Parville!” he cried, “I didn’t mean...”

Ignoring him, she swallowed the rest of the lemonade, repre
shudder as the liquid slipped down her throat. Then she handed the g
le.” him. “You didn’t mean—what?”

He shifted from one foot to another, and the confident stance dis
nt as to Instead, he looked uncomfortable—*guilty*, even.

“Are you saying that you didn’t mean for me to drink the d
g your concoction you’d procured on my behalf?”

His eyes twinkled with mischief. “Perhaps you’d like a glass of wa

“And where would you procure it from?” she asked. “A nearby dit
resting, She rose to her feet, and the world slipped sideways. He caught he
roy the and she drew in a sharp breath at the spark of desire which ignited
n are in belly.

“I say, my man—over here!” he cried. A footman appeared at his e

“Bring Miss Parville a glass of water,” Petrush said. “And
tterness brandy.”

“Sir, I...”

“Now. My companion is in danger of being indisposed. And you
me as *Your Grace*.”

“Very good, Your Grace.”

The footman bowed, then disappeared.

The duke took her hands and interlaced his fingers with hers.
Parville—are you all right?” he asked. The arrogance had gone fr
voice.

civility She met his gaze, fighting the wave of nausea. Though she expected to see contempt or false gallantry in his expression, instead, she saw only concern.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I have no wish to make you ill.”

ack the “What *do* you wish for, Your Grace?”

“Can you not call me Daxton?” he asked softly.

Daxton...

to stop She shook her head. The last time she’d called a man by his given name had ended in heartbreak and humiliation, and she had no wish to tread that path again, no matter how gallant her companion was being toward her. Full, she now...

...no matter how his eyes deepened with desire or his nostrils flared and drew close, and lowered his voice to a whisper.

ssing a “Shall I tell you what I wish for, Miss Parville?”

glass to She curled her fingers round his, taking comfort from his solid strength.

solved. “What do you wish for—Daxton?”

There—she’d said it. He drew closer, until she could almost feel his delicious breath on her lips.

“I wish to atone for my transgression, to make myself worthy of your pardon?” he said, “and,” he lowered his voice to a deep rumble which reverberated through her bones, “I wish to be the one to show you that there is nothing to fear from my hand, sweetness—or *pleasure*.”

l in her She caught her breath as an uncomfortable heat bloomed in her chest. She squeezed her legs together, her cheeks warming with shame at the moisture between her thighs.

a little What was he doing to her—and in the middle of a ball? To the rest of the company, they might merely be a couple seeking rest from a dance, a conversation. But, the flare of desire in his eyes spoke of something different. The air was thick with the fog of her own primal need.

“Shall I tell you what I also wish for, Miss Parville?”

Before she could respond, the footman appeared, brandishing a glass.

“Excellent!” He took the glass and sat beside her. Then he handed it to her. “Miss Parville’s hands shook so violently, that she spilled some of the liquid from her skirt.”

“Here, let me.” He guided the glass to her lips. He caressed her

ected to with his thumbs while she tipped the glass back.

w only Though the liquid cooled her throat and lessened the nausea, the
her body increased at his touch. Never before had she been touch
manner that was so—*intimate*.

“And now, to the matter at hand,” he said.

“What matter?”

“The matter of our courtship, of course.”

n name She stared at him, searching for evidence of insincerity, but hi
ad that seemed genuine. Then, she shook her head. “I’ve no intention of...”

ard her “May I not be permitted to at least try?” he asked.

He continued to stare at her, and she looked away, unwilling to
d as he the discomfort brought about by his intense scrutiny. Out of the corne
eye, she caught sight of Blanche dancing with Lord Horton. She saw
but unbridled joy in her sister’s expression and honest devotion in H
ity and gaze. Then she resumed her gaze on her would-be suitor.

He was the first man in her life to make her feel *wanted*—and w
taken an interest in what she had to say. And, he was the first ma
feel his refrained from sickly sycophancy and played her at her own gar
aplomb.

ou,” he “Very well,” she said, “I give you permission to court me.”

against “Excellent!” He smiled, and his eyes glittered in the candlelight, cr
ar from at the edges. Her breath caught in her throat.

Sweet Lord—that smile...

center. “Ah! There you are, old boy!” a voice cried. “You promised to par
ie slickin a few rounds of whist. Hardwick’s just set up the card tables in the
next door.”

t of the The spell was broken. Mr. Bond stood before them. Catherine’s
deep intuned to face the newcomer.

ig very “Bond, I’m afraid I’m occupied here.”

“I would not have Mr. Bond accuse me of depriving him of hi
partner, in addition to my many other faults,” Catherine said.

ss. “Then, I shall excuse myself, with your permission.” He took h
it over, and kissed it. “Perhaps I may be permitted to take you for a drive aro
nto her estate tomorrow? I’m sure our host and hostess will have no objection
using their curricule. In fact, I took the liberty of asking Lady Hardwick

r hands “I don’t know...”

“Or, would you rather spend the morning with the ladies, drinking heat inwine and discussing the latest society gossip?”

ed in a She couldn’t prevent herself from smiling.

“Aha!” he cried. “I see you have the same aversion to tattle as I. T if you miss the tattle, I can always regale you with tales of Lady Vine her eldest daughter Little Miss Lemon.”

“I think I’ve had quite enough of *her*,” Catherine said, with a laugh s smileshe checked herself.

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d laughed out loud.

She gave him a saucy smile. “For my part, I could regale you v weatherexploits of Lord Soretote.”

r of her “Until tomorrow then.” He took her hand and kissed it, then follow nothingfriend across the ballroom and disappeared into a room at the far end.

orton’s What the devil had she done, agreeing to be courted by a man?

“Well, thank the Almighty for that!”

who had Catherine cringed at the familiar voice.

an who Papa sat beside her, taking the seat the duke had just vacated. He g ie withtoward the parlor into which the duke and Mr. Bond had disappeared.

“You’ve finally seen sense, daughter,” he said. “Keep your mou and perhaps this one can be persuaded to take you on for good, rath inklingjust a dalliance. Then, I can see to your sister’s courtship. Lord H already taking an interest in her.”

“I don’t intend to enter into a *dalliance* with anyone,” she said.

tner me “But the Duke of Petrush is courting you?”

e parlor She cringed at the desperation in his voice.

s suitor “Papa—keep your voice down,” she hissed. “You’re not rid of me

smoothed the lapels of his jacket.

s whist “Whist, eh? I wonder if they’d be averse to a little piquet instead.”

er hand Catherine’s heart sank. “No, Papa, please. You’ve little left to wag piquet requires a degree of skill, which you lack.”

und thefurnished with a son, rather than cursed with two daughters, I’d not ha 1 to ourin such dire need of funds.”

.” The arrow hit home. Papa rose to his feet and sauntered off direction of the games room where, in all likelihood, he’d para

g sweetdesperation in front of the Duke of Petrush.

An evening in Papa's company would be enough to put off even tl
determined suitor. In all likelihood, by tomorrow, the duke would hav
though,up all intention of courting her.

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desperation in front of the Duke of Petrush.

An evening in Papa's company would be enough to put off even the most determined suitor. In all likelihood, by tomorrow, the duke would have given up all intention of courting her.



CHAPTER SEVEN

WHERE THE DEVIL is she?

Dax glanced across the breakfast table, his gaze wandering from guest to guest. This morning, Lady Hardwick had waved him over and invited him to sit beside her. Lord Hardwick sat at the opposite end. Halfway along the table, Lord Parville sat next to his younger daughter, Miss Blanche, but there was no sign of Catherine. Parville's skin had a greenish tone, and dark circles circled his eyes.

