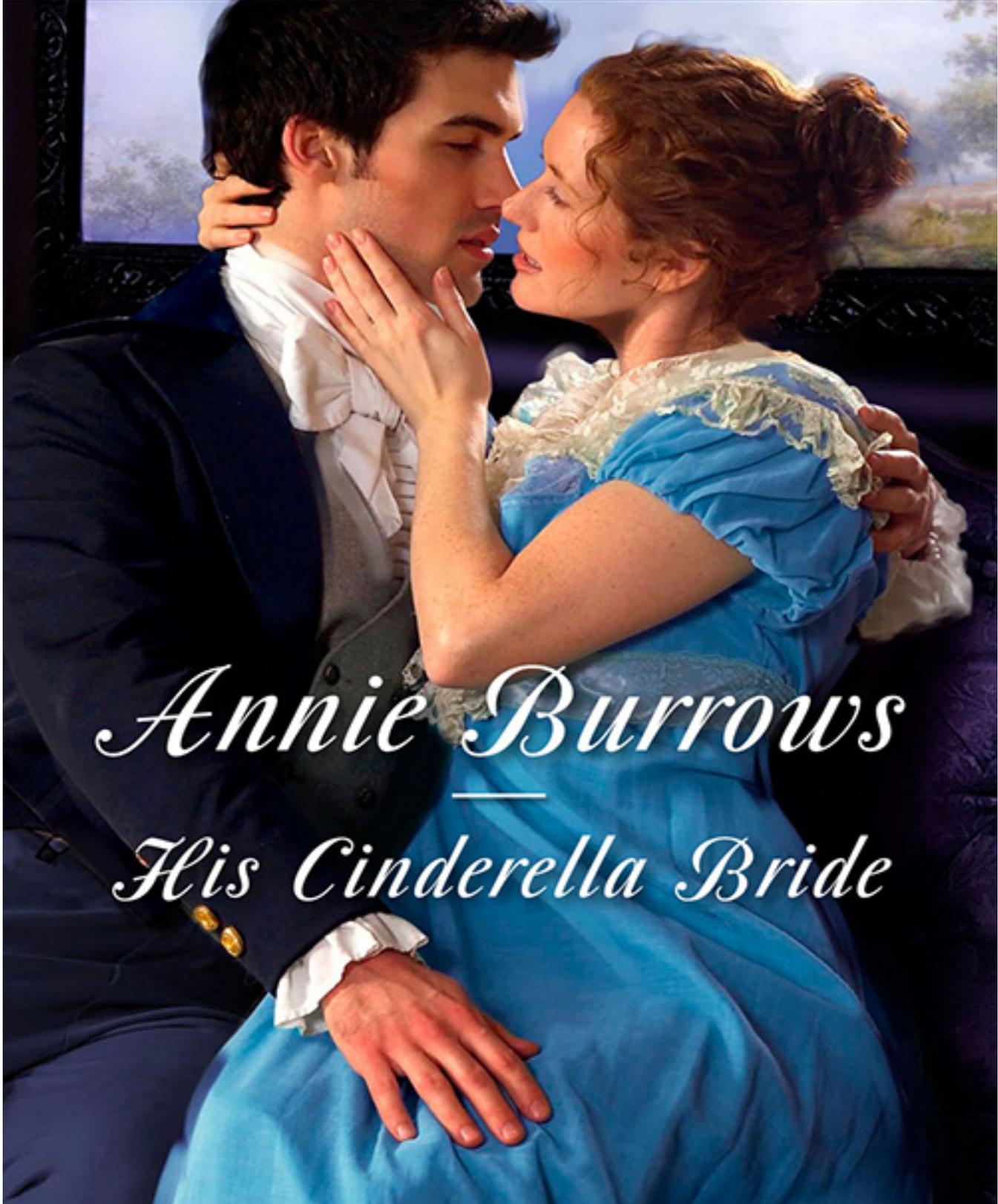




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HISTORICAL



Annie Burrows
His Cinderella Bride

ANNIE BURROWS
His Cinderella Bride

«HarperCollins»

BURROWS A.

