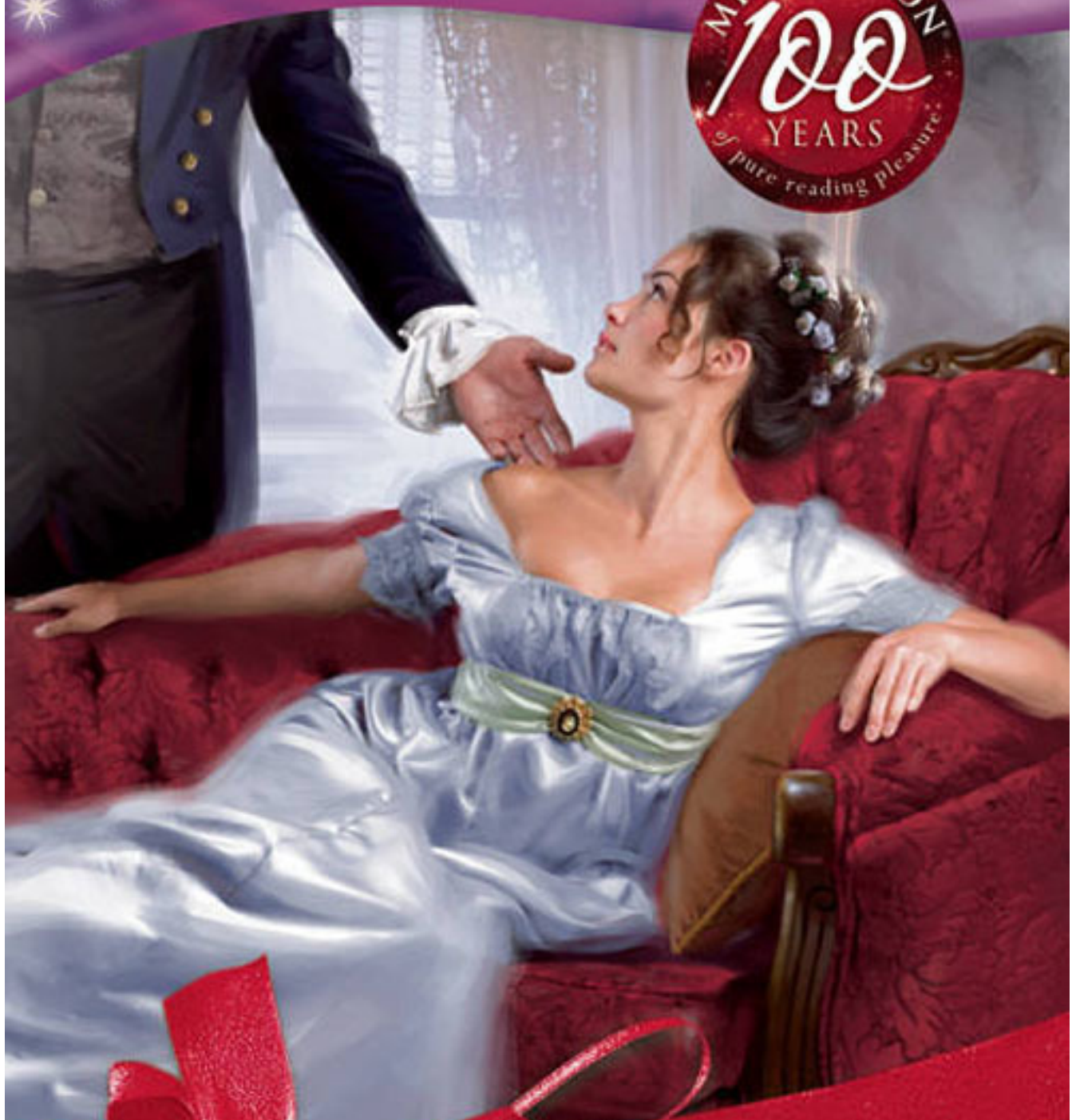


Captain Fawley's Innocent Bride

Annie Burrows



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Captain Fawley's Innocent Bride

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Содержание

CAPTAIN FAWLEY'S INNOCENT BRIDE	6
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	32

‘You have admitted to me that you do not expect to receive any proposals of marriage,’ Captain Fawley ploughed on with brutal candour.

‘And that at the end of the season, because of your straitened circumstances, you will have to seek paid employment. You will be quite miserable.’

Deborah’s heart was pounding hard. She could not remember any man ever insulting her so comprehensively. Even though all he had said was true, it was cruel of him to fling it in her face. How dared he taunt her with her wish to marry, having told her she stood no chance of snaring a man?

‘I do not think I wish to continue with this conversation,’ she said, rising to her feet and turning her back on him.

‘Miss Gillies, do not turn me down before you hear the whole.’

Turn him down? She froze. What was he trying to say?

‘The...the whole?’ Reluctantly, she looked at him over her shoulder.

‘Yes.’ He got to his feet, reached for her upper arm, and spun her to face him. ‘I thought you, of all women, might overcome your revulsion for such a man as I am in return for lifelong security.’

‘You are asking me to marry you?’

Annie Burrows has been making up stories for her own amusement since she first went to school. As soon as she got the hang of using a pencil she began to write them down. Her love of books meant she had to do a degree in English literature. And her love of writing meant she could never take on a job where she didn’t have time to jot down notes when inspiration for a new plot struck her. She still wants the heroines of her stories to wear beautiful floaty dresses, and triumph over all that life can throw at them. But when she got married she discovered that finding a hero is an essential ingredient to arriving at ‘happy ever after’.

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To Viv

For introducing me to the works of

Georgette Heyer

Chapter One

'Oh, no,' Susannah grumbled to her friend, Miss Deborah Gillies, snapping open her fan and raising it to conceal the lower part of her face. 'Here comes Captain Fawley, hobbling over to ask me to dance again. And I cannot. I simply cannot.'

Deborah compressed her lips to hide her own revulsion—oh, not at Captain Fawley. The poor man could not help the way he looked. He had lost the lower part of one leg, and his left hand in the same explosion which had so badly disfigured his face. His left eyelid would for ever droop into the scarring that covered his whole cheek, twisting his mouth into a permanently cynical expression. No, she could feel nothing but compassion for him.

It was Susannah's behaviour that upset her.

Captain Fawley bowed over her friend's hand, his dark eyes raised to hers with dogged determination.

'Good evening, Miss Hullworthy, Miss Gillies.' Though he included Deborah in his greeting, he shot her only the briefest glance. 'I was hoping I might prevail upon you to dance with me this evening.'

'Oh, dear,' said Susannah, with just the right amount of regret in her voice to sound convincing. 'I am afraid my dance card is already full. And here comes my partner for the quadrille.' She looked over Captain Fawley's shoulder, a smile stretching her lips into a pretty pink bow as Baron Dunning came to claim her hand.

Deborah supposed it was not Susannah's fault that the rules of conduct required a lady to repress her true feelings under a cloak of civility. But surely it would be kinder to Captain Fawley if she could just tell him how he made her feel. Then he wouldn't keep on approaching her, and being rebuffed so prettily that he had no idea that the very thought of him touching her made Susannah feel nauseous.

She flicked him a soulful glance as he watched Susannah walk to the dance floor on the arm of her portly young partner. Captain Fawley must have been strikingly handsome once, she sighed wistfully. Dark haired, as well as dark eyed, with features that were still discernibly pleasing, even under that horribly reddened and puckered skin.

Whereas there was nothing handsome about Baron Dunning. He had a weak chin, made more noticeable by a mouth full of prominent teeth, and his skin was a greasy broth of suppurating pustules.

'Many people suffer from spots,' Susannah had remonstrated when Deborah had pointed out that Baron Dunning's complexion was no better than Captain Fawley's. 'He cannot help that!'

Besides which, he had a title. All the poor Captain had to offer was his devotion. And Susannah might protest that she would hate to look ridiculous hobbling about the dance floor with a man who had a false leg, but she never worried what it looked like to dance with the dodderly Earl of Caxton. The *on-dit* was that the cadaverous widower was on the lookout for wife number three, and Susannah was plainly ready to stifle her squeamishness for the sake of a coronet.

The impecunious Captain Fawley could expect no such consideration.

'How could I let him touch me, with that false hand?' Susannah had whined only the previous night, when they had been preparing for bed at the end of an arduous day of husband hunting. It had

occurred to Deborah, as her friend applied pineapple water to her skin, that it was most apt to refer to the early weeks of spring as 'the Season'. Débutantes stalked their prey as ruthlessly as sportsmen on a grouse shoot, flushing unsuspecting bachelors from their covers with a swirl of silken skirts, then bagging them with a volley fired from a pair of sparkling eyes. Or lured them into traps baited with honeyed smiles and coaxing words.

'It is very hard to tell it is a false hand, it has been so well made,' Deborah had pointed out. 'It looks just like any other gentleman's hand, covered with an evening glove.'

'I would know it was a dead thing, resting on my arm.' Susannah had shuddered. 'Eeugh!'

As the orchestra began to play, Captain Fawley came back to himself. Turning to Deborah, he inclined his head and held out his arm. His right arm. She had noticed on previous occasions that if he offered a lady his arm, it was never what remained of the left one.

'Shall we take a turn about the room?'

Deborah smiled, and laid her hand upon his sleeve. As she glanced up, it occurred to her that placing her on his right side also had the effect of presenting the unblemished side of his face to her scrutiny. A pang of sympathy smote her. He was sensitive enough to his appearance, without girls like Susannah rubbing his nose in it. He had even grown his hair longer than was fashionable, sweeping part of his fringe over the left side of his forehead, in an effort to conceal the worst of the scarring.

They set out along the edge of the room, in the area behind the pillars that marked the boundaries of the dance floor. Captain Fawley's gait was a little uneven, she had to admit in fairness to Susannah. But by no means did he hobble! And though she had never danced with him, she was certain he would look no worse than many of the men here tonight, lumbering about with straining waistcoats and florid faces.

'I can see you would much rather be on the dance floor,' said Captain Fawley, noticing the direction of her gaze, 'than bearing me company. I shall escort you to your mother, and—'

'Oh, please do not!'

He eyed her curiously.

'I would m...much rather be promenading, than left to wilt on the sidelines.'

Her dance card, unlike that of her friend, bore very few names. If Captain Fawley abandoned her, it would be humiliatingly obvious that she had no partner.

She felt as though the only time she ever got to dance lately was when one of Susannah's admirers took pity on her, as Captain Fawley was doing now.

And unlike some of those gentlemen, Captain Fawley was invariably attentive and polite, almost managing to make her believe he was enjoying talking to her.

And what was more, she was sure he would never take part in the kind of conversation she had overheard not half an hour since. Not that she could blame Baron Dunning for comparing her unfavourably with Susannah. Although both of them had dark hair, Deborah's curls would have gone limp by the end of the evening. Her eyes, though as brown, were more often lowered bashfully than sparkling with wit. Her complexion, thanks to an inflammation of the lungs she had suffered over the winter months, might, she accepted, by candle-light look somewhat sallow. And when she stood next to the shorter, shapelier Susannah, she supposed she could see why Mr Jay had scathingly likened her to a beanpole.