Good. It served the old bastard right after his behavior last night.

Guests continued to enter the breakfast room, crossing the floor to the buffet table and helping themselves. Footmen wandered about, offering service to the guests. The air filled with the low murmur of chatter, punctuated by the clink of silverware and china as the guests spooned sugar into their tea, sliced into bacon, and sipped their tea.

Horton sauntered in, helped himself to a plate of breakfast, and then approached the empty space beside Blanche Parville.

"Is this seat taken, Miss Blanche?"

"Join us, do," Lord Parville said before his daughter could reply.

Horton met Dax's gaze. Then he winked and sat beside his quarry.

"Are you enjoying your breakfast, Miss Blanche?" he asked.

"Very much so," came the reply.

Dax found himself smiling at the besotted expression on Horton's face. He seemed genuinely fond of her. Blanche Parville was a genteel creature, softly spoken, and cordial.

The exact opposite of her sister.

Horton lowered his voice and murmured something unintelligible—a profession of admiration perhaps.

Miss Blanche shook her head. "My sister was a little indisposed this morning. I believe she's taking the air outside."

Lady Hardwick leaned forward, her brow furrowed in concern.

Miss Catherine not hungry—or thirsty?”

Blanche looked up. “I believe not, ma’am.”

“Oh dear,” Lady Hardwick said. “It does a young woman no good to venture out on an empty stomach.”

Lord Hardwick spoke up. “I’m sure she’s perfectly well,” he said.

Dear Lord—I hope so.

Lady Hardwick’s gaze snapped round, and she stared at Dax.

“So do I, Your Grace,” she whispered.

Before Dax could respond, Lord Hardwick leaned forward. “Are you objecting to wanting the curricle, Petrush?” he asked. “Or would you prefer to join the other gentlemen for the shooting?”

“I’ll pass on bagging birds,” Dax said. “I’d promised to take the carriage to Miss Parville on an excursion—that is, if Lord Parville agrees.”

Parville’s eyes lit up, and he nodded, almost dislodging his wig in the process at the prospect of ridding himself of his daughter. From his position at the table, Blanche, Horton grinned and mouthed a silent “thank you.”

“Perhaps, Miss Blanche, you might join me on a walk around the estate,” Horton suggested. “The sunken garden is, I hear, most exquisite, and the fountain, many Italian features which our host brought back from his travels, is most beautiful. Is that all right, Lord Hardwick?”

“That’s correct,” their host said.

“My daughter would be *delighted*,” Parville said, “wouldn’t she, Blanche?”

Blanche blushed and lowered her gaze. Her sweet shyness was what women would call endearing, though Dax preferred the prickly, fiery demeanor of another...

“Then that’s settled,” Hardwick said. He drew out his pocket watch. “Heavens! We’ll bag nothing if we spend the morning idling about the estate. Gentlemen, if you please, we’ll convene in the hall on the hour. Ladies, believe morning tea will be served in the drawing room, where Miss Bonneville is anxious to demonstrate her musical skills. My wife will be there—some for your every comfort, I’m sure.”

He rose, and the rest of the party followed suit.

Before Dax could stand, Lady Hardwick caught his sleeve.

“A word, if you please, Your Grace.”

“Was Dax turned his gaze toward his hostess and raised his eyebrows?”

inquiry.

“What are you doing with Miss Parville?” she asked.

“I’m taking her for an excursion—with her father’s permission.”

Her expression hardened. “You can do better than *that*, Your Grace said. “I think you know I wasn’t inquiring about your plan to tour this morning. You must consider me very naïve if you believe me in of understanding how men such as yourself view young women.”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite catch your meaning, Lady Hardwick,” he

“Then I must express my disappointment in *your* lack of understanding the Your Grace. Permit me to point it out. Most men view women as play particularly men who express their dislike of the marriage state by save as many *curricles* as possible before settling on one which they’re content to ride for the rest of their lives.”

Surely she didn’t mean...

“Of course,” she continued, “some men are not so fastidious as to from riding more than one curricl even after they’ve made their purchase?” Dax shook his head in disbelief. He’d not met a woman of her class and such a marked degree of frankness.

He opened his mouth to respond, and she held up her hand.

“Before you reply, Your Grace, I ask you not to insult my intelligence by feigning ignorance of the true subject of our discussion, particularly with you, who was absent at breakfast. I wonder if her indisposition this morning is to your friendship with Lord Horton?”

Sweet Lord! Surely Lady Hardwick wasn’t aware of the wagers between him and his friend?

“Ah,” she continued. “I see my insight astonishes you—sadly, but not surprising. Astonishment is to be expected, given that men often underestimate women in their presence. The pointed looks between the two of you this morning—and, I might add, last night—might have gone unnoticed by the Miss but I’ve always made it my business to ensure that each and every one of our guests is treated with courtesy and respect—even the ones who are notorious for being *shrewish*.”

She met his gaze unwaveringly, and a prickle of guilt needed to be trusted to plague his bloody conscience to plague him now, after having been absent from a lifetime.

But, in truth, the appeal of courting Miss Parville for a wager

lessened, particularly last night, when he'd gained an understanding of her plight.

After following Dax to the card tables last night, Lord Parville's behavior," she had been enough to make a man's stomach churn. While it was acceptable for gentlemen, in the company of their own sex, displayed a greater degree of capable frankness when expressing opinions of the fairer sex—Parville's comments

his daughters extended beyond the limits of respectability. The man said. too ready to express his opinion that women existed for three reasons: to provide men with dowries, heirs, and sexual gratification on demand.

Parville, as incapable of holding his liquor as his cash, had expressed his disappointment, vociferously and petulantly, on learning that Harriet had contented to forbade any form of monetary stakes at his card tables. He'd then

himself almost to oblivion, entering into a tirade about the burden of supporting two daughters, particularly when the elder was, in his words, "too refrained to attract even the most desperate suitor."

To his credit, Lord Hardwick had immediately summoned two footmen to assist with who marched Parville out of the room, after which he wasn't seen again for the remainder of the evening. And given the respect and deep admiration Lord Hardwick had for his wife, he most likely had related the entire situation to her.

When she Dax met his hostess's gaze.

He related "I assure you, Lady Hardwick, I've no intention of bringing Miss Parville to harm."

Between She nodded but remained unsmiling, as if she sized him up to determine whether he attempted to deceive her.

By such "I think," he added quietly, staring at the seat which Lord Parville had just vacated, "that, rather than bring Miss Parville to harm, I would like to see you do this at one for the actions of those closest to her."

By most, "Perhaps," she replied. "However, I find it something of a coincidence that your friend Lord Horton is paying court to Miss Parville's youngest daughter at the same time you seek to woo Miss Parville herself."

"Lord Horton's admiration of Miss Blanche is genuine."

At him. "And your admiration of Catherine is not?"

Sent for "Perhaps it wasn't at first," he said. "But I find myself admiring her frankness—a quality that many lack."

Her had "I suppose I must be satisfied with that," she said. "My husband

of her well of you, but I'm not one to blindly accept the opinions of others—even those I love. I prefer to form my own conclusion."

behavior She rose to her feet, and he followed suit.

ted that "I'll ask John to bring the curricle round," she said. "All *you* need to do is find Miss Parville."

empt of She exited the breakfast room and crossed the hallway to the main entrance. A footman stood on the drive outside next to a curricle with two horses. "Ah, John," Lady Hardwick said. "Perfect. We only need to find Grace's companion."

ssed his "If you mean Miss Parville, ma'am, I saw her in the herb garden earlier."

ardwick "Where's that?" Dax asked.