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Jasper Challinor, Marquis of Lensborough, was appalled! Who was this redheaded, badly dressed waif in his aristocratic host's dining room? And why in the world was the proud Marquis so drawn to her? Lord Lensborough was a man well used to getting exactly what he wanted—and he wanted Hester! Convinced that she was a poor relation, the noble lord was about to receive the shock of his life...from a lady who would break all his very proper rules!

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A chill swept the length of his spine.

He had gone over and over their encounter, and the devil of it was he could not remember if he had uttered a single word to express his regret. His valet would, of course, be making apologies on his behalf when he found the woman, but that was not quite the same. He wanted to see that reproachful gaze soften, those moss-green eyes glow with pleasure instead of glazing with fear.

She would haunt him if he did not take care. Already her image was more real, in his imagination, than the other occupants of the room he was standing in. He could see her now, glaring at him from the shadows at the corners of the room, her body pathetically thin beneath the shapeless gown she wore, that wild red hair framing her sharp, pale features.

Dear God! He could see her standing in the shadows in a shapeless gown with a frown on her face. He reached blindly behind him for the mantel to steady himself as the floor seemed to pitch beneath his feet. What was a beggar woman doing in his host's home?

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'.

This is Annie Burrows' first novel for Harlequin® Historical Romance

His Cinderella Bride

Annie Burrows



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To Aidan, my own hero, for always believing in me.
I wouldn't have been able to do this without you

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Chapter One

Lady Hester Cuerden did not wait for anyone to answer the kitchen door of Beckforth's vicarage. After thumping on it with her clenched fist a couple of times, she just pushed it open and marched straight in.

Caught in the act of hiding a book under her skirts, Emily Dean, the vicar's daughter, looked up from her chair beside the fire in guilty shock. Her eyes widened when she realised that Hester was visibly trembling.

'Whatever is the matter?' she asked, forgetting to conceal the worthless novel from her closest friend as she got to her feet.

Hester pulled off her gloves as she headed for the warmth of the kitchen fire. 'C...cold...' she said through chattering teeth. 'And w...wet...'

'And absolutely filthy!' Emily grabbed Hester's gloves before they had a chance to contaminate the freshly scrubbed deal table on which she had been about to deposit them, and ran with them instead to the sink in the adjacent scullery.

With numbed white fingers, Hester fumbled the buttons of her overcoat undone. Emily came back in time to see her drape it over the back of the chair she had just vacated and stretch her hands out towards the fire.

'Where's your bonnet?' Emily asked as Hester tucked a wayward coil of her distinctive vibrant auburn hair behind her ear. 'You came out in this weather without one?'

'Of course not,' Hester said. 'I was prepared for any eventuality when I set out. I had a bonnet, and a shawl wrapped over it to keep the wind off, and a basket full of provisions over my arm. You want to know where they all are now? In the bottom of a ditch, that's where.'

Emily blinked at the circle of greenish slime that was dripping on to the flagged floor from the uneven hem of Hester's skirt.

'The only eventuality for which I was not prepared,' Hester continued through gritted teeth, 'was that I should step out of the lodge gates at the exact same moment when his Lordship, the high and mighty Marquis of Lensborough, happened to be rounding the bend in the lane at breakneck speed. That reckless, foul-mouthed...' she struggled to find an epithet black enough to express her wrath, coming up eventually with 'Marquis!' as though it were the lowest form of insult she knew '... was going too fast to stop, and clearly deemed it imprudent to take evasive action. He might have injured his horses, mightn't he, if he had veered towards the ditch, or scratched the paintwork of his shiny curricle against the park wall if he had tried to swerve the other way. Do you know what he chose to do instead?' She continued before Emily even had a chance to draw breath. 'He swore at me for flinging myself under his horses' hooves. I've never heard such language.'

Emily found it hard to believe anyone was capable of exhibiting such callous behaviour. 'Didn't he make any attempt to stop?'

'I was too busy diving into the ditch myself to notice.' Hester shifted from one foot to another, drawing Emily's notice to the greenish sludge that was oozing out between the uppers and the soles of her ancient walking boots.

'You must get those boots off at once,' Emily said, promptly dropping to her knees so that she could untie the sodden laces.

'They're done for,' she pronounced as the mud-clogged sole peeled away in her hand as she tugged one boot from Hester's foot.