Not that knowing they had said nothing untrue made their comments any less hurtful, which was why she felt so grateful that Captain Fawley was deigning to spend these few moments with her.

When she thought of the adventures he must have had, in his soldiering days, she was amazed he could talk to her so kindly about the trivial concerns of a plain, provincial miss like her.

He gave her his wry, lopsided smile, which somehow always managed to make her own lips want to rise in imitation.

'Then let us go and sample the refreshments,' he suggested, turning her towards a door at the far side of the room from where the orchestra was playing.

‘Thank you, I should like that.’

She hoped very much that he would linger while she drank a glass of lemonade. Conversation would be limited, for after her initial burst of pleasure in securing his attention, she would doubtlessly become tongue-tied. He had experienced so much, when she had scarcely set foot outside her father’s parish before this trip to London. Not that he had personally related how he had fought his way across the Peninsula before suffering the horrific injuries at Salamanca that had left him hovering between life and death for months. No, that information had been gleaned from her mother’s friends, who made it their business to know everything about everyone.

They had shaken their heads, expressing pity as they related what they knew of his history, but she could only admire the determination with which he had clawed his way back to his present state. He did everything an able-bodied man did, though it must take him twice the effort. Why, he had even learned to ride a horse. She had glimpsed him on a couple of occasions, cantering through the park in the early morning, before many other people were about. He seemed to her to be so much more manly than the fashionable fops who lounged their languid way through London’s drawing rooms. He had overcome whatever life had thrown at him, which you could see, just by looking at him, had been a great deal.

She felt that first betraying blush sweep up her cheeks, which always assailed her at about this point in their meetings. For what could she say that might be of interest to a man like him, a man who had really lived? Though she knew that, whatever she said, he would never give her one of those condescending looks, which so many eligible bachelors seemed to have got down to a fine art. He was so kind, so magnanimous, so...

‘Tell me,’ he said, as they sauntered towards the table on which a large punch bowl sat, ‘just what a man has to do to secure a dance with your friend?’

Deborah’s flight of fancy exploded in mid-air, plummeting to earth like a spent rocket. He had not sought out her company because he wished for it. She was only a means by which he might be able to approach Susannah. Of course a man like him would not willingly spend time with a drab, nondescript, foolish, ignorant, penniless, plain...and let us not forget shy, awkward, dull...

She pulled herself together with effort, and pasted a polite social smile upon her face, as Captain Fawley continued, ‘I purposely arrived early tonight, and still her dance card seems to be full.’

‘It was full before ever we arrived,’ Deborah temporised. It was not her place to tell him that, no matter what he did, Susannah would rebuff him. Not only did she find him physically repulsive, but she had her sights set on a title. Forming an attachment with an impecunious commoner was not part of Susannah’s plan at all.

‘Before you arrived?’ Captain Fawley signalled a waiter to pour Deborah a glass of lemonade.

‘Yes,’ she confirmed, her heart plummeting as the waiter handed her a drink in a tall glass. It would take for ever to drink it down, and, for some reason, she no longer wanted to spend a moment longer with Captain Fawley than she had to. There was an acid heaviness in her stomach, her throat ached, and, to her annoyance, her eyes had begun to prickle with what she was afraid were burgeoning tears. She did not want him to see her cry. Lord, she did not want anyone to see her cry! What kind of ninny burst into tears at a ball because every man there wanted to dance with her friend and not her!

She took a gulp of the drink, appalled when the glass rattled against her teeth. Her hands were shaking.

‘Are you quite well, Miss Gillies?’ Captain Fawley looked concerned.

Her heart performed a peculiar lurch as she thought how like him it was to be so observant. ‘I...’ Lying was a sin. She would not do it. And yet, she desperately wanted to escape. If she was to twist the truth, just a little...there could be no harm in that, could there? ‘I think I would like to return to my mother, and sit beside her after all, if you do not mind?’

‘Of course.’ Captain Fawley took her glass and placed it on a convenient window ledge. He tucked her hand into the crook of his arm, pulling her hard against his body so that he could support

her wilting form as he ushered her towards the door. She had never been held so close to any man before, except her father. It made her heart race to feel the heat of his body seeping through his uniform jacket. She could feel the flex of his muscled frame with every step he took, and a slight change of pressure every time he breathed in or out. And if she could feel him, then he must be aware she was trembling. Oh, pray God he would put it down to physical weakness, and would never guess that he had devastated her with his careless remark.

Her mother was sitting on a bench with several other chaperons, ladies whose task it was to ensure their charges maintained that delicate balancing act between doing their utmost to entrap an eligible bachelor into matrimony whilst simultaneously behaving with sufficient decorum to avert scandal.

‘Mrs Gillies,’ said Captain Fawley, executing a polite bow, ‘I fear your daughter is feeling unwell.’

‘Oh, dear!’ Her mother’s eyes shot past her, to where Susannah was twirling merrily around the floor with Baron Dunning. ‘We have only just arrived, and Susannah is having such success...she will not wish to leave. Do you really need to go home?’ She shifted to one side, so that Deborah could sit next to her. Taking her hand in hers, she gave it a squeeze. ‘Deborah was so ill over Christmas, I almost decided to put off coming to London at all. But Susannah was so keen...’ she explained to Captain Fawley.

‘I shall be fine, Mother. If I may but sit quietly for a while....’

‘Perhaps a turn about the garden, to get some fresh air?’ Lady Honoria Vesey-Fitch, an old friend of her mother’s suggested with an arch smile. ‘I am sure the Captain would oblige.’

Oh, no. It was bad enough that he did not wish to dance with her, never mind dragging the poor man round the garden on what would be a fool’s errand. For no amount of fresh air was going to make her feel any better. On the contrary, knowing that Captain Fawley would wish himself anywhere rather than with her would only serve to make her feel ten times worse.

‘Oh, no!’ To Deborah’s immense relief, her mother instantly vetoed the suggestion. ‘The cold night air would be most injurious to her health, after the heat of this stuffy room. I do not want her to catch a chill on top of everything else!’

Everything else? Had her mother guessed that her only daughter had been smitten by a severe case of hero-worship? Though how could she, when Deborah had only just worked it out for herself? It could be the only reason why her heart twisted at the look in Captain Fawley’s eyes every time Susannah turned him down, the little leap it performed when he turned, albeit with resignation, to her.

‘Is there nobody who could escort Miss Gillies home?’ Captain Fawley said, then, looking pensive, he ventured, ‘Or perhaps you could take your daughter home, if you would entrust Miss Hullworthy to my care. I assure you, I...’

That did it. He would gladly think of an excuse to shovel her out of the way, so that he could have Susannah all to himself. Pulling herself upright in her chair, she said, ‘There will be no need for anyone to leave, or any alteration made to our arrangements. I will be fine, if I may but sit quietly, for a while.’

‘Oh, but thank you for your concern, Captain,’ her mother put in quickly. ‘Please do call on us tomorrow if you are still anxious over my daughter’s health.’

An arrested expression came over his face. ‘I shall certainly do so,’ he said, a gleam coming to his eye.

Deborah glared down at her hands as she clasped them in her lap. He did not care a fig for her health! He had just worked out that, if he called, he would be able to ascertain which social events Susannah might be attending the next evening. For all his manly attributes, he was clearly inexperienced at wooing society women. He often arrived at a ball quite late, looking flustered, as though he had searched several venues before hitting upon the right one. But now he had cottoned on to the mysterious means by which his rivals had stolen a march over him. They called during the

day, and by means of cajolery, flattery or downright bribery, wrought promises from their darling before even setting foot in the ballroom.

Tomorrow, he would join the ranks of admirers who called to deliver posies and drink tea whilst vying for Susannah's favours.

She rather thought she might have a relapse tomorrow. She did not think she wished to witness his humiliation.

There was a smattering of applause as the music ended, and the dancers began to leave the floor. Baron Dunning returned Susannah, very correctly, to Mrs Gillies. Flicking her fan open, she waved it briskly before her face, pointedly ignoring Captain Fawley.

'It is so hot in here,' she complained.

'Indeed,' he put in, in an effort, Deborah was sure, to draw her sparkling gaze in his direction. 'Miss Gillies has been quite overcome with the heat.'

'Really?' Instantly Susannah dropped what Deborah thought of as her ballroom manner, and looked at her with concern. 'Oh, don't say you are going to be ill again, Debs.'

'I am not going to be ill,' she grated, flustered at becoming the centre of attention. 'I will be fine, if everyone was to just leave me alone.' To her mortification, the tears that had long been threatening welled up; despite blinking furiously, one spilled down her cheek. Hastily, she wiped it away with her gloved hand.

'Oh, Debs,' said Susannah, her own eyes welling in sympathy. 'You really are unwell. We must go home at once.'

'No, no, I do not want to spoil your evening.'

'And you have so many distinguished names on your dance card,' put in Mrs Gillies. 'You don't want to disappoint so many eligible gentlemen....'

'Oh, pooh to that!' said Susannah, bending forward and taking Deborah's hand. 'I can dance with them all tomorrow. Or the next night. But I would never forgive myself if Deborah sacrificed her health for my pleasure.'

Deborah was swamped by a wave of guilt. No wonder the men all preferred Susannah to her. Not only was she far prettier, but she was a much nicer person too.

Captain Fawley certainly thought so. His eyes were glowing with admiration as he organised a footman to bring their carriage round. He was falling deeper and deeper under Susannah's spell with every encounter. Just as she, Deborah realised, stifling a sob, was growing more hopelessly infatuated with him. She had experienced an almost overwhelming urge to *cling* to him when he finally handed her over to her mother. To fling her arms around him and beg him to forget Susannah. In a ballroom!

She allowed Susannah and her mother to hustle her to the ladies' retiring room while *they* waited for their carriage and *she* grappled with the revelation that she had carelessly lost her heart to a man who scarcely noticed she existed.

'I am so sorry,' she said when they got into the carriage. 'I have ruined your evening, Suzy, and it is not as though I feel that unwell.'

Susannah grasped her hand. 'I shall not mind having an early night myself, truly, I promise you. Just lately, things seem to have become a bit of a whirl. It was easier, in some ways, when we first came to London, and hardly knew anybody.'

That was before Susannah had become such a hit. Her success had astounded Mrs Gillies, who had warned her not to expect too much from society. For though Susannah was so pretty, and so charming, and had so much wealth, that wealth came from trade.

'I can introduce you to a certain level of society,' she had explained. It was the reason that Deborah's mother was acting as chaperon, after all. Her own lineage was impeccable. Her only problem was lack of money. Since Susannah's family had plenty, they had come to a mutually beneficial arrangement. Mrs Gillies would introduce Susannah alongside her own daughter, and Susannah's parents would foot the bill for both girls. 'But there is no guarantee you will be accepted.'

Indeed, for the first few weeks of the Season, they had stayed in more often than they had gone out. Now, they had so many invitations, they had either to reject some, or attend several functions each evening.

And naturally, since Susannah's parents were meeting their costs, Mrs Gillies felt obligated to ensure that she had the opportunity to mingle with the sort of men she considered marriage-worthy.