1 drunk The footman gestured toward a privet hedge with an archway in the middle. "Through there, Your Grace."

too vile "Thank you," Dax said. "Wait here—I'll return presently."

ootmen—a small paved area with a sundial in the center, surrounded by a hedge again filled with rows of foliage in various shades of green.

ffection A lone figure stood beside a bush with dark green leaves shaped like small spikes. She turned as he approached, her hair shimmering in the sunlight, and her eyes wide.

"Your Grace! What are you doing here?"

Parville "I've come for you," he said.

She averted her gaze and plucked a sprig from the bush, lifting it to her nose and crushing it between her fingers. "Rosemary," she breathed. "I always find the aroma comforting. Aren't you joining the men in the garden today?"

l rather "I thought we agreed last night to take a tour round the estate," he said.

"Y-yes—but that was before..." Her voice trailed away. She colorless. He could almost read her mind.

er sister *That was before you played cards with my father.*

"Did you think I'd change my mind?" he asked. "If you knew me, you'd realize that, of the two of us, *I*, at least, do not scare easily." Parville.

ing her She tipped her chin as if in defiance. "Neither do I."

He approached her and offered his arm. "Then, Miss Parville, the curricle awaits."

rs—not She took his arm, and he placed his hand over hers. She drew in
breath, and her gaze locked with his. For a moment, a connection
between them—twin souls staring at each other across a chasm. T
d do issmiled and steered her toward the archway.

He'd spoken the truth to Lady Hardwick. He did admire Miss Par
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She took his arm, and he placed his hand over hers. She drew in a sharp breath, and her gaze locked with his. For a moment, a connection existed between them—twin souls staring at each other across a chasm. Then, he smiled and steered her toward the archway.

He'd spoken the truth to Lady Hardwick. He did admire Miss Parville—dangerously so.

Once this excursion was over, he'd seek Horton out and tell him that he could keep his hundred guineas. Dax had no need to be paid to spend time in Miss Parville's company.

Because, he realized, that her company was not a punishment—far from it.

Her company was a pleasure.



CHAPTER EIGHT

CATHERINE RELAXED INTO her seat, lulled by the gentle rocking motion of the curricule. Though she'd expected the ride to be bumpy, her companion guided the horses with aplomb and a firm hold on the reins—his long, lean fingers curled around the leather as if he understood how to assert his mastery over the horses.

And not just the horses...

Her breath had hitched when he'd helped her into the curricule—his chest warm and smooth against hers, his touch on the small of her back possessive and protective as he guided her into her seat...

"Are you comfortable, Miss Parville?"

"That's the third time you've asked, Your Grace," she said. "I will continue in this manner, I'll be forced to change my opinion of you."

"For the better, I hope."

"I've little time for sycophancy."

He let out a low chuckle. "I'm no sycophant, Miss Parville, I assure you. If I were, I'd have spent the past hour extolling your beauty and instead of inquiring about your comfort."

"And, do your inquiries about my comfort stem from a belief that I am somehow infirm and, perhaps, your mirth is as a result of my speaking for myself?"

He laughed again. "My dear Miss Parville, when have you been *not* to speak for yourself—or, for others, for that matter?"

"I see not fault in frankness, Your Grace, if it can be utilized to the benefit of those whom I love."

"Such as your sister."

He slowed the horses to a walk and turned to face her. Her skin tingled at the intensity of his gaze.

She looked away.

"Have I spoken out of turn?" he asked. "Or, perhaps, you consider..."

weakness to love another?”

“Love is only a weakness if others exploit it,” she said. “The weakness of character in loving another—but the danger of revealing love is very real indeed.”

“You speak from experience, Miss Parville?”

She closed her eyes, but his closeness—the intoxicating, masculine—threatened to overpower her.

Love may be a weakness, which often brought about a wretched downfall. But loving Blanche enabled her to remain strong, to ensure her sister never suffered her own fate—the crushing agony of heartbreak over rejection.

Catherine’s own heartbreak had taught her resilience against flattery; the sharp-witted barbs of her companion were weapons of a very different kind, for they threatened to breach her armor, corroding the hard surface until they revealed her soul.

A warm hand covered hers.

“Forgive me, Miss Parville. I fear I’ve spoken out of turn.”

She turned to see regret and concern in his eyes—not a fear that diminished her opinion of him, but a genuine concern for her.

It was a look she had almost never seen in her life—as if his heart had reached hers, weaving a spell to bind them together.

She blinked and broke the spell.

“I would be disappointed in Your Grace if you were incapable of speaking *out of turn*,” she said.

He smiled, and a light danced in his eyes.

“Do you wish to return to the house, Miss Parville?” he asked. “Or are you prepared to suffer my company a little longer?”

“Perhaps we can tarry a while longer,” she said. “I prefer the outdoors and the countryside hereabouts is beautiful. It seems a shame to waste time stuck inside discussing embroidery stitches with the other ladies besides,” she added, “while the extension of our excursion means I must endure your company a little longer, I’ve always been taught to believe that a little suffering does wonders for one’s character.”

“I must applaud you, Miss Parville, in performing a great service to society.”

“How so?”

A wicked gleam shone in his eyes. "Because by spending a little of your company, every living soul must find their character much improving that—" "Perhaps," she replied. "But there must also be exceptions to the rule." She met his gaze unwaveringly and bit her lip to stem the tide of bubbling inside her. "Some individuals, I find, are wholly irredeemable from those who ask me to spend more time with them on an outing."

His eyes widened in mock hurt. The laughter inside her threatened to burst, and she let out an unladylike snort. Unable to contain herself any longer, she let the laughter ripple through her, until they relaxed back into their seats, shaking with mirth.

He pulled her close, and the laughter died on her lips as she gazed at him—two sapphire pools, dark with desire.

"Catherine..."

He lowered his mouth to hers.

She drew in a sharp breath and parted her lips. His tongue swept across the seam of her lips, then slipped inside. With gentle strokes, he claimed her, and she savored the taste of him—the blend of honey and spices.

Expert fingers caressed her neckline, then his hand slipped into her gown.

She froze as the memory came flooding back...

...a hand, which had sought to claim her body—a suitor who had tried to take what he wanted, then discarded her, leaving her heartbroken. His voice, filled with contempt, gray eyes filled with derision.

Who'd want to court an ugly little thing like you, Miss Parville?

"Miss Parville?"

"Or are you?" She blinked and stared up into eyes that were blue, not gray—which bore an expression of desire, not contempt.

"Forgive me, Miss Parville," he said. "I had no intention of compromising you."

And he withdrew and took the reins again, and she caught her breath. I must sense of loss.

"Shall we continue?" he asked. "I have a fancy to visit one of our neighboring estates. Hurstpoint Place."

She drew in a sharp breath. "Did you say *Hurstpoint Place*?"

"Have you heard of it?"

"I-I believe so," she said, "though I may be mistaken." She forced

time in into her voice to conceal the maelstrom of emotions. “W-who lives the ved.” “An old school friend,” he said. “Though, I hesitate to call him *frie* general were at Eton together. He’s something of a rogue—which is of mirth something coming from *my* lips, I admit.” He grinned at her, but she le, even her appetite for teasing.

“The grounds are worth exploring,” he continued. “Mrs. Leander is somewhat obsessed with her gardens.”

elf any Icy fingers clutched at her heart. “D-did you say—*Leander*?”

ick into “That’s right,” he said. “Andrew Leander. He has no title, but his was the younger daughter of a duke—which he reminds everyone into his frequently.”