Hester shivered violently, then sank abruptly on to Emily's chair. 'At least I'm not,' she said, passing a shaky hand across her mud-streaked face. Her mind had been so preoccupied by the news that had sent her scurrying from the house as soon as she could slip away unnoticed, that she hadn't paused to check for traffic before stepping out into the rutted lane. She didn't know what had made

her glance up. She certainly hadn't heard the curricule approaching over the noise of the wind that was buffeting her ears.

Seeing a vehicle bearing down on her had been a shock. Far more shocking was the look of blistering fury that emanated from the driver's night-dark eyes. It had pinned her, for a split second, to the spot, until the unbelievable sound of his foul language triggered her indignation, and from somewhere deep inside the instinct for self-preservation had kicked in.

'I honestly believe if I was not such a good swimmer...oh, not that there was much water in the ditch, I don't mean I would have drowned,' she explained at Emily's puzzled look. 'And that was half-frozen. Just slushy enough to cushion my fall...no...I mean that it was all those hours I spent diving into the tarn at Holme Top that gave me the expertise to dive out of the way before his Lordship had the chance to crush me.'

'Don't make it sound as if he did it on purpose, Hester,' Emily reproved. 'Just because you decided not to like the man before even meeting him.'

It was all very well for Emily to take the moral high ground, but she hadn't had all her plans overturned by the arrogant, cold-blooded...lecher! For the past three weeks, ever since he had written to inform her uncle Thomas of the date he was going to visit, and decide which one of her cousins was going to have the dubious honour of becoming his wife, the household had been rather like an ant hill after a mischievous boy has poked a stick into it. Her aunt and cousins had embarked on a shopping spree for clothes that had her uncle practically tearing his hair out at the prospect of the bills, leaving her to placate staff who were already braced for a family house party that included her imperious aunt Valeria the very same week. There was no putting off a marquis. Telling him that the date was inconvenient and could he please come another time, or saying that no, there wasn't sufficient room to accommodate the friend who had been spending Christmas with him. Oh, no. She'd simply had to devise a way of squeezing them into a house already crammed to the bursting point with assorted guests, their servants and horses.

She smiled a little maliciously to herself. Just wait till he tried to get to sleep in the rooms in the North Wing that she had persuaded her uncle to open up for his sole use. On learning from her aunt Susan that the marquis, whom she had met on several occasions, was a tall man, she had taken great delight in having the so-called Queen's bed made up for him in the abandoned Tudor apartments. His legs would overhang the end of it by miles if he tried to stretch out flat. If he did manage to doze, propped up against the mound of pillows she'd provided, the noise from the uncarpeted servants' attics directly above him would be sure to disturb him. If he lasted the full week he'd declared he intended to stay, she would be surprised. A man of his wealth was used to the finest of everything. He had only to snap his fingers and whatever he wanted was handed to him on a plate. Naturally she hadn't needed to meet him to decide that she loathed him.

'You haven't heard the worst of it yet.' Hester's hazel eyes glowed almost amber with the heat of her indignation. 'While I was struggling to climb out of the ditch, his groom sauntered over to tell me off for frightening his lordship's horses and perhaps even costing him the race.'

'No.' Emily sat back on her heels, suitably appalled.

'Yes. And do you know what he was doing? Backing his team up so that they blocked the gateway. So that his friend had no chance of overtaking him. When he saw his groom trying to help me, he told him to stop wasting time and get back to where he belonged.'

Hester neatly omitted to tell Emily that at the time the marquis called his groom to heel, she was physically attacking the man. She had the volatile temper to match her red hair, and when the groom had implied his master's horses were of far more value than a mere woman, she had seen red. She had only intended to slap the man's face, and wipe off the impudent grin he'd been wearing since the moment he had come upon her, sprawled face down in the mud at the lip of the ditch she'd just clambered out of, her skirts tangled round her knees. He'd dodged her slap, laughing, and she'd snapped. Forgetting she was a lady, that he was merely a servant, that she was on a public highway for

anyone to see, she had launched herself at him, pummelling his chest with her clenched fists, kicking at his shins with her disintegrating boots.

It had taken his lordship's exasperated voice to cut through her humiliated rage and bring herself back to a sense of what she owed her station in life. Hitching up her dripping skirts and battening down her temper, she had squelched across the lane to confront the author of her disaster.