They were not at all what Deborah wanted. She had hoped that she might meet a young man who did not mind that she was not very wealthy. He would be looking for a helpmeet. A girl who would not demand he keep her in splendid indolence, but be prepared to run his household on a tight budget, and raise his children with a cheerful demeanour. There must be many younger sons of good families who wanted a dependable, resourceful wife. When they had first come to London, she had held out hopes of meeting such a man. But not now they were beginning to mingle in somewhat higher social circles, to satisfy Susannah's ambitions.

Deborah sighed heavily more than once as the carriage took them the few streets to their rented house. In the small market town where she had grown up, she would have scorned to ride such a short distance, when she was perfectly capable of walking. But in London, she was subject to all manner of ridiculous restrictions. A footman grasped her arm as she stumbled in the act of clambering out of the coach. Hired for the Season, naturally, just like the town house they had rented in Half Moon Street. She missed being able to hold a conversation without wondering if the servants, who were strangers she could not trust, were listening. She missed being able to go for a walk without one of them trailing behind, for the sake of propriety. And really, how silly was it to stipulate that a footman was necessary to knock on the door of whatever house they were paying a call at? As though a young lady's knuckles were far too delicate for the task?

She barely restrained herself from shaking him off, but when, upon climbing the steps to their front door, she experienced a moment of dizziness, she was glad she had not. A little later, she blinked, to find herself sitting in the armchair in her pretty bedroom, a maid kneeling at her feet removing her slippers, and Susannah hovering over her, fanning her face. Her mother was behind her chair, hastily loosening her stays.

'Did I faint?' she asked, feeling thoroughly confused.

'Not quite,' her mother replied, 'but your face was as white as paper. You must get straight into bed. Jones,' she addressed the maid, 'go to the kitchens and fetch Deborah a drink.' When the woman looked a little put out, she continued ruthlessly, 'Miss Hullworthy and I are quite capable of getting my daughter undressed and into bed. What she needs from you is a drink of hot chocolate, and some bread and butter. You have lost weight this last couple of weeks,' she said, clucking her tongue at the sight of Deborah's bony shoulder blades as she removed the stays and gown. 'You have been racketing about, growing more and more tired, and only picking at your food....'

'I am so sorry,' Susannah put in at this point. 'I should have noticed. Please say you forgive me for being so selfish. I have been so full of myself. My success has quite gone to my head....'

'I think,' said Mrs Gillies, raising her daughter to her feet, and supporting her towards the bed, 'that it will do both you girls good to spend a few days at home quietly. We may put it about that it is on account of Deborah's indisposition, but really, Susannah, I have been growing quite concerned about you too.'

'Me?' Susannah plumped down on to a bedside chair as Mrs Gillies rolled up Deborah's nightdress and pushed it over her head, just as she had done when Deborah had been a little girl, back home in the vicarage. It was almost worth being a little unwell, Deborah decided, to be rid of that maid, and have her mother and Susannah to put her to bed as though she was herself, and not this prim débutante she had to pretend to be in order to trick some poor man into matrimony.

'Yes, you. You know, Susannah, that I would never countenance any of those fellows making up to my Deborah.'

At this statement, both girls blinked at Mrs Gillies in surprise.

‘You may think you are doing well to attract the attention of several men with titles, but I have made it my business to find out about them, and the sad truth is that they are fortune hunters.’

‘Well...’ Susannah pouted ‘...I have a fortune. And I want to marry someone with a title.’

‘Yes, but I think you could show a little more discernment. Over the next day or so, I think it would be wise to consider the gentlemen who have been paying you attention, very carefully. Baron Dunning, for example, is only obeying his mama in paying you court. She wants him to marry, so that she will not have to make the drastic economies that his late father’s reckless gambling have necessitated. He will not be any kind of a husband to you once he has got you to the altar. Why, he is hardly more than a schoolboy!’

‘Don’t you think he likes me?’ said Susannah in a very small voice.

‘Oh, I think he likes you well enough. If he has to marry a fortune, of course he would rather it came so prettily gift-wrapped. But don’t you think,’ she said in a more gentle tone, ‘you deserve better than that?’

Susannah bowed her head, her fingers running along the struts of her fan.

‘And as for the Earl of Caxton...’

But Deborah was never to find out what her mother thought of the Earl of Caxton. The maid had returned, bearing a tray laden with a pot of chocolate, a plate of bread and butter, and a small glass of what smelled like some form of spirituous liquor.

‘Ah, just the thing for a faint!’ Mrs Gillies remarked cheerfully, startling Deborah even further. Her father, the late Reverend Gillies, had lectured his flock frequently, and at length, upon the evils of drink. And there was never anything stronger than ale served at his table. ‘That was very thoughtful of you, Jones, thank you. And now, Susannah, I think it is high time you went to bed, as well.’

She bent to kiss her daughter’s forehead, pausing to smooth back a straggling lock of hair before turning her full attention to her other charge. Susannah paused in the doorway to pull a face at her friend, knowing she was about to endure one of her mother’s patient, but excruciatingly moving lectures.

Under Jones’s watchful eye, Deborah consumed the plate of bread and butter, then, holding her nose, she downed what she had been told was brandy in one go, like the vile medicine she considered it to be, then snuggled down against the pillows to enjoy her chocolate.

A pleasing warmth stole through her limbs as she sipped the hot drink, and she could feel herself relaxing. She must have been quite wrung out, what with one thing and another, she reflected, yawning sleepily. Perhaps, after a day or two spent recouping her strength, she would be able to put the unsettling feelings she had towards Captain Fawley into proper perspective.

And the next time she saw him, she would be able to smile upon him with perfect equanimity. Her heart would not skip a beat, her breathing would remain orderly and she would not blush and grow tongue-tied. And if he took her arm, she would not succumb to the temptation to lean into him and revel in the feel of all that masculine strength and vitality concealed beneath the fabric of his dress uniform.

She was far too sensible to give in to the first infatuation she had begun to harbour for a man. Only a ninny would let her head be completely turned by a scarlet coat and a roguish smile, she told herself sternly. She must nip such feelings in the bud. She was the sensible, practical Miss Deborah Gillies, who could be relied upon to behave completely correctly, no matter what blows fate dealt her. Had she not stood firm when her mother had collapsed after the sudden death of the Reverend Gillies? Though she, too, had been grief-stricken and shocked to discover her loving father had left them with scarce two farthings to rub together, she had dealt with the legal men, assessed their budget, found a modest house and hired the few servants they could now afford. She had shaken hands with the new incumbent, who had wanted them to move out of the vicarage within a month of her father’s death, and even managed to hand over the keys of the only home she had ever known to his pretty young wife with dry eyes.

In comparison with that, this inconvenient yearning she felt for a man who was unattainable was nothing.

Yawning again, she pulled the covers up to her ears, reminding herself that she did not have the energy to waste on weaving dreams around the dashing Captain Fawley anyway. What she ought to be worrying about was what she and her mother would do once Susannah had bagged her eligible, and they no longer had any reason to let the Hullworths foot their bills.

If tonight had taught her anything, it was that she might as well stop hoping to meet someone who would want to marry her and miraculously make everything right. And she had long since known that she could not simply return to Lower Wakering at the end of the Season, and continue to be a drain on her mother's scant resources.

It was about time, she decided as her eyes drifted shut, to come up with some plan to settle her future for herself.

By herself.

Chapter Two

Deborah yawned, opened her eyes and stretched languorously. And sat up abruptly. She could see sunlight burning through the curtains, so the day must be far advanced. Why had Jones not come to wake her?

Then the events of the previous night filtered back to her consciousness. After the dizzy spell, the near faint, and, of course, the scene she had almost caused in the ballroom, her mother had probably decreed she should be left to sleep for as long as she needed. She swung her legs out of the bed and went to the washstand. The face that gazed back at her from the ornate gilt mirror was drawn, her eyes looking incredibly large against the pallor of her skin. Yes, she decided wryly, she had been trying to do too much, too soon after her illness. The fact that she had been unable to control her emotions in public was an indicator of how pulled she must be.

Once she had recovered her strength, she decided, splashing her face with cold water, she would be much better able to control those ridiculous feelings she had been experiencing around Captain Fawley. And the uncharitable ones she had been harbouring towards Susannah.

She rang the bell for the maid, deciding that she would have her breakfast in bed for once, just like a lady of fashion. While the Hullworths were paying the bills, she might as well make the best of it. This would very likely be the last time she would have the opportunity to experience such luxury.

After a hearty breakfast of ham and eggs, washed down with liberal amounts of coffee, she fell asleep again, not waking until the day was far spent.

This time, when she rang for her maid, she decided she must get up and get dressed.

'I'll put out the long-sleeved morning gown, the one with the green sash, shall I, miss?' said Jones. 'There are several gentlemen callers downstairs, and you will be wanting to look your best.'

'Will I?' she said bitterly, causing Jones to frown at her. It would hardly matter what she looked like, she reflected, raising her arms for Jones to drop the delicate muslin over her head. They would all be there for Susannah.

'Perhaps I am not well enough to leave my room, after all,' she muttered darkly, settling on her dressing table stool so that Jones could arrange her hair. She had thought she had recovered her equanimity, yet the minute she was out of bed, she was beginning to feel jealous of Susannah again.

'Oh, no, miss, I think it would do you good to go and drink a cup of tea and eat a little something.'

There was that, she agreed, as her stomach rumbled loudly. After brushing her hair briskly, Jones took a length of green ribbon in her hand.

'No sense in heating the curling tongs, if you are only going to be out of bed for an hour or so,' Jones said, deftly securing her hair off her face with the ribbon. Deborah wondered if she had infected the woman with her own pessimism, or whether Jones had come to the conclusion that, since her charge would never match up to the pretty Miss Susannah, there was no point in making much effort.

Funnily enough, Deborah approved of the new style Jones had created out of sheer laziness. She had not tried to torture her hair into the fussy mass of curls that had only ever made her face look even more pinched. It simply cascaded down her back. She looked far more like herself than she had felt since she had come to town.

‘Let’s not bother with the tongs again, Jones,’ she said, making for the door. If the London bucks did not find her attractive enough to propose, she was no longer prepared to exhaust herself trying to get them to notice her.

As she descended the stairs to the first floor, she felt more cheerful than she had for some time. The result of all that extra sleep, or her decision to stop hankering after the unobtainable? She did not know. She only knew that she wanted a cup of tea. And some sandwiches. And maybe a few of the delicious little macaroons the cook always put out for afternoon callers.

She was not going to bother attempting to engage any of Susannah’s suitors in conversation. She was tired of trying to discover some speck of intelligence in the fops and fribbles who were crowding her drawing room lately. No wonder she had begun to think so highly of Captain Fawley. He stood out from the herd whose minds were full of the cut of their coat, or the latest way of tying a cravat. Nor was his conversation peppered with tales of his exploits on the hunting field.