“No...”

Catherine shivered and drew her shawl about her.

Andrew...

t across The last time that name had been on her lips, her heart had lain in t
ied her, “Are you well, Miss Parville?”

She shook her head. “Take me back.”

ide her “We’re almost there,” he said. “If you’re feeling unwell, you c
your rest at Hurstpoint Place. Once we’ve reached the end of the lane
see the house—it’s quite impressive.”

sought “I said no!” she cried. “Please, stop!”

And a “Miss Parville, I must insist...”

“What a fool I’ve been!” she cried. “Did the two of you plan it b
you?”

He glanced at her, and guilt flared in his eyes. “The two of us?”

–a face “You and Lord Leander!”

ion oftalking about.”

Pushing him aside, she scrambled to her feet. But before she coul
n at the down from the curricule, he caught her arms and pulled her back.

“What the devil do you think you’re doing, Miss Parville?” he cr
of themust be two miles at least to Hardwick Hall—surely you’re not going
back?”

“I will if I must.”

“I only thought...”

ed calm “No, you *didn’t* think!” she cried. “None of you do! We’re just pla

re?” for your amusement, aren’t we?”

nd. We “Is that what you think?” he cried. “I could never view you saying anything! I have too much respect for you.”

e’d lost He pulled her close. “Please believe me,” he said. “If you have no continue, then we shan’t. The last thing I want is to see you dis under is Leander’s an arse, if truth be known.”

“You’re playing me false,” she said, struggling to break free. continued to hold her, his touch gentle but firm.

mother “I’m not playing you false, Catherine,” he said. “Do you not know all too feel—can you not see it? My eyes have been opened. I now realize want in life.”

A treacherous little nugget of hope flared within her, and she glanced his eyes, fearing what might confront her. But all she saw was honest desire.

atters. “I don’t want a simpering miss to cater to my whims,” he said. “I v equal, to challenge me at every turn—a woman not afraid to meet battle, head-on. I never believed she could exist until I met you.”

an take Her heart leaped with joy at his words, but she fought the urge to f , you’ll his arms. She couldn’t survive a second heartbreak.

She shook her head. “I—I can’t...”

“I know, sweeting,” he said. “You’re unwilling to place your another. Believe me, I understand your fear. But only by confront etween fears can we find true happiness.”

“How can you understand me on such a short acquaintance?” she a

“You think the duration of an acquaintance matters when two connect?” He took her hand and held it against his chest.

you’re “My heart has no need for weeks to go by in order to declare to v belongs, Catherine.”

d climb *Catherine...*

A ripple of need flowed through her.

ied. “It “I see much,” he continued. “Do you think me incapable of unders to walk why you’ve fashioned such a prickly exterior round yourself? So a covers himself in armor before engaging in battle, you have conceal true self. It’s how you protect yourself—and the sister you love.”

“Blanche...”

ythings “Blanche is safe, Catherine,” he said. “Horton may be a dandy, bu

good man and devoted to your sister. Rest assured that he'll make her
u as a if she permits him to."

He lifted her hands to his lips, caressing her skin with his thumbs.
wish to "What of you, Catherine? Who will make *you* happy?"
tressed. "I can shift for myself," she said.

His eyes deepened with desire, and his voice took on a note of huskiness.
But he as if he struggled to control his emotions. "That you can," he said. "If
you permitted me, I could devote myself to your happiness."

Desire flared within her at the blatant need in his eyes, as if a fire
v how I through her veins, and she shifted her legs to ease the ache which pulsed
what I within—a delicious, unfathomable ache that begged to be eased.

"I told you..." Her breath hitched as he placed a hand on her waist
ed into y—and cannot bear sycophants. I will not smile at your flattery...I—oh!"
y—escaped her lips as he shifted his hand to her thigh, inches away from
want an source of her need.

"I have no desire to flatter you, my sweet," he said, his voice
me in primal growl, as if she were in the clutches of a primal beast—a predator
fall into ready to devour her. "But I do wish to see pleasure in your eyes.
pleasure you will feel as you spend at my touch."

Oh, my...

The fog of desire threatened to obliterate rational thought, but she
trust in ing our to him, shifting her thighs apart in an instinctive gesture, as if her body
ing what she needed.

asked. "Do you trust me, Catherine?"

Her breath caught, and she looked into his eyes. But all she saw
o souls desire, a wish not to hurt her—and, in turn, a wish not to be hurt.

Could it be that he was in possession of a heart? Perhaps, like
whom it wore a mask—the carefree mask of the rake—to conceal it?

He grew still and sighed, his breath a warm caress on her cheek.

"I'll do nothing without your consent," he said, "and I'd never ruin
tanding I value you too highly for that."

"But—what about..." she hesitated, feeling her cheeks
knight ed your "...pleasure?"

His mouth curled into a smile, and he placed a kiss on the corner of
mouth. "I can give you pleasure and leave you intact."

"H-here?" she asked. "Outside?"

r happy “Where else? There’s nobody to see—and do you not prefer the sh
of the frost on the landscape and the excitement from the danger?”

Oh, heavens—yes!

A little pulse fluttered in her belly.

“Your body speaks of your desire,” he whispered, “but I mu
skiness, consent from your lips.”

“But, if What did it matter that they were outdoors—or that she faced rui
Marriage was not a state she wished to imprison herself in. There
fire ran harm in a little pleasure with a man who understood her better than
ed deep herself.

She tilted her head until their lips met.

st, “...I “Yes,” she whispered. “I give you my consent—gladly.”

A cry He dipped his head and kissed her, but this time, there was no gen
om the His tongue thrust inside her mouth, sweeping across every corner, c
ownership as he devoured her.

a low, And she devoured him in turn, curling her tongue round his, er
redator him in a battle of desire to match the battle of wits they’d indulged in e
es—the A growl of approval reverberated in his chest as he held her clo

she drew in a sharp breath to dissipate the heat flowing through her vei

Then, a delicious coolness caressed the skin of her thighs.

e clung *Sweet heaven!*

y knew With deft fingers, he grasped her skirts and pulled them to her wa
despite the cold air, the need to part her thighs overpowered her. The
her center threatened to engulf her senses, and she shifted her hips, h
aw was understanding that only he could ease the sweet ache.

Then he drew a finger across her center, and her body tightened,
her, he anticipated a burst of pleasure.

“Daxton...” his name escaped her lips, and he let out a groan of ap

“Oh, Catherine,” he whispered, “are you ready for pleasure?”

1 you— He continued to caress her, but rather than feel shame at the intima
relished the delicious sensations rippling through her body. His mov
burn, grew slicker—slow, sensual circles.

How the devil did he know how to bring about such delicious sens
r of her Then the tip of his finger brushed over a sensitive spot in her cen
she cried out, as a fire ignited in her belly.

“Oh!”

arpness “That’s it, sweetheart—you’re close now,” he whispered. “So close

Then he stopped moving, and she let out a mewl of frustration. She
her hips to increase the pressure, moving against his fingers. Tears of
at her wantonness pricked at her eyelids, but he nodded his approval.

st hear “Ah, yes—that’s it,” he whispered. “Show me how much you want
pleasure at my touch.”

nation? She tilted her hips once more and gave a low cry at the flare of ple

was no Then, he plunged his finger inside her, and her world shattered.

she did Her body disintegrated at his touch, and she let out a scream as wa
wave of torturous pleasure ripped through her.

“Daxton!”