'Just what do you think you are about?' she had demanded. 'Taking a blind bend at that speed—you might have killed somebody. A child might have been playing in the roadway. A farm cart might have been going down into the village.'

'But they weren't.' He lifted his left eyebrow a fraction. 'Let us stick to the facts of the case.'

'The facts,' she spat, justifiably incensed by the brusque tone that accompanied his irritated expression, 'are that I had to take such drastic action to save my skin that everything I had in that basket is now crushed at the bottom of that ditch.'

His only response was to sit a little straighter while he ran his eyes swiftly over her. 'Not to mention the loss of your bonnet, the ruination of your stockings...'

Hester had gasped, feeling her face grow hot. The fact she wore no bonnet was obvious, since the wind was whipping her hair round her face, but when had he been able to catch so much as a glimpse of her torn stockings? She had tried to tuck some of her hair behind her ears, suddenly acutely aware of the picture she must present, but her movements had been jerky with embarrassment. The bulky, muddy cuff of her coat had flapped against her cheek and she knew that, in trying to tidy herself up, she had only succeeded in daubing her face with muck. While she had prayed for the road to open up and swallow her, so that she would not have to endure another second of the Marquis of Lensborough's coldly withering gaze, his groom had gone off into fresh gales of laughter at her expense.

'God give me strength,' she heard the marquis sigh as his mouth twisted in disgust.

How dare he! How dare he look down his nose at her as though she were something he wished to scrape off the sole of his glossy Hessians. She glared at the offending footwear for a second. He probably gloated that his valet could achieve a shine he could see his arrogant face in. And what if those tightly fitted buckskins, that multi-caped driving coat and the supple gloves cost more than her uncle spent on his own daughters' clothes in a year? His manners and morals were straight from the gutter. She didn't care what anyone else thought of his reasons for coming to The Holme. He was despicable through and through.

She hadn't bothered to disguise her disdain, and he hadn't liked it. When their eyes finally met, hers flashing with contempt and his black with fury, he had gripped the handle of his whip and sworn at her yet again.

Who knew how long the stand-off might have lasted if they had not both turned at the sound of a second vehicle approaching?

'And then he just whipped up his t...team,' Hester told Emily through teeth that were still chattering with a combination of cold, and shock, and temper, 'and t...took off without so much as a backward glance.'

'You need to get out of that dress,' was Emily's measured response. 'I will lend you one of mine.'

Emily followed Hester up the stairs with a dishcloth in her hand, mopping up the footprints and puddles as they went.

'He is so addicted to sporting pursuits, and gambling, that he cannot even spare the time to find himself a wife in the usual way,' Hester grumbled as she climbed out of her wet dress and petticoats. 'He gets his mother to write round to anyone with a couple of spare daughters and a pedigree worthy of being mingled with the Challinor blood line—'her stockings hit the floor of Emily's bedroom with a resounding slap '—just as if he were selecting a brood mare.' Emily handed her a towel.

'And then informing my uncle that he would come and look my cousins over, in a letter so lacking in feeling it could have been referring to a visit to Tattersalls,' she huffed as she vigorously rubbed her legs dry.

‘You make it sound far worse than it really is. Men of his class routinely contract marriages arranged by their families. And your aunt and his mother have corresponded for years. Julia is Lady Challinor’s goddaughter, isn’t she? She must have thought she would suit him, and he has only agreed to come and meet her to see if he thinks so too.’

‘But it isn’t only Julia, is it?’ The damp towel went the same way as the ruined stockings. ‘You cannot have forgotten that awful letter his mother wrote suggesting he may as well look Phoebe over while he is here? In case he finds a very young girl, whose opinion is not yet fixed, might be more easily moulded to the position she would fill. Moulded! As though she were a thing of clay, a puppet for him to play with. Not a real person at all.’ Her voice was barely above a whisper as she concluded, ‘Em, she’s barely sixteen. I cannot condone a man of his age and experience forcing a girl so young to his bidding, simply because he has not so far been able to find what he wants from a wife elsewhere.’

Emily handed her a pair of clean stockings. ‘Neither of your cousins object to the prospect of marrying a marquis, though, do they? And he could not have come visiting if either your uncle or aunt had indicated he was not welcome.’