Oh, Lord, she thought, setting her hand to the doorknob with a self-deprecating smile, *here I go again!*

Susannah saw her the moment she entered the drawing room, and leapt to her feet, squealing ‘Deborah!’ in a most unladylike display of pleasure. ‘I had begun to think you were going to sleep the clock round. Are you feeling better? Do come and sit by me.’ She gestured towards the sofa seat next to her, causing the swain sitting there to scowl. ‘Mr Jay will not mind making room for you.’ She turned her sweetly smiling face to his, and the scowl miraculously disappeared. ‘You can fetch Miss Gillies a plate of sandwiches from the sideboard, while I pour her a cup of tea.’

Deborah bit her lip to prevent herself from giggling. The last thing Mr Jay wanted to do was fetch and carry for a pasty-faced girl he would not have passed the time of day with, given the choice. But to win favour with Susannah, his pained look seemed to convey, he would walk across hot coals.

As she followed his progress across the room, her eyes snagged on the figure of Captain Fawley, lounging against the mantelpiece. He had been looking distinctly surly, but, on seeing her, the expression on his face softened somewhat.

In spite of her resolution not to allow herself to be affected by him again, her unruly heart began to thump as he picked his way through the throng to reach her side.

‘I am glad to have had the opportunity to see you before I take my leave, Miss Gillies,’ he said. ‘Miss Hullworthy gave me to understand that it was unlikely.’

Out of the corner of her eye, Deborah saw Susannah blush and look a little uncomfortable. She wondered if her friend had tried, at long last, to make her dislike of this particular one of her suitors somewhat clearer.

‘Are you feeling better?’

‘Yes, much, thank you,’ she replied.

‘I did peep in once or twice,’ said Susannah, handing her a cup of tea, ‘in case you were just resting and in want of company...’

‘Never tell me you stayed in all morning! I thought you meant to go to Hatchard’s, for some new books!’

‘Oh, well, I could not go out and leave you until I was sure you were not really ill. If your mother had needed to send for the doctor—’ Susannah broke off, chewing at her lower lip.

Deborah could not help noticing how the Captain’s eyes fixed intently on that little gesture, his own lips parting slightly.

‘Your concern for Miss Gillies’s well-being is most commendable,’ he said. ‘Not many young ladies would forgo their pleasure, to sit at home and tend an invalid.’

'Nonsense!' Susannah replied robustly. 'I do not think of Deborah as an invalid. She is my dearest friend,' she said, taking Deborah's hand and squeezing it. 'She has been kindness itself to me, when I needed her, and if she was not here with me in London now, I should consider myself most unfortunate.'

Deborah returned the squeeze, remembering some of the grim times the Hullworthys had endured when they had first moved into Lower Wakering. The local gentry had closed ranks against the common upstarts, excluding them from their select gatherings. It was presumptuous, they all agreed, of the Hullworthys to buy the bankrupt Lord Wakering's estate, shocking of them to demolish the ramshackle mansion that had been his ancestral home and downright vulgar to replace it with a purpose-built colossus equipped with every luxury and new-fangled convenience. For some time, the only locals who had not been hostile had been the vicar and his family. And it was entirely due to their influence that the Hullworthys had gradually found a measure of acceptance.

Once more, Captain Fawley's eyes glowed with admiration. He appeared to think that Susannah was just being gracious, thought Deborah with a spurt of annoyance, when she had only spoken the literal truth. If her mother had not agreed to sponsor Susannah, she would not have the entrée to the circles in which she was now moving. Especially not if either of her parents had come with her. They would have ruined Susannah's chances, as Mrs Gillies had wasted no time in pointing out to them. Dearly though she loved them, there was no getting round the fact that Mr and Mrs Hullworthy were not at all genteel.

'I hope...' He checked himself, then went on, 'That is, I shall be asking the dowager Lady Lensborough to call on you soon, to extend an invitation to Lord Lensborough's engagement ball. I hope you will be able to attend. And that you will save me at least one dance.'

Susannah gasped, her grip on Deborah's hand growing uncomfortably tight.

'L...Lensborough? The Marquis of Lensborough?'

For a moment, Deborah thought she saw a flicker of amusement in Captain Fawley's eyes. Did he know that an invitation to such an event was the one sure way to capture Susannah's interest? She looked at him keenly. Perhaps it was not only débutantes who cast out lures to catch their prey. He had certainly baited his hook with the one worm that could make Susannah bite. She was almost obsessed with gaining an entrée to the *haut ton*.

'The same,' he said, his fleeting trace of amusement replaced with an air of gravity.

'Oh, well, that would be wonderful!' Susannah sighed rapturously. 'If you can indeed promise me an invitation, you may be sure I shall save at least one dance for you!'

'That was just what I thought you would say,' he replied, bowing over the hand she had extended, for the first time to Deborah's knowledge, willingly.

'Now I will take my leave,' he said, nodding curtly to Deborah. 'I am glad to hear you are recovering from your indisposition. And I hope you will accept the small token of my good wishes in the spirit in which it was given.'

'Token?' Deborah felt totally mystified.

'Oh, Captain Fawley brought you a posy. It is over there.' Deborah looked where Susannah had pointed, to see the usual mound of floral tributes piled upon the little table by the door. Her heart leaped to think that, at long last, one of them was for her!

'Miss Hullworthy informed me that you would not be able to accept it from me personally, so I left it with the other tributes to the beauties of Half Moon Street,' he said drily.

'Which one is it?' she asked, her pulse fluttering wildly.

'The orangey-coloured one,' he replied vaguely. 'I know not the names of the flowers. I just thought they were something like the colour of the ribbons you were wearing in your hair last night.'

All the breath left her lungs in a great whoosh. He had brought her a posy. And he had noticed what colour ribbons she had been wearing in her hair! She wanted to rush across the room, gather the flowers to her bosom and breathe in their fragrance. How silly of her. He had not brought it because

he harboured any tender feelings for her. It had been expedient to arm himself with it, that was all, and feign concern over her health to gain entry to the home of the woman who really interested him. Rather stiffly, she said, 'I am sure Susannah would have brought it up to me, had I not got out of bed today.'

'Yes, of course I would!'

'Of course you would,' he agreed wryly. 'But now there is no need. Miss Gillies is much recovered, and I am sure in a day or so, will be well able to withstand the rigours of the ballroom at Challinor House.'

'Where is Challinor House?' Susannah asked, the minute he had left. 'And what has it to do with an invitation to Lord Lensborough's engagement? And what is his connection with the family?'

'Hush, Suzy,' Deborah murmured. 'Wait till your callers have gone. Then we may ask my mama.'

* * *

Her mother was very well informed about the noble families of England. It never ceased to amaze her how a woman who had spent the majority of her life in a rural backwater had managed to keep her finger on the pulse of London gossip.

'Challinor is the family name, dear,' Mrs Gillies explained, when Susannah eventually got the opportunity to question her about the Marquis of Lensborough. 'And you say Captain Fawley is to use his influence with the dowager Lady Lensborough to get you an invitation to her son's ball? Hmm...'. She sank on to her favourite chair, her finger tapping her chin as a frown came to her brow. 'Of course!' Her face lit up. 'Her younger son served in the same regiment as Captain Fawley. Dead now, of course, like so many of them after that dreadful affair of Waterloo...'. She sighed, shaking her head. 'But I believe shared grief has created something of a bond between your Captain Fawley and the Marquis. I know for a fact that he trained a horse especially to cope with his...umm... disadvantages. He is bound to be on the guest list already....'

'But I heard that the engagement ball is one of the most exclusive events of the Season so far!' Susannah protested. 'Why should they include a penniless nobody like Captain Fawley?'

'Now, Susannah, my dear, I have told you before about judging a man too hastily. There is nothing wrong with his background. He is half-brother to the Earl of Walton, after all.'

Deborah's heart sank as Susannah's eyes lit up. She suddenly felt incredibly weary.

'If you do not mind,' she said, 'I would like to go and lie down again before dinner.'

'Of course, my dear,' said her mother. 'And do not be thinking you will be left alone this evening. If you do not feel up to coming down and keeping company with us, one of us will come and read to you. Won't we, Susannah?'

To her credit, Susannah betrayed not the slightest sign of petulance, though Deborah knew she had been looking forward to the theatre trip planned for that evening. Instead, she leapt to her feet, saying brightly, 'Shall I come up with you now? We could have a good gossip while you have a lie down. For you surely don't need to sleep any more today, do you?'

Deborah mentally braced herself. She knew that the gossip would consist of hearing Susannah dissect every single one of her suitors—their dress, their manners, their connections and fortune—and she was not sure she was sufficiently in control of the frayed edges of her temper to hold it together.

'Fancy Captain Fawley being the brother of an earl!' Susannah sighed the moment they had shut the chamber door behind them.

'Yes, only fancy,' Deborah muttered glumly, sitting on a low stool to ease off her pumps.

'Why did you not tell me?'

'Would you mind helping me with the hooks?' Deborah prevaricated, turning her back to her friend. While Susannah was thrilled to find one of her suitors so well connected, so far as Deborah was concerned, it only seemed to put him further from her reach than ever.

While Susannah dealt with the fastenings of her dress, she confessed, 'I had no idea his father was an earl.'

'Which changes everything, of course. Do you think he is a viscount, as well as being a captain?'

'Don't you dare toy with him, Susannah!' Deborah whirled round, her eyes blazing with fury. 'He has suffered enough!'

'I wouldn't...' Susannah gasped.

'You may not mean to hurt him, but I have seen the way his eyes follow you round the dance floor, while you are making up to your latest conquest!'

'Well, I...'

'Oh, you do not need to tell me—you cannot bear to look at him!'

'With that face?' Susannah shuddered. 'Can you blame me?'

Deborah struggled to control her temper. 'I admit he has been knocked about a bit. But only consider how he received his wounds. Fighting for his country. He is worth ten of that fribble Baron Dunning, whom you hang upon because he has a title. He worked his way up through the ranks, earning promotion through merit....'

Drawing herself up to her full height, Susannah said quietly, 'Your mother has already made me revise my opinion of Baron Dunning. I see what this is, Deborah—you have designs upon Captain Fawley yourself.'

Deborah's mouth opened, then closed, as she sought to refute Susannah's argument, but realised she could not in all conscience do so.

'I do not have designs upon him,' she eventually managed to say. 'But that does not mean I am prepared to stand by and watch you break his heart. I think you are a better person than that, Suzy.'

Susannah's eyes narrowed. '*If* you do not have your sights set on him, and *if* you are only thinking of what is best for him, then I would have thought you would be glad that I have finally relented towards him. He is intelligent enough to know what my ambitions are. He knows I intend to make a brilliant match. Agreeing to go to one ball as his guest, letting him have one dance with me, is all he aspires to, I assure you. I won't encourage him to dangle after me.'

'I...I hope you will not.'

'Of course I won't! What do you take me for?' She laid one hand upon Deborah's arm. 'Goose. I think you must really need to lie down if you are as snappish as this.'

'Yes,' Deborah mumbled, hanging her head guiltily. 'Yes, I think I must.'

Though she felt wrung out after that episode, sleep remained far from her as she lay rigidly on top of the counterpane, her fists clenched at her sides. She did not know what was the matter with her. Why had she got so angry with Susannah? Oh, if only this Season was over, and she could leave London and all its painful associations behind.