His mouth crashed against hers, and he silenced her cries, thrust
tleness.tongue in her mouth to mirror his exquisite administrations betwe
laimingthighs. She clung to him, and her breathing steadied.

Gently, as if she were as delicate as the finest porcelain, he pul
ragagingskirts down, and held her close, his warm breath caressing her neck.
earlier. drifted into a doze, she caught his whispered words.

se, and “Oh, Catherine, my love—no man shall ever hurt you again.”

ins. *My love...*

He might have given her pleasure—but, in doing so, he had claim
heart.

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“That’s it, sweetheart—you’re close now,” he whispered. “So close...”

Then he stopped moving, and she let out a mewl of frustration. She tilted her hips to increase the pressure, moving against his fingers. Tears of shame at her wantonness pricked at her eyelids, but he nodded his approval.

“Ah, yes—that’s it,” he whispered. “Show me how much you want to feel pleasure at my touch.”

She tilted her hips once more and gave a low cry at the flare of pleasure.

Then, he plunged his finger inside her, and her world shattered.

Her body disintegrated at his touch, and she let out a scream as wave after wave of torturous pleasure ripped through her.

“Daxton!”

His mouth crashed against hers, and he silenced her cries, thrusting his tongue in her mouth to mirror his exquisite administrations between her thighs. She clung to him, and her breathing steadied.

Gently, as if she were as delicate as the finest porcelain, he pulled her skirts down, and held her close, his warm breath caressing her neck. As she drifted into a doze, she caught his whispered words.

“Oh, Catherine, my love—no man shall ever hurt you again.”

My love...

He might have given her pleasure—but, in doing so, he had claimed her heart.



CHAPTER NINE

*T*HIS WASN'T SUPPOSED to happen.

Dax steered the curricle along the lane, retracing the path to Ha Hall.

His companion was a very different creature to the one he'd help the curricle that morning. The prickly exterior had gone, replaced by a young woman. Her eyes shone in the light of the low winter sun, emeralds studded with stars, and her lips curved into a genuine smile of pleasure.

How had he described her when he'd first seen her at the Wiltons' ball? *If she saw fit to smile, she might be quite pretty.*

How wrong he was! With the sunlight dancing in her eyes and that smile for him—and only him—she was not just pretty. She was breathtaking.

Nothing would stop him from continuing to court her when they returned to London. That old bastard Lord Parville would relish the prospect of ridding himself of Catherine—the daughter he'd never valued, and who would be eternally grateful for Dax giving him the opportunity to continue to court Blanche.

Everyone would be happy.

A successful venture, if I say so myself.

He glanced toward her, and they exchanged a smile. Whatever that Andrew Leander had done to her, he was a fool. He'd missed out on the opportunity to claim one of the most exciting women in England as his companion for life.

An opportunity that Dax had no intention of passing on.

"I feel I must apologize, Your Grace," she said.

"Daxton, please."

Her cheeks flushed. "Daxton."

He nodded. "Good. And, there's no need to apologize. If anything"

the one who should explain myself to you. You must have thought me incredibly rude when we first met.”

She let out a laugh. “I found it rather refreshing. Most men either they’ve not been insulted, or scuttle away to massage their egos as flatterers and sycophants. No...” she hesitated, her smile slipping, “... that I must explain my refusal to visit Hurstpoint Place.”

“You have nothing to explain,” he said. “I suspect the present incumbent has more reason to apologize than you. I take it you knew him?”

“We met shortly after my come-out,” she said. “I wasn’t so foolish as to let myself be compromised, but I believed myself in love—until he made it clear that a self-respecting gentleman could never consider courting one so vibrant as I.”

“One such as you?”

She turned away, but not before Dax caught sight of moisture in her eyes.

“A woman with little fortune,” she said quietly, “and even less beauty.”

“He said *that*?”

“He may have perhaps worded his opinion a little more...” she laughed with a smilesigh, “...*explicitly*.”

“*The cad!*”

It wasn’t too late to turn round and resume the journey to Hurstpoint Place—where he’d take great pleasure placing a shiner on Leander’s nose to teach him a lesson.

“Did you love him?”

Dax regretted the question as soon as the words escaped his mouth. Nevertheless, he held his breath in anticipation of the answer.

She shook her head. “No. I was infatuated—and Papa had stressed the importance of securing a match when my Season was costing him so much. So—the impoverished Lord Parville had dressed up his daughter as a prize sow and paraded her round the marriage mart in the hope that somebody would purchase her. Most likely, she would have jumped at the chance of a match—any match, to be free of a man who’d resented her from the moment she was born.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“It’s not your fault.”

“In *that*, you’re wrong, Miss Parville. I apologize on behalf of my father. I’m sure we have much to answer for. But I’d like to hope that *my* soul, at least,

ght mechance of redemption.”

She resumed her gaze on him, amusement in her expression. “Redemption, eh? Is a soul not supposed to suffer purgatory among redemption can be granted?”

I meant “This weak soul will gladly endure what purgatory you see fit to upon him,” he said.

umbent She laughed. “You’re not what I believed you to be at first. In fact, I find myself in the uncomfortable position of beginning to find you *agreeable*.”

sh as to He shifted closer to her, relishing the fact that rather than flinch, she made it lean toward him.

ne such “Oh, no—that simply *won’t* do, Miss Parville,” he said. “I have no intention to be merely *agreeable*. Such a bland word used too often to describe someone that we can barely tolerate.”

er eyes. “How would you prefer to be described, Your Grace?” she asked.

” “It’s Daxton, sweetheart, or did you forget?”

“Daxton.”

et out a His manhood twitched in his breeches as her tongue curled over his lips as if she relished each syllable.

“Should I describe you as delectable, perhaps?”

rstpoint “Or virile?” he suggested.

face to She let out a snort. “Mayhap vainglorious is more appropriate.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief.

“Such an adjective would only be appropriate if I was guilty of being over-exaggerated my talents,” he said. “Thus far, I promised to give you pleasure, and I believe I succeeded—unless my ears deceived me.”

sed the She gave a sharp gasp, and her blush deepened. His blood surged through his veins as her chest heaved, and he ached to run his finger along the curve of her neck like a flame at her neckline, which hinted at the plump softness of her breasts.

pe that “Very well,” she said, her voice tight, as if she, too, struggled to control her desire. “*Virile* it is.”

er from The curricule turned a corner, and the chimneys of Hardwick House came into view.

“Such a beautiful building,” she said.

“It’s very much like my country seat,” Dax said, “at least in style and size.”

it, has a “Don’t tell me—yours is larger?” She gave a saucy smile.

He leaned toward her and lowered his voice. “Are you still referring to the buildings?”

“Your Grace!” she cried in mock horror.

“I thought I’d told you to call me...”

“Ah, yes,” she interrupted, “but if I cry out your name too loudly, someone might hear and draw certain conclusions.”

“Conclusions with respect to what?”

He reached for her hand, and his heart leaped when she laced her fingers through his.

“Oh, I say—old chap!” a voice cried. “I wondered where you’d been gallivanting about the place, were you?”

Horton stood alone in the center of the lane.

“Where’s your companion, Horton?” Dax asked.

“Miss Blanche? Inside with the rest of the ladies. Sewing her cushions, or something or other. It seems I was surprised by your requirements.”

“You were?”

“Apparently, I kept blocking the light each time I went to look out the window. I swear Lady Hardwick was going to smack me with her fan!”

Miss Parville let out a soft laugh. “Lady Hardwick’s a woman with a softer heart,” she said. “She doesn’t suffer fools—or obstructions.”

Horton glanced at her, and his eyes widened in astonishment.