Hester sighed, one stockinged foot curling over her cold, bare toes, remembering how her cousins had waltzed each other round the parlour, giddy with glee on the day her aunt received the letter confirming his intent to make one of them his wife.

‘I think that is the worst aspect of the case. They are willing to sell themselves to this heartless, horrible man simply because of his stupendous wealth and the position he occupies in society. By the end of this week, one of my poor cousins will have given herself into the keeping of a virtual stranger, a man cold enough to take a wife on his mother’s recommendation, sight unseen, heartless enough to run a defenceless female off the road and despicable enough to berate his groom for wasting time going to her help.’

She thrust her other foot into a neatly rolled stocking and jerked it up her leg. ‘If I hadn’t been only a few yards from the vicarage, and known I could rely on you to provide me with a quick change of clothing, I would have had to go home instead of...’

She bit her lower lip, knowing her friend must disapprove of the way she had intended to spend this afternoon. As she had guessed, Emily laid a hand on her shoulder, before saying gently, ‘Perhaps you ought to look on him as a messenger of divine providence then. Sent to deflect you from—’

Hester leaped to her feet, throwing her friend’s hand from her shoulder. ‘I am not doing anything wrong. Not really.’

‘Nevertheless—’ Emily’s voice was muffled as she rummaged in the bottom of her wardrobe for a spare pair of boots ‘—you do not want any of your family to know what you are about, do you? Not to mention the fact that your aunt must need you today, with so many guests arriving.’

Hester stamped her feet into the shoes Emily set in front of her. ‘I have spent the last few weeks ensuring that everything will run like clockwork. The staff all know exactly what to do, and my aunt will be in her element. Nobody will miss me. They will all be far too busy fussing over the new arrivals.’ Then she shrugged. ‘I deserve a day off.’

Emily went back to the wardrobe to select a dress suitable for the errand she knew Hester was embarking on. ‘It’s the talk of the village that the gypsies set up camp in The Lady’s Acres last night. Running off to visit them behind your uncle’s back is not at all proper and you know it.’

‘If I asked his permission, he would not let me go, not today,’ Hester cried. ‘And it has been a whole year since they were last here.’

Emily sighed. ‘You are determined to go?’

‘Yes.’ Hester raised her chin defiantly, knowing that though Emily disapproved, she would not betray her.

‘Then would you consider letting me come with you, so that if anyone were to find out, you can at least say you had a chaperon?’

Hester felt her dark mood dissipate as swiftly as it had descended. 'I would be delighted to have your company, if you are sure? I know Jye can be a bit...'

'Scary?' Emily shivered.

'I was going to say unpredictable, but, yes, I know he scares you. That is why I would never have asked this favour of you. And the meeting today is not likely to go smoothly, either, now that I've lost the basket of provisions I intended to sweeten him up with.'

'I can run quite fast, you know, if he decides to set his dogs on us.'

Hester laughed. 'And no man is going to stop us from following the dictates of our conscience, be he marquis or gypsy.'

Having washed her face and changed into dry clothing, Hester set out back down the lane, with Emily at her side, to see if she could rescue anything from the ditch before heading off to the gypsy camp. She managed to hook her bonnet from the hawthorn branch that had earlier snagged it so painfully from her head. She could sew new ribbons on to it. The old ones had got a bit threadbare anyway. There was nothing left of the pies, pastries and preserves that had been in the basket but an unappetising reddish mush studded with shards of broken pottery. But a package containing coloured paper and a box of crayons had survived. Triumphantly she wiped the gloss of freezing mud from her spoils with the sleeve of her borrowed coat.

They had not gone far when Emily, who had clearly been turning something over in her mind for quite some time, said, 'Has it occurred to you that it might not have been the marquis himself who ran you off the road? You did say he was bringing a friend with him.'

'Oh, it was him,' Hester breathed. 'He more than matched the description my aunt Susan provided us with.' Her lip curled. 'Of course, she used terms that were meant to make him sound attractive. Saying he had the physique of an accredited Corinthian, besides being tall and distinguished in his bearing.' She snorted in derision. 'The truth is that he is a great brute of a man with shoulders like a coal heaver and a permanent sneer on his face. He has eyes as hard and black as jet. I don't think I have ever seen a man who is so...dark. Like a creature of the night.' She shivered. 'Everything about him was black. His clothes, his hair, even the language he used came straight from the pit. And,' she concluded, 'expressed complete contempt for lesser mortals.'