As soon as Susannah's future was settled, she would begin to scour the papers and apply for every post suitable for a lady of gentle birth.

She was never going to get married.

She did not want to get married!

Not if it meant playing the sort of games Susannah was indulging in.

* * *

A week later, as she entered the portals of Challinor House, Deborah was glad she had allowed Susannah to talk her into buying a new gown.

'Papa will pay for it!' she had airily promised. 'And don't think of it as charity. He has hired your mother to bring me to the notice of the best families, and I am sure he will think the cost of one gown well worth it to have us both looking our best when we walk into the house of a marquis!'

That had been all it had taken to sway Deborah. They both had to look the part, not just Susannah. If Deborah merely refurbished one of the few ballgowns she had, or remade one of Susannah's cast-offs, as she had first intended, every woman there would know she was purse-pinched.

And then they would look at Susannah, decked out in her finery, and see the true state of affairs. A girl who had to hire someone to launch her into society would not be looked upon with the same indulgence as one who was being sponsored, out of friendship, by a family with as good a pedigree as the Gillies.

Still, seeing the diamonds that glittered at the throats and ears of so many of the other guests as they slowly made their way up the stairs, made her feel as though it was she, and not Susannah, who was the impostor here. Though her ballgown was quite the finest thing she had ever owned, a superbly cut satin slip, with an overdress of gauze embroidered with hundreds of the tiniest beads whirling in intricate patterns, little puffed sleeves and a demi-train of spangled lace, her only jewellery was a single strand of pearls that had been her mother's.

'I don't need such gewgaws at my age, dear.' She had smiled as she clasped it about her daughter's neck just before they came out. 'In fact, I prefer to conceal as much of my neck as I can!' She had recently taken to wearing an assortment of floaty scarves draped about her throat. The one she had on tonight was a delicate wisp of powder blue, which, Deborah had to admit, somehow managed to put the finishing touch to an outfit that was as elegant as anything that the other older ladies were wearing.

At length, they came to the head of the receiving line, and she finally came face to face with her host and hostess. The Marquis of Lensborough bowed his head in greeting to her mother, expressed the appropriate sentiments to her, but then merely looked at Susannah as though...she gasped—as though she had no right to be there. As his features settled into a decided sneer, Deborah took a strong aversion to him. Why on earth did Susannah want to ingratiate herself with people of his class, who would only ever look down their aristocratic noses at her? And his fiancée, a tall, rake-thin redhead, was no better. She had the most haughty, closed expression of any woman Deborah had ever met. It was a relief to get past them and make for the ballroom.

'Ah, there is Gussy!' said her mother, spotting the dowager Lady Lensborough holding court from a sofa in an alcove just off the ballroom proper. Deborah felt her lips rise in a wry smile. It had come as a shock when, not two days after Captain Fawley had made his promise to get them an invitation, the dowager Marchioness of Lensborough had swept into their drawing room, and proceeded to treat her mother as though she was a close friend. She soon learned that this was not so very far from the truth. They had known each other as girls, and though their paths in life had taken very different directions, they had kept up a sporadic correspondence.

She had made both girls stand, and turn and walk before her, before she deigned to hand over the coveted invitations.

'I will not have any chit in my ballroom who will not do it credit,' she had said outrageously. 'You are both pretty enough, in your own ways.' She had raised her lorgnette and frowned at each in turn. 'It is a great pity that your daughter has not her friend's looks and fortune, Sally. But then again, *she* has not the advantage of breeding. But there...' she sighed '...that is always the way of things. And there is no real reason why either of them should not marry well. My own son has gone for character, over beauty, in the choice of his bride, as I am sure you will discover when you meet her.' She clicked her tongue in exasperation. 'Men are such odd creatures. No telling what will take their fancy.'

Susannah and Deborah followed closely in her mother's wake, like chicks seeking the warmth of a mother hen. The dowager's evident pleasure in seeing the girls served as a welcome antidote to their frosty reception, and reassured the other guests that these two girls were persons worthy of notice. Soon, Susannah's hand was being solicited for the dancing that was about to ensue. She very correctly saved the first dance for Captain Fawley, but when he came to claim her hand, Deborah was somewhat startled to find he had brought a tall, fair-haired man with him.

'Permit me to introduce my half-brother, Miss Gillies,' he said to her. 'Lord Charles Algernon Fawley, ninth Earl of Walton.'

He looked nothing like Captain Fawley. Not only was he fair-haired and blue-eyed, but there was nothing about their facial features to suggest they could be related at all.

Deborah curtsied. He bowed, then shocked her by saying, 'Would you do me the honour of allowing me to partner you for the first dance?'

It was with mixed feelings that she allowed Lord Walton to lead her on to the dance floor. It had been so kind of Captain Fawley to ensure she was not left on the sidelines, while Susannah formed part of the set that opened such a glittering ball. She had never danced with an earl, never mind such a handsome one. She should have been giddy with rapture. But as they trod the measure of the stately quadrille, she could not help being agonisingly aware that, though she formed part of the set that contained Captain Fawley, she was not his partner. Nor could she help but be aware of the satisfaction that gleamed from his eyes every time he linked hands with Susannah.

On the whole, she was glad when the exercise was over, and Lord Walton led her back to the bench where her mother was sitting, chatting happily with a bevy of dowagers.

As Susannah's next partner came to claim his dance, Captain Fawley bowed stiffly to Deborah. His face looked a little strained as he said, somewhat defensively, 'I am not going to ask you to dance, Miss Gillies. But may I have the pleasure of your company during the next set, if your card is free?'

In spite of all the stern lectures she had given herself, her heart began to beat a tattoo against her ribs in response to his request. In truth, she would much rather spend time talking to him, than treading prescribed steps in time with the music. Especially since she could tell that performing the quadrille had cost him quite dearly. Lines of tension bracketed his mouth, and his eyes were dulled with pain.

'Yes, thank you. I should like that.' She smiled, laying her hand upon his arm as he held it out. 'In fact,' she suggested, sensitive to his evident discomfort, 'I should quite enjoy sitting and watching the dancers.'

He quirked one eye at her. 'You sound just like Heloise—that is, my sister-in-law, Lady Walton. As an artist, she likes to observe the *ton* at play. Do you sketch?'

'Oh, no, not really. No more than any young lady is supposed to.'

He suddenly frowned. 'Of course, you are not in the best of health, are you? Here, let us sit on this sofa, so that you may rest.'

'I do not need to rest. Not tonight. I am not generally invalidish,' she retorted. Then could have kicked herself for being so insensitive. He had probably homed in on her precisely because he thought she was frail, so that he could have the opportunity to sit without making it look as though it was what he needed to do.

He settled her on a cushioned window seat, far enough from the swirling crowds so that they could engage in conversation, yet still within sight of the chaperon's bench.

'Are you enjoying your Season?' he enquired politely, ignoring her last tactless remark.

'In some ways.' She sighed. She did not want to waste her few precious moments with him in polite nothings. Yet he did not look as though he was really interested in her answer. 'I am certainly glad to see my mother enjoying herself so much.' She looked across the room to where Mrs Gillies was dividing her time between chatting with her acquaintances and watching Susannah's progress with obvious satisfaction. 'From the moment we heard that a Season in London was going to be possible after all, it was as though she came back to life.'

'Your father died not long ago, I seem to recall?'

'Yes, and it hit her very badly. For several months she seemed to lose interest in everything. I had to...' She paused. She did not want to sound as though she was complaining. 'Well, we were not left in very comfortable circumstances. But look at her now.' She smiled fondly at her mother across the room. Her cheeks were pink and her eyes were bright. 'It has done her so much good to launch Susannah. And finding so many of her old friends in London has successfully distracted her from her problems.'

‘But what of you?’ he persisted. ‘I can see your friend is enjoying her triumph. And that your mother is in her element. But how does the delicate Miss Gillies fare in the hurly burly of London society?’

‘I have told you before, I am not in the least delicate! It was only because...’ She tailed off, blushing as she realised she was on the point of divulging just how desperate their straits had been before the Hullworthys had come to their rescue.

The little cottage, which had seemed perfectly charming when they had moved in during the summer, had revealed all its inadequacies during the first autumnal storm. The roof leaked, the windows rattled in their casements, and the chimneys smoked. Her mother had shrunk into herself as though finally realising that she was going to eke out the rest of her days in penury. Feeling as though she had contributed to her mother’s state of mind, by not having managed to find somewhere better, Deborah’s health had broken down.

That, at least, had roused Mrs Gillies from her apathy. Fearing that she might lose her daughter, as well as her husband, within the space of a few months, she had put pride to one side and finally accepted the Hullworthys’ offer of rooms up at the Hall so she could nurse Deborah back to health in warmth and comfort.

Even though it meant they had become charity cases.

Deborah was only having this Season at all because she felt she owed the Hullworthys her very life. She had not wanted to come, especially not at their expense, but Susannah wanted her mother to launch her into society, and Deborah was necessary to make the whole thing look right.

‘If you must know, this whole thing seems...unreal. Wasting entire days shopping so that we may fritter away the evenings dancing, or doing something equally frivolous...it is a bit like living a dream, from which I am waiting to awake, so that I can get back to my real life again.’

‘Do you dislike it so much?’ he frowned.

‘Oh, no. It is quite a pleasant sort of dream...’ she sighed ‘...for the most part.’ She frowned down at the dainty satin slippers that peeped from beneath the hem of her gown, wondering what on earth had possessed her to speak so frankly. Yet having begun, she felt a compelling urge to unburden herself to the one person she thought might understand her sentiments.

‘It is just that I cannot ever permit myself to enter into it all in quite the same way as Miss Hullworthy does. She is here to catch a husband, whereas I...’ Her breath hitched in her throat.

‘You do not wish to marry?’ Captain Fawley looked puzzled.

‘Of course, marriage would be my preferred option. But being of a practical nature, I have to consider what I will do when my time in London is over, should I not have received any offers.’

‘And what decision have you come to?’ he asked, with a smile.

‘That I shall have to find some kind of paid position, of course. Either as a governess, or teacher. I would prefer to secure a post as a housekeeper, for I know that is a job I could do really well. However, I do not think anyone would employ a girl as young as me for such a responsible post.’

‘Would anyone employ a girl of your background for a teaching post, either?’ She shot him a look of chagrin. But there was nothing in his face to suggest he was mocking her. On the contrary, he only looked as though he was curious.

‘I think they might, yes,’ she retorted, lifting her chin. ‘All I shall need to do is teach other young ladies the very same things I have had to learn. I can do household accounts, and bake, and sew. And, what is more, Papa taught me Greek and Latin,’ she finished proudly.

‘Do many schools for little girls have Greek and Latin on the curriculum?’ He laughed.

‘They might have,’ she replied, fixing him with a challenging look. ‘There might be some schools that work on the ethos that girls have a right to learn all the things that boys do, and not restrict them to sewing, and deportment, and drawing.’

‘Are you equipped to teach them to fence and box, by any chance?’

Part of her wanted to take offence at his words, but the smile in his eyes as he teased her was so appealing, she found herself laughing instead.