“You seem in good spirits, Miss Parville,” he said. “I trust my friend hasn’t plagued you too much.”

“On the contrary, he’s taken great pains to ensure my comfort.”

“Ha!” Horton cried. “I bet he has. How much do I owe you, Petrus?”

Dax frowned at his friend. “We’ll discuss that later, Horton. If you’re ready, there’s time to join the rest of the gentlemen for the shooting.”

“I’ve no interest in shooting when I’ve already bagged my bird,” Horton said. “No small thanks to *your* efforts, I might add. It was fifty guineas, wasn’t it?”

“Horton,” Dax growled. “We’ll continue this conversation later, or I’ll escort Miss Parville back to the house.”

“There’s no need to *escort* her anywhere, now,” Horton corrected. “Unless, of course, you’ve had a change of heart.”

“That’s enough!” Dax cried. “Go and annoy the other gentlemen.”

ring to leave me be.”

Horton bowed his head.

“I beg pardon, Miss Parville,” he said. “I was mistaken, and can apologize if I’ve given offense.”

loudly, He tipped his hat and disappeared.

Dax tugged at the reins. “Walk on!”

The horses set off. Miss Parville remained silent, but he could see tension in her body. As the curricle drew up beside the main doors, a footman rushed toward them and took the reins.

It had been! Dax climbed down, then offered his hand to help her out, but she would not take it. Instead, she stared at him out of clear green eyes.

“A change of heart about what?” she asked.

“Just a silly jape between friends,” Dax said. “Nothing to concern yourself with.”

plus to “I disagree,” she replied. “If your friend saw fit to apologize to me, he, at least, considers the matter of some concern to myself. And, what about that about fifty guineas?”

It of the “It’s nothing,” he said. “I see that now.”

” “Now? Then you didn’t see it before?” She stared at his hand, but after a moment she didn’t take it. “Can’t you at least be honest? I’d rather be subjected to a painful truth than a falsehood any day. The former is a mark of respect; the latter, disdain.”

her friend There was no escaping the truth. And he *did* owe her that much.

“Before I tell you anything,” he said, “let me say that had I known what I know now, I’d never have agreed to it.”

h?” The color drained from her face. “Agreed to what?”

In a hurry, “I…” he shook his head, his gut twisting in shame. “I never meant to offend you, Miss Parville. I spoke the truth when I said that my friend Horton genuinely admires your sister, but…”

guineas, “Stop,” she said, her voice hard, as if a frost had settled in her veins. “Permit me to hazard a guess. You and your friend know of the stipulation that no man shall approach Blanche until I am being courted. I therefore devised a scheme to masquerade as my admirer in order to permit your friend to court my sister—in return for fifty guineas.”

Oh, shit.

en, and “Indeed, Your Grace.”

Bugger—he'd cursed aloud.

“Am I inaccurate in any respect?”

an only He shuffled from one foot to another, as if he were a grubby boy standing in front of his housemaster, waiting for a beating after a capital transgression.

“In one respect, yes,” he said, his voice meek. “The sum was a hundred guineas, not fifty.”

inse the She wrinkled her nose. “I suppose I should be flattered that a footman considered me worth the effort—or is it perhaps an insult that you demand for such a substantial compensation for suffering my company?”

he didn't “I did it for my friend,” he said, “who I believe is genuinely fond of his sister.”

“You've said that on several occasions,” she said. “A man only reveals his concern for his feelings when he's uncertain of them.”

She gripped the side of the curricule and began to climb out. He offered her a hand, then she slapped it aside, almost losing her balance.

hat was “Don't touch me, Your Grace,” she hissed. “I think you've done enough. Head held high, she turned her back and strode toward the doors.

“Wait!” he cried. “Don't you want to know why I told you that you were not to go out still, now?”

ted to a She turned and shrugged. “Because you knew I'd find out. You were not to act—then she had as good as confessed. All you've done is fill in the details.”

“It wasn't because of that,” he said. “It's because I have too much to say for you—I care about you too much to want to conceal the truth. I want to tell you that I love you—*all* of me—including my flaws.” He took a step toward her. “I love you—all of you.”

Her hand flew to her mouth, and her eyes shone with unshed tears. She shook her head.

friend “No,” she whispered as if to herself. “I'll not fall for it—not again.

“Catherine!” he cried. “Won't you at least listen? Give me a chance to tell you my heart. I regret deceiving you. But the deception was short-lived. I'm sorry.

Papa's some ways, I'm glad I set out to court you. For had I not done so, I would never have seen the real woman.”

ersuade “The real woman?”

as.” “The kind, caring woman,” he said, “who thinks nothing of herself and everything of those that she loves. The clever woman with the sharp tongue and ready wit—who conceals herself beneath the façade of the shrew.”

She flinched at that last word, then sighed.

“Shrew I may be,” she said, “but at least *I’ve* never set out to t
tandingsomeone’s heart for my own ends—or for a hundred guineas.”

ession. He approached her again, and she raised her hand.

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“What must I do?” he asked.

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Before he could respond, she turned her back and strode inside.

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He thrust his hands into his pockets. What the bloody hell was he g
ered hisdo?

“Ahem.” The footman cleared his throat. “Will you be want
ough.” curricl again today, Your Grace?”

“Bloody hellfire, man!” he cried. “Do I look like I’ll need it?”

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curricl and drove off, disappearing round the side of the building.

r friend Only a week ago Dax would have been crowing at the notion of
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ant you The only woman in the world he was capable of loving.

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She flinched at that last word, then sighed.

“Shrew I may be,” she said, “but at least *I’ve* never set out to toy with someone’s heart for my own ends—or for a hundred guineas.”

He approached her again, and she raised her hand.

“No further, sir!”

“What must I do?” he asked.

“Spend your hundred guineas wisely,” she retorted. “Or, if you’re unable to grasp the concept of a wise purchase, use it to buy yourself a woman who doesn’t mind being deceived. I hear there’s plenty in the bawdy houses of London.

Before he could respond, she turned her back and strode inside.

Shit.

He thrust his hands into his pockets. What the bloody hell was he going to do?

“Ahem.” The footman cleared his throat. “Will you be wanting the curricule again today, Your Grace?”

“Bloody hellfire, man!” he cried. “Do I look like I’ll need it?”

“Very good, Your Grace.” The footman bowed, then climbed into the curricule and drove off, disappearing round the side of the building.

Only a week ago Dax would have been crowing at the notion of having won a bet—and a hundred guineas to restock his wine cellar with.

But, in doing so, he’d lost something far more precious.

The only woman in the world he was capable of loving.



CHAPTER TEN

A SHARP KNOCK on the door roused Catherine from her doze.

“Come in!”

The door creaked open, and Lady Hardwick’s maid appeared.

“Excuse me, miss, her ladyship’s been asking for you, seeing missed dinner.”

“I wasn’t hungry.” Catherine said.

“She wanted to know if you were joining the dancing tonight waiting for you now, in the hall.”

Dancing—the last thing she wanted to do.

Catherine climbed off the bed and rubbed her eyes.

“Are you unwell, miss?” the maid asked. “Shall I send for a doctor

“No, thank you.” Catherine forced a smile. “I was merely a litt from this morning’s excursion. Did you say Lady Hardwick’s wait me?”

“She wondered if you might like some assistance, miss, perhaps your hair, seeing as you brought no maid with you.”

Catherine flinched. Was Papa’s inability to afford a maid for subject of servants’ gossip?

“Shall I fix your hair, miss?” the maid asked. “I’ve a ribbon that’ll the color of your hair just right, see?” She held up a bright green ribbon.