Em looked thoughtful. 'I suppose he must have thought you were just a simple working woman, though, Hester, since you are dressed for visiting...um...the disadvantaged, and were without a chaperon.'

'Well, that would excuse him, of course!' Hester's pace quickened as her temper seethed, forcing Emily into a trot to keep up with her longer-legged stride. 'In effect, it was all my fault for getting in his way.'

'No, that was not what I meant at all,' Emily panted. 'Only that it might have accounted for his attitude. I am sure he would not treat your cousins with the same—'

'Contempt?' Hester supplied. 'Oh, he might gloss it over with society manners, but that is exactly how he will treat them. Men of his class think of women as playthings at best. Have you forgotten what I told you about the poor women Mrs Parnell takes in?'

Hester had renewed her acquaintance with her former schoolfriend during her short, disastrous Season, and become heavily involved with the refuge she ran for unwed mothers and foundling children. She had found it increasingly hard to mingle, in the evenings, with men who she knew full well were capable of using and discarding women of the lower classes without a qualm. Who would then compound their villainy by duping an innocent girl of their own class into marriage with the intention of squandering their dowries on vice. When any of them had looked her over with the sort of lascivious gleam in their eye that other girls regarded as a form of flattery, she had gone hot all over, and then icy cold, and then begun to tremble so violently that she usually had to flee the room altogether.

‘And wives have no legal rights,’ she continued. ‘A husband can do what he likes with his wife, as he can with any other of his possessions, while she must turn a blind eye to his conduct if she values her own skin. I dread to think of either Julia or Phoebe in the hands of such a brute as Lord Lensborough.’

She dreaded him being in the house at all. He would be looking her cousins over in that speculative way that single men had when considering marriage, polluting the wholesome atmosphere of what should have been an informal family gathering.

‘Surely his sense of pride in his family name would prevent him from being downright cruel, though? Even I have heard how high in the instep the Challinors are.’

‘On the contrary. Having met him, I fully believe he is so conceited that he doesn’t care what anyone else thinks of him. He acts as though the rest of the human race is so far beneath him that he need not pay any heed to what they think, or say.’

Emily reached out and gave Hester’s hand a squeeze. ‘Don’t judge him before you have even got to know him. During the course of this week you will have ample opportunity to observe him, and perhaps find that he had reasons to explain his behaviour this afternoon. It is all too easy to misjudge a person’s motives. After all, a person who did not know you as well as I do might well put a most ungenerous interpretation on your own behaviour.’

Hester broke away abruptly, climbed on to the stile that spanned the hedge, and swung her legs over it.

‘That is entirely different,’ she insisted as she dropped into the meadow on the other side of the hedge and strode, head held high, towards the cluster of brightly painted caravans that were drawn into a semi-circle around an open fire.

She did not look back. She knew Emily would soon realise that she would feel much safer beside her than hesitating timidly on the stile.

Eagerly, she searched among the swarm of ragged children who were tumbling out of the caravans for one very special little girl. Tears sprang to her eyes the moment she saw Lena’s copper curls bobbing amidst the sea of black, and it was all she could do not to rush forward, sweep her into her arms and kiss the tip of her freckled little nose. How she had grown.

Emily was so naïve. Men were beastly, even the ones you thought you could trust. The very thought of marrying one of them was akin to enduring the most degrading form of slavery. And as for saying she should observe Lord Lensborough before deciding what his motives were—she knew all too well what motives men had for the way they acted towards women. She had Lena as living proof.

Chapter Two

Lord Jasper Challinor, the fifth Marquis of Lensborough, lounged against the mantelpiece, watching in growing disbelief as the room filled with Sir Thomas Gregory's extended family. They greeted each other with a noisy, informal exuberance that made him shudder with distaste. Nobody gave so much as a passing nod to the rigid etiquette that governed the behaviour of the circles in which he normally moved. No wonder the children were so boisterous. They were running about as if this were a playground, not a drawing room, and nobody saw fit to check them.