‘Oh, very well, not perhaps everything, but you know what I mean.’

‘Yes, I rather think I do.’ He smiled, getting to his feet. ‘Pray forgive me, Miss Gillies, but I must take my leave of you. Now that I have had my dance with Miss Hullworthy, and spent this delightful interlude with you, it is time I was elsewhere.’

Delightful interlude. He had said this had been a delightful interlude.

She stared up at him, her heart sinking as she noted the blankness of his face as he bowed his farewell. It was just the sort of nonsense men spouted all the time. Something to say. He hadn’t really meant it.

‘Goodnight, then, Captain Fawley,’ she managed to say, though she could not muster the smile she should have raised to go with the polite utterance. Nor could she tear her eyes away from him, as he limped away. As he bade farewell to his host, Lord Lensborough’s face darkened. And after he had gone, the Marquis turned and glared at Susannah, as she made her way down the current set, his fists clenching as though he was restraining the urge to seize her and throw her bodily through the nearest window.

At first, his demeanour shocked her. But then she reminded herself that she did not like the way Susannah treated Captain Fawley, either. Lord Lensborough might not be a very pleasant man, but he was clearly capable of loyalty towards those he considered friends.

And it *was* hard to sit and watch Susannah enjoying herself, when Captain Fawley, who had been responsible for bringing her here, had just slunk out, alone, into the night.

Oh, why could not Susannah appreciate what it was costing Captain Fawley to court her? He found it physically painful to dance, and yet he had persistently begged for the privilege of doing so with her, so ardent was his admiration. He could not even bear to remain in this ballroom, when he knew his own case was hopeless. He had laid himself open to rejection, time and time again, and yet it all meant nothing to her! Why couldn’t she see that the esteem of a man like him was worth far more than landing a title? What did it matter if his body was no longer completely whole? It was the heart of a man that mattered.

And Captain Fawley’s heart was Susannah’s for the taking.

Susannah’s.

She must not forget that. Not for an instant.

Snapping her fan open, Deborah rose to her feet, and made her way rather unsteadily to the bench on which her mother was sitting.

Chapter Three

It was a glorious afternoon. Though there was hardly a cloud in the sky, a deliciously cool breeze skittered playfully through the chestnut trees, making the air beneath their boughs sweet enough to drink. Sadly, Deborah’s pleasure in being out of doors was dimmed somewhat by the company she was in.

Although Susannah no longer viewed Baron Dunning with much enthusiasm, she had not turned down his invitation to promenade through Hyde Park during the fashionable hour. Particularly since he had been thoughtful enough to bring along his friend, Mr Jay, to escort Deborah. The girls had both hoped that having male escorts would make the walk rather more like the brisk outings they were used to taking in Lower Woking. But the men were no more willing to stride out than the hired London servants were. They strolled along at a snail’s pace, pausing frequently to acknowledge acquaintances or point out persons of interest who were bowling along the carriage drive in smart barouches or landaulets.

Deborah’s heart sank as yet another friend of Mr Jay’s called out a greeting, then, upon catching sight of Susannah, pulled his rather showy chestnut mare alongside them.

‘What brings you to the park at this hour, Lampton?’ Mr Jay asked him as he swung down from the saddle. ‘Wouldn’t have thought it was quite your thing.’

‘Oh, you know,’ Mr Lampton said vaguely, his attention riveted upon Susannah. ‘Won’t you introduce me to your charming companions?’

Deborah’s first impression was that he must be one of the most handsome men she had ever seen. He was tall and well built. A lock of fair hair strayed from under his curly-brimmed beaver hat, but she would have guessed at the colouring anyway, from the fairness of lashes and brows that framed forget-me-not blue eyes.

‘Oh, this is Miss Gillies,’ Mr Jay said briefly. ‘Miss Gillies, the Honourable Percy Lampton.’

‘Charmed to make your acquaintance,’ said Mr Lampton, turning on a smile so patently false, it immediately put Deborah’s back up. Men as handsome as this were not charmed to make her acquaintance. They usually ran their eyes over her swiftly, assessing her scrawny figure, the cheapness of her dress, and then the expression in their eyes became dismissive, or sometimes even downright scornful.

‘Mr Lampton,’ she repeated, making the proper curtsy, though she found it hard to muster up a reciprocal smile.

‘And who, pray, is the dasher upon young Baron Dunning’s arm?’ he enquired, turning to make an exaggerated bow to Susannah.

While the introductions were made, the horse became quite skittish.

‘You were correct about this brute,’ Mr Lampton said to Mr Jay, tugging ineffectually on the horse’s reins while its hindquarters surged across the path. ‘Too high spirited by half.’

‘Yes. I say, don’t you think you ought to...?’ Looking somewhat alarmed, Mr Jay let go of Deborah’s arm and darted under the horse’s tossing head. Shooting a look over his shoulder, he said to Baron Dunning, ‘Perhaps you should move the ladies a little further away.’

While he set about calming the horse, with a competence Deborah had to admire, Baron Dunning linked arms with her and moved her out of range of those potentially dangerous hooves.

And somehow, once the incident was over, Mr Jay had the horse, Baron Dunning had Deborah on his arm, leaving Mr Lampton in sole possession of Susannah.

That was how it remained, all the way home. And Baron Dunning, far from exerting himself to be pleasant to Deborah, could not disguise his annoyance at being so neatly cut out by the newcomer. Deborah felt amused, rather than offended, only wondering how on earth Susannah would decide between all her suitors in the end. Although, if she could not make up her mind, there was nothing to stop her from returning to London again the next year. She was wealthy enough to be choosy. Her parents would not mind in the least if she went home without a husband in tow. So long as she enjoyed herself, and did not throw herself away on a nobody.

She sighed, remembering their conversation the morning after the Marquis of Lensborough’s ball.

‘I am not to throw myself away on a nobody,’ she had said defiantly, when Deborah had challenged her for asking her mother to make further enquiries about Captain Fawley. ‘Even if he is not what I thought him at first, I must not encourage him if he does not have any prospects.’

Sadly for Captain Fawley, it had not taken her mother long to discover that his prospects were non-existent.

‘The eighth Earl of Walton married twice,’ she had explained. ‘The first marriage was arranged by his family, while he was scarce out of his teens, to ensure the succession, for he was the only son. They matched him with one of the Lampton girls, who, eventually, presented him with a healthy boy. He chose his own wife the second time he married, for reasons of sentiment, rather than duty. There was some sort of scandal about the time he died, which I have not been able to get to the bottom of, but the upshot was that the boys were parted and reared separately. The current Earl,’ she said, leaning forward in her chair to dispense her nugget of gossip in a thrilled tone, ‘scoured the battlefields of

Spain to find Captain Fawley when he got news of how severely injured he was. He brought him home, and spent a fortune having him nursed back to health, thus effecting their reconciliation.'

'So,' said Susannah, getting to the nub of the matter, 'does that mean he is eligible, or not? If he is truly the younger son of an Earl, he must have a title, as well as his rank of captain from the army, must he not? And...' She bit at her lower lip as she hesitated over broaching the indelicate topic of money.

But Mrs Gillies knew what interested her charge, without having to have it spelt out for her.

'No, he was never officially recognised as the eighth Earl's son. Nor did the old man leave him anything in his will. It all went to the current Earl. All Captain Fawley has is his army pension.'

'That's shocking!' cried Deborah, her fists clenching in indignation. 'Why was he cut out of the inheritance? It is not as if the present Earl cannot afford to spare a little. He must be one of the wealthiest men in England!'

Susannah laughed. 'Don't be such a goose, Debs. Isn't it obvious? Haven't you wondered why the two so-called brothers bear not the slightest resemblance to one another? No wonder the Lamptons threw the second wife out.' Picking up her cup of tea, and taking a dainty sip, she added, 'Well, that rules him out, for certain. Papa would never countenance me marrying a man who was born on the wrong side of the blanket.'

'Now, Susannah, dear, I hope you won't go around suggesting that I even hinted that Captain Fawley might not be legitimate. The Earl of Walton gets most upset with anyone who repeats that old scandal. He guards his brother's reputation zealously. And if you offend a man of his standing...'

Susannah had shrugged, calmly putting Captain Fawley out of her mind now that she had no further use for him.

It was a relief to get home from their walk in Hyde Park and slough off the disappointed suitors who would, if etiquette had not forbidden such tactics, have cheerfully shoved Mr Lampton off the pavement in order to pry Susannah from his side. Deborah was not surprised when, upon entering her mother's room, her friend's first words were of her latest conquest.

'What do you know about the Honourable Percy Lampton?' she said, perching on a chair beside the bed, where Mrs Gillies had been taking her afternoon nap. 'Is he one of the Lamptons who are related to the Earl of Walton? He looks as if he might be!'

Mrs Gillies struggled into a sitting position, while Deborah plumped up her pillows.

'From the way you have bounced into the room, I assume he has taken your fancy?' said Mrs Gillies, with a yawn. 'Of course, he will probably be a handsome devil, if he is anything like his father.' Her eyes took on a dreamy look as she delved back into reminiscences of her youth. 'And, yes, he is cousin to the present Earl. Very good *ton*, the Lamptons.' Suddenly, her eyes snapped back into focus. 'Eminently respectable family. Pride themselves on it, in fact. I do not know exactly how young Percy is situated financially, but if you like, I shall find out.'

Susannah leant forward, giving Mrs Gillies an impetuous hug. 'Thank you!'

Deborah and her mother watched her practically dance out of the room, with similarly thoughtful expressions.

'I think Susannah may have met her match,' said Mrs Gillies, at length.

Remembering the ruthlessly charming way he had outmanoeuvred his two rivals in the park, Deborah was forced to agree with her.

* * *

'What the devil is Lampton playing at, that is what I want to know.' Captain Fawley scowled at his brother, across the dining table, some ten days later. 'The way he is monopolising Miss Hullworthy is becoming the talk of the clubs. And don't tell me he is thinking of marrying her, for I won't believe it. Apart from the fact he enjoys his bachelor status far too much to hazard it for any woman, no Lampton would stoop to marrying a cit's daughter.'

The Earl of Walton frowned thoughtfully into his glass of port. 'He lacks only four months to his thirtieth birthday,' he said at length, enigmatically.

'What has that to say to anything?'

The Earl sighed, then looked his younger brother full in the face. 'What is Miss Hullworthy to you, Robert? Do you care for her?'

'I certainly don't want to see her ruined. Good God, you know what a menace Lampton is around women. Only remember the trouble he caused Heloise when she first came to London!'

Percy Lampton had joined forces with the Earl's discarded mistress in an attempt to soil his young bride's reputation. The marriage had very nearly foundered before the Earl had got wise to what was going on.

'I don't forget it,' said the Earl crisply. 'Although, in this particular case, I think I can see what motivates him.'

'Well, I cannot! Much as I dislike the man,' he said with a pensive frown, 'he strikes me as too fastidious to get embroiled in the kind of scandal that would erupt if he really did seduce her....'

'He won't need to go so far. All he means to do, I think, is to keep her away from you until he attains the age of thirty.'

'What has his age to do with anything?'