Catherine wanted nothing less than to join the company or cover in frippery. But, neither did she want to be the subject of gossip, which would be if she remained hidden in her chamber. *She* had done nothing ashamed of. The duke—*Daxton*—had behaved abominably. Why should she hide? Let him see her and suffer discomfort—assuming he had a conscience.
Daxton...

“Here, miss—sit yourself down.”

The maid’s merry chatter returned Catherine to the present, and while the maid brushed her hair, then proceeded to pin it up and s

with the ribbon.

“There!” the maid cried. “You’ll be the prettiest woman in the room tonight.”

Catherine turned her head from one side to the other. She had to admit that the ribbon looked rather fetching. She smiled at the maid’s reflection.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’ll tell your mistress that she’s fortunate to have such a talented lady’s maid.”

The maid bobbed a curtsey.

“You’re welcome, miss.”

Catherine rose and exited her chamber. As she descended the stairs, strains of music could be heard through one of the doors, and she found the urge to flee. Before her courage failed, Lady Hardwick appeared at the top of the stairs.

“There you are!” she cried. “I was most anxious when I didn’t see you at dinner. I hope you didn’t think it an imposition that I sent Betsy to fetch you.”

“Of course not,” Catherine said. “It was most kind.”

“And—you’re well?”

Catherine nodded.

“Good! The evening wouldn’t be the same without you. And, I hope you’ve been missed.”

“Blanche will fare very well without her older sister getting in her way,” Catherine said.

“I wasn’t referring to your sister,” Lady Hardwick said. “One of our most distinguished guests was looking distinctly out of sorts tonight.”

Catherine looked away.

“You’re not curious to know who?” Lady Hardwick slipped her hand through Catherine’s. “No matter. There’s plenty of young men enough to dance with.”

She led Catherine into the ballroom, then she excused herself and went to her husband. Lord Hardwick took his wife’s hand, and the two smiled at each other—the perfect picture of marital bliss.

A number of couples were already dancing, moving in unison across the dance floor. Catherine spotted her sister with Lord Horton. Blanche’s expression was filled with joy, and Horton had eyes for none but Blanche. Her eyes that conveyed the purest devotion.

Catherine looked away. Why did Blanche have to be so happy?
e room Why did they all have to be so damned *happy*?

Then she cursed herself. She would never have resented her sister
o admit anyone else's—happiness before today.

on. But, today, she'd caught a glimpse of what happiness might have
to have like for *her*—of what it might have been like to be loved.

Until it had been wrenched from her. Until she'd realized that she
been used as a pawn, as a means to earn one hundred guineas for a week.

She averted her gaze from the happy faces and moved around
aircase, perimeter of the ballroom, in search of a quiet corner. Then she collided
right the solid wall of muscle.

he foot Her breath caught at the familiar masculine scent.

“Miss Parville,” a deep voice spoke, and her body tightened
e you at recognition. “May I request...”

tend to “No, you may not,” she said, her voice sharp to hide her heartache.

She glanced up, and her senses were assaulted by his deep blue gaze.

“Won't you let me explain?” he asked.

“Explain what, Your Grace? That you took on the challenge
persuading the Spinster Shrew into a pretend courtship in order to
you've yourself a hundred guineas and have a jolly good laugh at my expense?”
shook her head. “I have no wish to listen to what you have to say. So
r way,” to say that our *courtship* is at an end—though it had never really begun
it?”

ar more He stepped toward her, and she raised her hand. “No!” she cried. “
nothing you can say that I could possibly want to hear. You mock
being a spinster, but I consider spinsterhood to be significantly better than
ier alternative.”

ager to His blue eyes narrowed, regret in their expression. But she was not
fooled by him, no matter how well he might conceal his true intentions.

l joined She turned her back and strode toward a footman brandishing a
of them champagne glasses. Though she loathed the stuff, she needed something
to erase the pain—and her host would doubtless object to her disappearing
ross the study to seek oblivion in his brandy.

anche's She plucked a glass from the tray and took a sip. But, before she
anche—take another, a hand caught her sleeve. She looked up into a pair of
rimmed eyes, framed in a sallow, weather-beaten face creased with anxiety.

“Papa.”

“I see it didn’t take you long to scare off your suitor,” he hissed. “Orphan’s—child!”

“I have no suitor,” she said. “I never did.”

He let out a sharp, bitter laugh, and her senses were assaulted by the stench of stale liquor.

“Frightened him off, did you? I hope you’re proud of yourself. I’ll tell your sister that she must break off her courtship with Lord Horton.

“Leave her be, Papa!” Catherine cried. “What Blanche does is none of my business.”

“It *is* your business,” he snarled, “seeing as you’re such a misbegotten shrew that it’s impossible to get you off my hands! Do you think I would be saddled with daughters?”

“Then be grateful that someone’s courting Blanche.”

“I’m not grateful!” he cried. “I’m bloody furious! If Blanche marries, she’ll be left with you plaguing me all my life. And nobody wants a shrewish daughter—particularly one who repulsed two suitors.”

“Papa...”

“Mr. Leander was right about you!” he snarled. “Ye gods, I hate to see you for not ridding me of you, but you cannot deny he was right. With your shrewish tongue, you’ll never attract a man.”

“Perhaps I don’t *want* to attract a man!” she cried.

The music faltered, and Catherine became aware of several pairs of eyes on her. The dancing had stopped. But she’d passed beyond the realm of wanting to pander to the sensibilities of the other guests.

Let them hear. Let them *all* hear!

“I never want to suffer my mother’s fate,” she said, “to be a broodmare, to longer furnish a man with a son and be discarded if I fail—or worse still, to be tossed aside after my death, to be replaced by another and soon forgotten. I *knew* you resented your stepmother.”

“I did not!” she cried. “I loved Mama Eugenie. *You’re* the one responsible for her death. As you were responsible for my mother’s, you’ve always blamed me.”

“Why you...” he stepped forward and raised his arm, and she flinched in anticipation.

But the blow never came.

A hand appeared from nowhere and caught Papa's wrist. A huge Uselessmale—body moved between them, as if to shield her from Papa's fury

It was Daxton.

"That's *enough*, Lord Parville."

by the "Your Grace." Papa gave a stiff bow. "I was just reprimanding your daughter on her behavior. Surely you'd not object to a little of your candiscipline?"

"Only where it's warranted," Daxton said. "But I suspect the opportunity of my true—and has been for some years."

"What the devil do you mean?" Papa asked.

iserable "I mean that you have no understanding of parental love."

intended to "Love!" Papa scoffed, wrenching his hand free. "An emotion weakens a man—turns him into a milksop.

"You're wrong, Parville."

ies, I'll "Daxton turned his gaze to Catherine, his eyes filled with admiration for a "Love is the greatest emotion of all," he said. "It leads us to undertake deeds—selfless deeds. Your daughter Blanche is in love, yet you'd do happiness in your desperation to rid yourself of Catherine—the daughter he man value so little."

th your "I've every right to treat her as I see fit, Petrush!"

Papa raised his hand again, and Daxton caught it. "That's your warning, Parville," he growled. "Your daughter is worth a thousand of eyes you've no right to touch her."

realm of "I have a father's right!"

"Only insofar as the law permits it," Daxton said. "But the law is a

He shifted his gaze to Catherine, and her belly fluttered at the mere to admiration in his eyes. Admiration...

l, to be ...and love.

en." "My daughter's nothing!" Papa spat.