On the contrary, Sir Thomas had been quite adamant that he wished to encourage the children to mingle with their elders, that he liked having all the children present at this annual family gathering, and had warned him, in quite a belligerent voice, that they would all be sitting down to dinner that evening, right down to the youngest babe in arms. That had been just before he had introduced him to the nursery maid, in whose arms the babe was being carried.

His mood, which had not been all that sanguine when he set out that morning, had been growing steadily blacker as the day had progressed. It set up a tangible barrier that none of the other guests dared broach, leaving him to stand in haughty isolation beside the fire.

Stephen Farrar, who as an ex-soldier had no qualms about making the most of whatever company he found himself in, detached himself from their hostess, Lady Susan, and came to stand beside him, his face alight with merriment.

'I'm glad you are enjoying yourself,' Lensborough said through clenched teeth.

'I have to admit, the whole day has been vastly entertaining,' Stephen grinned.

Lord Lensborough grimaced. Agreeing to pit his bays against Stephen's showy greys had been an act of monumental folly. Neither of them was familiar with the terrain. That, Stephen had said, was the point. It gave the race an edge. It had almost resulted in tragedy.

And brought Bertram's death horribly close. His brother had never told him what it felt like to look someone in the eye as you robbed them of their life, and now he knew why. That woman's face was indelibly seared into his memory. Was his brother's face seared into the memory of whichever Frenchman had slain him? Or had he too become a casualty of Napoleon's ferocious ambition? He shook his head. At least Bertram had died with a sword in his hand. That woman had nothing with which to defend herself. She had briefly clutched the basket she had been carrying to her chest, as though the wickerwork could shield her from the massed force of several tons of galloping horseflesh. He had vented his horror at his inability to prevent the inevitable in a torrent of abuse, as if she had flung herself in front of his curricle on purpose.

'I don't know why you should be frowning,' Stephen persisted. 'Those two girls are real charmers.' He smiled across the room to where Julia and Phoebe Gregory sat next to each other on one of the sofas that were scattered about the edges of the room, which was little more than a broad corridor connecting various wings of the house to the central Great Hall where they were about to dine.

That was another factor to add to his gloom. Yes, the girls his mother had selected for him were exactly to his taste. Blond and blue eyed and well rounded. Unfortunately, they were no different from any one of a dozen eligible females he might have tossed the handkerchief to in London. Coming to Yorkshire had been a waste of time. If not for Bertram...

He clenched his fists, reminding himself that at least by coming here, he could fulfill the vow he had made to his brother. He had to marry and produce an heir, now that Bertram was gone. He was the last of his line, and it was unthinkable that it should end with him. It was equally unthinkable to make a selection from any of the vultures who had begun to circle round him with avaricious eyes as soon as he donned the black garb that the etiquette of mourning decreed. They were glad Bertram had died, because it meant they had a real chance of fixing their greedy talons in him. Well, he was

not going to give any of them the satisfaction of trampling on his brother's memory by making them his marchioness. He had told his mother, when she had reminded him of his obligations to the family, that he didn't care who he married, so long as she had never set her cap at him.

'But you are willing to marry someone?' she had persisted.

'Yes, yes, I know I must.'

'Shall I introduce you to one or two girls who might suit you?'

His mother was clearly keen to get his nursery set up before he changed his mind.

'No,' he had said. 'I am leaving town tomorrow.' He had taken all he could stand. Tours of the Belgian battlefield had become all the rage, and there was a roaring trade going on in the most grisly souvenirs of Wellington's victory. Eventually the only man in London whose company he could tolerate was Captain Fawley, a man who had served in his younger brother's regiment until he had been invalided out after Salamanca, a man he normally only visited out of a rigid sense of duty because his bitterness over the horrific nature of his injuries had left his attitude as twisted and stunted as his body. He was beginning to think, and speak, so very like this bitter man that he had to get right away from people, immerse himself in the business of running his racing stables. 'Write to me at Ely.'

He had been only too glad to leave the matter entirely in his mother's hands, knowing that she had a network of acquaintances among England's noble families that stretched as far from London as it was possible to go. If there was a woman who matched his requirements in a wife, his mother would know where to find her. Someone who would be content to bear his name and his children, he had stipulated, and not expect him to dance attendance on her. He could just about tolerate having a wife who was well bred enough to know she must never attempt to interfere with his lifestyle.