The Earl sighed. 'Upon his thirtieth birthday, Percy Lampton will come into a substantial inheritance.'

'But what has that to do with me? Or Miss Hullworthy, come to that?'

'You brought her to his notice, Robert, by pursuing her so hotly. Inviting her to Lensborough's engagement ball caused the devil of a stir.'

'That was my intent,' Captain Fawley replied brusquely. 'But why should Lampton think my affairs are any of his business?'

'Because of my Aunt Euphemia's will, I should think,' he said wryly. 'Which rather ambiguously named either you, or Percy Lampton as her heir.'

Captain Fawley went very still. 'I have been named in the will of some woman that I have never heard of? Why has nobody informed me of the fact until today?'

The Earl shifted uncomfortably in his seat. 'Aunt Euphemia died not long after I brought you home from Spain. My mother's family always regarded her as something of an eccentric, but when her will was finally read out, they declared she must have been unhinged. I do not think so. And nor did her lawyers or her doctors. Naming you as her beneficiary was not an irrational act, but rather her attempt to redress the injustice she felt her brothers had done to you over the matter of your upbringing.'

'Felt they had done?'

The Earl acknowledged his brother's objection. 'Did do. We both know your mother should have been moved to the dower house and granted an annuity, and that you should have been brought up at Wycke, along with me.' He clenched his fist on the tabletop. 'They would have contested Aunt Euphemia's will, too, if I had not convinced them I had the resources to fight them tooth and nail until there would have been nothing left for anyone to inherit. Eventually, we reached a compromise with the trustees of her estate, which ensured that at least her fortune would remain intact until such time as one of you met with certain conditions.' He swirled his port round in his glass, staring into it meditatively. 'I rather think they ceded to my terms, instead of embarking on what would have been a protracted legal case because, at that time, nobody really expected you to survive.' He smiled mirthlessly.

'All right,' Captain Fawley grated, 'I accept that at the time this will was read, you acted on my behalf, since everyone thought I was about to stick my spoon in the wall. But I have been living under your roof for nigh on two years. Why is this the first I have heard about the will?'

'Would you believe me if I told you I did not think it would do you any good?'

‘Not do me any good? I have a substantial sum of money owed me—at least I must assume it is, or the Lamptons would not have considered contesting the will to get it—and you say it would not do me any good?’ Captain Fawley got to his feet, blood surging hotly through his veins. This was not the first time he had felt such hatred for his brother. No, he checked himself, only his half-brother. Though they shared the same father, his mother had never quite made the grade with the Earl’s starchy relations. They had evicted her from his father’s home before he was cold in his grave, threatening her with all sorts of dire consequences should she try to claim anything from her late husband’s estate. Bereft, pregnant and without powerful friends to advise her, she had quietly returned to her middle-class family and dwindled away.

‘What are you about, Walton? You pretend to act in my interests, but how can I forget that your mother was a Lampton too?’

Walton barely reacted to his brother’s thinly veiled accusation.

‘You forget, perhaps, that I mentioned there were conditions attached to you inheriting anything,’ he said with icy calm. ‘Until a few weeks ago, nobody, least of all myself, could have guessed you might want to meet them.’

‘If I had known what they are, I would have been able to make the decision for myself!’

‘Then do so now,’ the Earl stated coldly. ‘If you truly wish to escape the ignominy of living on my charity, all you have to do is make a respectable marriage. For one thing my aunt made resoundingly clear. She had no wish to have a bachelor living in her house. But do not tarry, Robert. If you are not married by the time Percy attains the age of thirty, then the trustees have decreed everything will go to him. He is, after all, a blood relative, which you are not.’

Robert felt as though the wind had been knocked out of him. No woman in her right mind would marry him. He knew it. Charles knew it. *That* was why he had not told him about the legacy. Knowing that a fortune lurked for ever just beyond his reach would only have added a further layer of torture to his existence.

He slumped back into his chair. Once again, he had lashed out at his brother, who had only ever had his welfare at heart. And sadly, though they both knew he hated having to subsist on his brother’s charity, they also knew there was no viable alternative. Charles had offered on numerous occasions to make over to him the estates and trusts that should have been his, as the younger son of the Earl of Walton. Had he inherited them from his father, he would have been glad to live the life of a gentleman farmer, pottering about his acres. But the old man had not named him in his will...how could he, when he had not even been aware his wife was pregnant when he had died so suddenly? To accept them now, from his brother, out of some kind of misguided charity... He grimaced with distaste. No, he had been brought low enough, without stooping to accepting handouts, like some beggar on the streets.

If only he could be independent! His mind revolved over what Walton had just told him about this will. All he had to do, apparently, was to persuade a respectable female to marry him. Yes, that was all, he reflected bitterly. Persuade some poor woman to wake up to the nightmare of his face upon her pillow every morning.

Yet, Lampton must have thought he might have been able to persuade Miss Hullworthy to marry him. Or why would he have gone to such lengths to detach her from him?

‘Damn him!’ He lurched to his feet. ‘Damn all the Lamptons. And damn you too.’ He rounded on his half-brother. ‘Oh, yes, you claim you acted for the best, but because you decided to keep me in the dark, Percy Lampton is dangling that girl on a string. If only I had known, I would—’ He stopped, bitter rage roiling in his gut. ‘You have a lot to answer for, Walton,’ he grated, turning on his heel and striding from the dining room.

He crossed the hall and slammed into the suite of rooms Lord Walton had set aside for him in his London residence. Linney, his manservant, who had been with him since his days in the army, was sitting at a table covered with newspaper, a tankard at his elbow and a pair of boots across his knees.

When Captain Fawley slumped into the chair opposite him, Linney reached under the table for a stone bottle, wiped round the rim of a rather smeared glass tumbler with the sleeve of his shirt and poured his master a full measure.

Captain Fawley drank the bumper off in one go, and pushed it across the table for a refill. He could not let Lampton get away with this! Apart from the fact he hated all the Lamptons on principle, the way he was falsely raising Susannah's expectations was downright dishonourable. Was there nothing that family would not stoop to, to increase their already substantial personal wealth?

It was not even as though Percy Lampton needed the money as much as he did. Lampton lived a comfortable, independent bachelor lifestyle, whereas he was completely dependent on his brother. His half-brother, he corrected himself.

He leaned his forehead on his hand, struggling against the sense of resentment that thoughts of his half-brother still roused, even after all the man had done for him.

Too much! That was half the trouble. Walton always claimed he was acting in his best interests, but he was effectively robbing him of any choice. Smothering him!

If only there was some way out. Or, at least, some way he could prevent the blackguard getting his hands on his Aunt Euphemia's fortune.

He damned the Lamptons volubly, and comprehensively, before addressing his second glass of brandy.

He had hated the name of Lampton for as long as he could remember. They had destroyed his mother, blighted his childhood with their insinuations of his illegitimacy and made no secret of the fact they had hoped he would die in some foreign country while he was on active service. The French had done their damndest, but he was not an easy man to kill. He had survived an explosion, two amputations, a fever and gruelling months of rehabilitation.

Even in his darkest hour, when he had felt he had nothing left to live for, he had refused to let them beat him.

And he was not going to let them beat him now.

If Percy Lampton thought he was going to sit back while he waltzed off with his inheritance, then he was very much mistaken.

He would find a way to best all the Lamptons.

His face twisted into a mask of hatred.

And he didn't much care how low he might have to stoop to do so.

Deborah started at the sound of someone knocking at the front door. Susannah had gone out for a drive in the park with Mr Lampton, and she had been looking forward to spending a peaceful afternoon reading. She had already become engrossed in her book, and was a little annoyed that she would be obliged to put it aside, and entertain some dull man who would be crushingly disappointed to find his quarry flown. Her mother, who was sitting on a chair by the window to get the best light for her embroidery, let out a sigh.

'Oh, dear,' she said, having evidently caught sight of the visitor as he waited on the front steps. 'He will be so disappointed to have missed Susannah.' Turning to Deborah, she said, 'Ring for some tea. We must make the poor boy especially welcome, must we not?'

It was only when Captain Fawley walked through the door that Deborah understood what had prompted her mother's sympathy. She had not approved of many of Susannah's suitors, before Mr Lampton had come on the scene, but she had a soft spot for the Captain. It was the way he looked at Susannah, she had confided to Deborah one evening not long after they had first made Mr Lampton's acquaintance. So wounded, so bitter, so tragically certain he had no chance against a man who was everything he was not. For not only was Mr Lampton staggeringly handsome, he had expectations. It was common knowledge that he stood to inherit a substantial fortune upon reaching the age of thirty. So he could not be pursuing Susannah for her money. He would make a better match for Susannah, Mrs Gillies had decided, than an ageing earl, or a spotty young baron. Nor would her parents look

askance at him, even though he had no title, since Susannah herself seemed to have her heart set on him. And he was being so particular in his attentions, it was surely only a matter of time before he proposed.

Deborah laid her book to one side, as her mother said, 'Oh, Captain Fawley, how good it is of you to call on us this afternoon. We are all alone, as you see, and so dull! Please, do sit down. We have ordered some tea. I am sure you will stay and drink a cup with us, even though Miss Hullworthy is not here...' She faltered, looking a little self-conscious as she alluded to the Captain's disappointment.

'Thank you, Mrs Gillies,' he replied, though he remained standing stiffly by the door, rather than advancing towards the seat she had indicated he should take. 'I was aware that Miss Hullworthy was out. In point of fact, I waited until I was certain she would be. It is your daughter I have come to see. Miss Gillies,' he said, his cheeks flushing as he turned towards her, 'I know this is a little unorthodox, but might I have a few words with you in private?'

Deborah did not know how to answer him, nor to even begin to guess what on earth he might wish to say to her that would require privacy. Besides, it was completely improper! She was sure her mother would not allow any such thing.

'Why don't you two take a turn about the garden?' her mother stunned her by saying. 'But stay in sight of the windows. I am sure if Captain Fawley feels he needs to speak to you privately, he has a very good reason,' she said, in answer to Deborah's puzzled look. 'I will take a seat in the back parlour, from where I will have a good view of the lawn. Will that be acceptable, Captain?'

'Most acceptable. Thank you for your generosity, madam,' he said, opening the door and indicating that Deborah should accompany him.

One of the reasons for hiring this particular house was that it had a good-sized garden, by London standards. There was a narrow strip of lawn, bordered by low, shrubby sage plants, interspersed with clumps of sweet-william. Against one of the walls that separated their garden from the neighbouring property, some chairs had been set out around a wrought-iron table in a position to catch the early-morning sun. The area could still be used for sitting out later, too, since a pergola had been placed to provide some shade at the height of the day. And the roses and honeysuckle clambering over the structure in a marvellously scented tangle made it a pleasant place to sit well into the evening.

Captain Fawley headed unerringly towards the flowered arbour, making sure Deborah was sitting down before glancing back towards the house. When Mrs Gillies waved to him from the window, he bowed in her direction, before turning to address Deborah.

'Before I broach the matter I have come here to discuss, may I have your assurance that you will hold everything that passes between us in the strictest confidence?'