"You're wrong, Lord Parville!" Daxton cried, his voice, his he one listening as he continued to gaze at Catherine. "She is *everything* though weathered betrayal, yet has not once lost her capacity for kindness compassion. You believe her to be undeserving of love because you checked incapable of loving another."

"Neither are you," Papa said, scorn in his tone.

"I'm happy to prove you wrong, Lord Parville," Daxton said. "I lo

—very daughter. I didn't intend to at first. I confess I'm guilty of the crime of courting Catherine merely to help Lord Horton in his plans to court Beatrice. But I soon realized my own folly—the folly of toying with the finest woman in England.”

Catherine's heart fluttered as Daxton took her hands in his. Long, fatherly fingers lovingly interlaced with hers, and he pulled her close.

“Can you forgive me, my Catherine?” he whispered, his breath caressing her cheek. “I realized what an ass I'd been as soon as I understood that your kind heart lay concealed beneath your prickly exterior.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Prickly?”

A bloom crept across his cheeks. “Forgive me,” he said, “but I'm not being that frank. *Your* frankness is what I love about you. And your kindness. I've seen the love you bear your sister—your wish for her to have the happiness that you believe is forever denied you. But, if you can bestow even a fraction of that love onto me, then you'll make me the happiest man alive. I care not at all, regardless of your opinion of me, I'm, prepared to dedicate my life to making you happy.”

A ripple of murmurs threaded through the ballroom, and Catherine glanced around. The dancing had stopped, and the small crowd had gathered around, watching them. She caught sight of Blanche, arm in arm with Lord Horton. Her face flushed with joy.

Then, Daxton took both her hands and, before the entire company could blink, lowered himself onto one knee.

“Catherine—dearest Catherine—would you do me the honor of becoming my wife, an ass.” permitting me to court you properly? Before the whole world, so that everyone might witness the admiration and love I bear you?”

“Oh, how romantic!”

Catherine glanced round to see Lady Hardwick with her husband, her hands clasped over her heart.

“Hush, Beatrice, my love,” Hardwick whispered.

“Don't be so staid, Augustus!” she laughed. “Didn't I tell you I've seen the way he was in love with her?”

Catherine's skin tightened with need as Daxton brushed his thumb over the back of her hand.

“What do you say, my love?” he whispered. “Will you permit me to have you? Then, perhaps...” he hesitated, and vulnerability flickered in his eyes.

time of which tore at her heart, "...perhaps, in time, when you have four
blanche yourself to forgive me, I might be permitted to ask for your h
woman marriage?"

Sweet Lord! He'd spoken aloud—in front of a roomful of gues
, strong when she looked into his eyes, she saw no mischief or deceit. S
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ressing plea to be given a chance.

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making her lips, and she relaxed into his embrace, as if she'd always belonged

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Sweet Lord! He'd spoken aloud—in front of a roomful of guests. But when she looked into his eyes, she saw no mischief or deceit. She saw something she had never seen before—a deep regard and love for her—and a plea to be given a chance.

Which is all any good man could ask for.

She curled her fingers around his. "Yes," she said. "With all my heart, Your Grace."

He arched an eyebrow in question.

Your Grace?

Then she nodded.

"With all my heart—*Daxton.*"

He rose to his feet and pulled her into his arms. Then, he placed a kiss on her lips, and she relaxed into his embrace, as if she'd always belonged there.

"Oh, how lovely!" Blanche cried, her eyes bright with tears of joy.

Beside her, Lord Horton shook his head, smiling in delighted disbelief. "That's something I never thought I'd witness. Petrush—you've surprised us all."

"I've surprised myself," Daxton said, "but I'm glad that it was the duke who was tamed by the shrew."



EPILOGUE

London

December 1818

“**T**O THINK, CAT—A double wedding!”

Catherine linked her arm with her sister’s while they stood at the entrance.

Two figures waited at the far end of the aisle. The taller of the two and Catherine caught a flash of sunlight in a pair of deep blue eyes, by a face with strong, angular features, and hair as black as the night. Her heart fluttered in her chest, and she curled her fingers round the stems of the posy—a bouquet of pure white orchids which had arrived on her doorstep that morning with a card bearing a message inscribed in a bold, clear hand.

May the battle of wits begin.

And what a battle it would be! Two people who challenged each other constantly, warring with words, engaging in combat, until the moment of victory and sweet surrender when she’d yield to the pleasures he could offer her.

She drew in a sharp breath as a sinful pulse of heat threaded through her body at the notion of tonight. Other than a few stolen kisses and unobserved little moments when he’d brought her to pleasure with his hands—in a secluded garden, in his carriage, and even in the hallway—Papa was in his study not five feet away—Daxton had yet to open her to the true delights of lovemaking—delights he’d promised would send her to the realm of exquisite ecstasy.

The second man turned, and Blanche sighed. Lord Horton was handsome enough, but Daxton, in his magnificence, outshone his friend as the sun outshone the moon.

Perhaps that’s because I love him.

The music piped up, and the congregation stood.

Papa stepped between Catherine and her sister.

“Ready?” he asked.

Papa cut a fine dash in a new suit—courtesy of Daxton, who settled most of Papa’s debts. Though Catherine might never understand his bitterness, she could, at least, bring herself to forgive her parent and rejoice in the joy which now shone in his eyes.

She took Papa’s right arm while Blanche took his left, and together they walked down the aisle toward their future.

As they reached the end, the grooms stepped forward to claim their brides. Daxton’s eyes shone with love as he claimed Catherine and took her hand.

church “The Spinster Shrew no longer,” he whispered, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

turned, “Quite so, my love,” she said. “I must acquire a new reputation. Will you framed you to the *Diabolical Duchess*?”

light. Her His eyes sparkled with delight. “I look forward to many altercations of her love.”

doorstep “As do I.”

and. Then they turned to face the parson, soon to be man and wife.

The battle of wits had begun.

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His eyes sparkled with delight. “I look forward to many altercations, my love.”

“As do I.”

Then they turned to face the parson, soon to be man and wife.

The battle of wits had begun.

The End

Author's Note

The Taming of the Duke was inspired by Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew*. However, Catherine (*Katherina*), the "shrew," has justifiable reasons for her outwardly shrewish behavior, including her desire to protect her younger sister Blanche (*Bianca*).

Daxton Hawke, Duke of Petrush (*Petruchio*), initially agrees to let Catherine to enable his friend Lucian (*Lucentio*) to court Blanche, with whom he's fallen in love. However, while Daxton tries to "tame" Catherine by using similar approaches to Petruchio in the play, he relishes their battle of wits and finds that he prefers a woman with spirit to a biddable wife—and thus becomes the duke who is tamed!

Author's Note

The Taming of the Duke was inspired by Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew*. However, Catherine (*Katherina*), the "shrew," has many justifiable reasons for her outwardly shrewish behavior, including her desire to protect her younger sister Blanche (*Bianca*).

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About the Author

Emily Royal grew up in Sussex, England, and has devoured romantic fiction for as long as she can remember. A mathematician at heart, Emily worked in financial services for over twenty years. She indulged in fiction of writing after she moved to Scotland, where she lives with her husband, two teenage daughters and a menagerie of rescue pets including a Twin attention-seeking boa constrictor.

She has a passion for both reading and writing romance with a weakness for Regency rakes, Highland heroes, and Medieval knights. Persuasion is one of her all-time favorite novels which she reads several times each year. She is fortunate enough to live within sight of a Medieval palace.

When not writing, Emily enjoys playing the piano, hiking, and exploring the landscapes, particularly the Highlands. One of her ambitions is to peak as well as climb, every mountain in Scotland.

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