He returned her mystified gaze with a scowl so ferocious, Deborah began to feel a little nervous.

'If it means so much to you,' she answered, touched by his intention to confide in her, 'of course I will. Though I should not like to keep anything from my mother...'

'There will be no need to keep her in the dark for long,' he assured her. 'But I must insist that you do not reveal anything, not even to her, until I give you leave.'

'That sounds a little high-handed.'

'If I cannot trust you, then say so now, and that will be an end to it!'

Deborah scarcely paused to think. It would be quite impossible to let him leave without discovering why he had thought it imperative to breach etiquette by seeking an interview with her alone and then swearing her to secrecy. She would die of curiosity.

'You can trust me,' she vowed.

For a minute or two, he frowned down at her, searching her face as though he needed to be absolutely sure before committing himself any further. Finally, he squared his shoulders, as though coming to a decision about her, and muttered, 'If I did not think I could trust you, I would never even have considered coming to you. One thing I have noticed about you—you seem to possess more

integrity than most girls of your age. I know that you have endured much during this past year, and borne it all with fortitude.'

Deborah filled up with pleasure at his praise, though gruffly delivered.

'You have also confided in me that when your Season comes to an end, you will have little to look forward to. I hope you will not take it amiss if I speak bluntly?'

He was about to trust her with some burden that he carried. How could she object if, in his extremity, he phrased it bluntly?

'You may speak freely to me,' she assured him.

'Well, then,' he said, taking the seat beside her and staring earnestly into her face, 'not to wrap the matter up in clean linen, the facts are these. You have neither the wealth, nor the looks, nor the wiles required to snare a wealthy husband.'

Deborah gasped, wounded to the core by his harsh assessment of her complete want of feminine allure. But he did not even pause in his catalogue of her failings.

'You might, perhaps, have secured the interest of a more ordinary man if you were not so frail. But I have no need to tell you that a man who must earn his own living, as, say, a soldier, or a diplomat, will want a wife in robust health, with the stamina to raise his family, and order his household in possibly less-than-comfortable circumstances.'

She was about to point out, in no uncertain terms, that she was not some frail creature that could not withstand a little hardship. And argue that, while such a man as he had spoken of was exactly the sort of husband she had come to London to find, Susannah's ambitions had catapulted her into spheres where such men did not venture. She was quite sure, that if she ever met such men, *they* might see she had some redeeming features. But he gave her no opportunity to say a word.

'You have admitted to me that you do not expect to receive any proposals of marriage,' he ploughed on with brutal candour, 'and that at the end of the Season, because of your straitened circumstances, you will have to seek paid employment. If you do not become a governess, you must serve as a teacher, for ever confined to some stuffy classroom. You will be quite miserable, for you would much rather marry, and be mistress of your own establishment than be for ever at the mercy of some other family's spoiled brats.'

Deborah's heart was pounding hard. She could not remember any man ever insulting her so comprehensively. Even though all he had said was true, it was cruel of him to fling it in her face. How dare he taunt her with her wish to marry, having told her she stood no chance of snaring a man!

'I do not think I wish to continue with this conversation,' she said, rising to her feet and turning her back on him.

'Miss Gillies, do not turn me down before you hear the whole.'

Turn him down? She froze. What was he trying to say?

'The...the whole?' Reluctantly, she looked at him over her shoulder.

'Yes. Miss Gillies, I have recently discovered that if I can but persuade some respectable female into marriage, I will inherit a substantial property.' He got to his feet, reached for her upper arm and spun her to face him. 'I thought you, of all women, might overcome your revulsion for such a man as I am in return for lifelong security.'

'You are asking me to marry you?' Deborah's heart was pounding with quite another emotion than she had been experiencing a moment earlier. She might have known his intention had not been to deliberately hurt her. He just obviously thought of himself as such a bad bargain for any woman, he had to highlight what he thought her alternative to accepting his proposal would be. 'The devil or the deep blue sea,' she whispered, her eyes filling with tears. Oh, how could he think no woman could love him!

'Don't dismiss the idea out of hand,' he implored her. 'Please, hear me out.'

Deborah's heart soared, even as she lowered her head to fumble in her reticule for a handkerchief. She did not know why she was crying, really. It was so silly when it felt as if a huge

dark mass, which had been crushing her hopes and dreams, had finally rolled away, leaving her giddy and dazed. The man she loved had asked her to marry him!

She dropped back down on to her chair. The only reason, she now admitted to herself, that she had decided to forswear marriage and seek work was that she could not see herself marrying anyone except Captain Fawley. If she had received a proposal from any other man, she would have been gratified, but she did not think she could really have accepted it. But of course she would marry him. In a heartbeat! As soon as she had got this ridiculous urge to weep tears of relief under control, she would tell him so....

'Miss Gillies, I know I have little to offer you myself. But consider the property that comes with the marriage.' He sat down next to her, leaning forward as he put his case. 'I believe it would make an ideal family home. There will be room for your mother. I am sure you wish to be able to provide for her in her old age. I know her pension to be so meagre you thought it would be better to work than be a burden on her. And would you not rather raise children of your own than be paid to teach other people's? I would even permit you to hire a fencing master for our daughters, if that is what you wish,' he added, the touch of humour reminding her of the conversation they had shared at the Marquis of Lensborough's ball.

Though his reference to children was made in a jocular fashion, she knew he was spelling out to her that he was offering her a real marriage, not just a convenient arrangement. She had a brief vision of a boy and a girl capering about a broad, sunlit lawn, waving wooden swords at each other, while Captain Fawley, lounging beneath the shade of a gnarled oak tree, shouted instructions to them. Another little boy, with a grubby face, grinned down from the branches of the tree, while her mother, seated on a rustic bench nearby, smiled contentedly at her grandchildren. She watched them all from the windows of a rambling stone house, a tiny baby nuzzling at her breast. And then the Captain Fawley on that sun-drenched lawn turned to look at her. And he smiled at her. And his expression was not that of the bitter, careworn cripple who was putting this proposition to her, his eyes full of hopeless entreaty. He had become a contented family man.

She scanned the harsh features, scarce six inches from her own face. The warmth of his breath fanned her cheek. She could smell the faint aroma of bergamot, a scent she had associated with him since the night when he had supported her, half-fainting, from the heat of that crowded ballroom. Her hands remembered the texture of his sleeve, and, through it, the strength of the arm that it clothed.

How she longed to be the one to wipe away those lines of suffering that a lifetime of disappointments had etched so deeply on his face! To make those eyes, that burned with suspicion, glow with contentment or light with laughter.

Oh, she knew he was only asking her to marry him out of disappointment in losing Susannah to a rival. But she could empathise with the streak of practicality in his nature that had him reasoning that if he could not have the woman he had set his heart on, there was no reason that he should forgo the property, as well. Had she not planned her own future along similar lines? Having given up hope of marrying the man she loved, she had decided she would at least stand on her own two feet and not be beholden to anyone.

Though it was depressing that he thought so poorly of her. He saw her as a girl with so little going for her that she would be grateful for the chance to live in comfort, even if it meant allying herself to a man he assumed no woman could look upon with anything but revulsion.

'If any other man had asked me in such terms,' she declared, determined to justify her intention to accept him, in spite of his insults, 'I would have turned him down flat. Don't you know that the way you just addressed me was hurtful, almost beyond bearing?'

'If that is what you think,' he said, rearing back and making as though he was about to stand up, 'then I will trouble you with my unwelcome attentions no more.'

She regretted her impulse to put him straight, as soon as she saw the pain in his eyes. She had never intended to hurt him. Oh, blow her stupid pride. It was not worth defending if doing so wounded him.

‘Your attentions are not unwelcome,’ she hastily reassured him. ‘And of course I will marry you. It was just the way you put it...’

He got to his feet, looking down at her with an expression so fierce she felt almost afraid of him.

‘You must not expect honeyed words, or any insincere flattery from me, Miss Gillies. I may not have put my proposal with any great eloquence, but at least you know exactly what it is I am offering. I am offering you financial security, a chance at a good, comfortable future. You are about to marry a man who has been a soldier all his adult life. A man who has fought hard and lived rough. I am not going to spout some silly romantic nonsense to try to deceive you into expecting what I cannot give.’

She blinked in astonishment. Hurt tears sprung to her eyes. Had any woman ever received such an insulting proposal or had her acceptance met with such a stinging rebuke? If she had a grain of sense, she would tell him what he could do with his proposal, and walk away.

But then she would never see him again.

She would become a teacher, just as she had planned, but with the knowledge that, had she had more courage, she could have been Captain Fawley’s wife.

She could have endured that lonely life of drudgery, had he never proposed to her. But now, such a future would be unbearable.

A cold hand seemed to reach into her bowels, and twist them into a knot as another horrible thought occurred to her. Seeing the ruthless way he had tried to bludgeon her into a marriage he was convinced she could not want, was he not bound to bully some other hapless female into taking him on, so that he could get at his inheritance? She could not deceive herself into thinking she was anything more to him than the first on a list of prospective wives, drawn from the pool of available females in desperate straits.

‘I do not expect anything from you,’ she said despondently. How could she have forgotten, even for a second, that he was in love with Susannah? She might have fanciful visions of creating a happy family with the man she loved, but as far as he was concerned, she could be any female.

A means to an end.

Chapter Four

A sense of elation swept over him, so strong that it made him almost dizzy. Vengeance, for all of it, was almost within his grasp! He could not believe it had been so easy. He had all those fools to thank—the fools who had made this lovely girl believe no man could want her.

He sank down on to the chair next to her, and would have seized her hand in gratitude, had he not been aware that she saw acceptance of his proposal as the lesser of two evils. Poverty and drudgery on the one hand, or marriage to a man no other woman could stomach on the other. What was it she had murmured, tears in her eyes? The devil or the deep blue sea!

So what if she felt she had made a bargain with the devil? She would soon learn that though he might not be the kind of husband most girls dreamed of, she would most definitely enjoy the comfortable lifestyle marrying him would bring her. From what he had been able to glean from his brief visit to the lawyers, to verify exactly what he needed to do to inherit, the old woman had left a tidy sum of money, as well as the property that would become their home.

‘Thank you, Miss Gillies. I cannot begin to tell you what this means to me.’ He almost winced at his own choice of words. He had been deliberately economical with the facts. For he never wanted her to discover that he had taken advantage of her vulnerability in order to exact revenge on a Lampton. Such knowledge was bound to chafe at her tender conscience.

He had suspected, before he came to put his proposal to her, that she would refuse him outright if she knew that marrying him would be tantamount to ruining another person’s future. She seemed capable of putting everyone’s happiness before her own. Look at how pleased she had been to observe

Susannah's success. She had displayed no trace of envy, though Susannah had totally eclipsed her more understated beauty, denying her a chance to attract her own suitors. And she had been pleased that the London Season, which was clearly sapping her strength, was helping her mother to get over her grief.

No, he had no intention of burdening her with the knowledge that he was determined to deprive Lampton of a fortune the man had always regarded as his.

But he had to secure it swiftly. Lampton was bound to take steps to prevent him marrying if he got wind of it.

‘We must marry at once.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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