His faith in her had soon borne fruit. Not long after Stephen, a man he had first met in Captain Fawley's gloomily shuttered rooms, had run him to ground at Ely, she had written to inform him that her goddaughter, Julia Gregory, was available and willing. If he did not like her, she had a younger sister who was reputedly very pretty as well. The family was large, she had added. Lady Susan had given her husband two male heirs, as well as four daughters, and was still in robust health. He understood the implication that if he married one of her daughters, they were more than likely to provide him with a clutch of healthy offspring. They were not wealthy, but she felt bold enough to put their names forward, because he had not stipulated that having a dowry was of much relevance. Their main attraction must be that they were unknown, and as such would infuriate all the ambitious women he wished to put firmly in their place. He had smiled ruefully at his mother's complete understanding of his unspoken wishes, and decided he might as well marry one of the Gregory girls, if they would have him.

Of course they would have him, she had written in reply. They were too poor to have romantic notions about marriage. An offer from a man of his wealth would seem like a godsend. They would take him on any terms he cared to name. Since she knew he was spending Christmas at Stanthorne, the hunting box he kept near York, she suggested he get over to Beckforth, which was less than a day's drive away, and clinch the deal. That way, he could marry before the Season got under way.

'I like their mother too,' Stephen said, causing Lord Lensborough to eye him in frank disbelief. Lady Susan had come bouncing down the front steps to greet him when he had arrived that afternoon, her arms outstretched as though she meant to embrace him. Stephen had found it hard not to laugh as the insular Lord Lensborough recoiled from such a vulgar display of enthusiasm. 'No, really. Almost as much as I like Sir Thomas.'

Lord Lensborough scowled. The reception he had received from Sir Thomas had been as different as it was possible to be from his wife's. When the butler had first brought them down to this room to await dinner, Sir Thomas had positively glowered at them as they went to join him by the roaring fire. When he had asked them if they had any complaints to make about their rooms, he was almost sure the man expected to hear a whole litany of them.

Lord Lensborough had been taken aback when the butler had led them into what appeared to be a disused wing of the house. Although, looking around the room now at the Gregory family's lack of decorum, he could appreciate the man's explanation that Hester, whom he had assumed was the housekeeper, hoped the apartments would afford him some privacy. Stephen had replied that he liked the fact that their shared sitting room overlooked the stables, and appreciated the information that a fire would always be kept alight in case they wanted to retreat there.

'It is a very cosy set-up,' he had said generously.

Lord Lensborough had not been able to draw any comfort from that fire. No sooner had he sunk into one of the squashy leather chairs drawn up before it and stretched out his feet to the flames, than an image of a shivering woman in soaking clothes, reproach in her moss-green eyes, had pricked at his conscience. He ought not to have left her standing in the lane like that. But he had been so infuriated by his groom's callous disregard of her plight, that he had decided his only recourse, if he was not to dismiss the man from his job on the spot, was to remove him from the scene and let his anger cool. He was sure he could trace the woman later. How many red-haired shrews could a village the size of Beckforth contain, after all? Leaping from the armchair, he had summoned his valet and instructed him to begin the search. He gave the man enough money for the woman to buy several changes of decent clothing to replace the ones she had been wearing, and something over to compensate for her distress. He was absolutely not the sort of person who thought nothing of running a member of the lower orders off the road whilst in pursuit of a sporting wager.

'Aye...' Sir Thomas nodded '...Hester assured me it would be once we got the chimneys swept. My sister always lays claim to the blue room when she comes, and short of turning her out...'

Lord Lensborough wondered why they had not simply requested he come at a different time, if they already had a house full of guests, none of whom he particularly wished to meet. He had not been able to keep the irritation from his voice when he had said, 'I hope we have not caused you inconvenience, Sir Thomas.'

Sir Thomas had snorted. 'Nay, for it is not me that sees to the running of the household. Hester is the one who has had all the extra work. And you may as well know right now that I do not intend to alter any of my plans for this week because you have invited yourself into my home. My lord, I made up my mind that you would not inconvenience me, do you see? You have come to find out what my girls are like, you say. Well, we are not sophisticated folk, and you won't find me trying to impress you by pretending otherwise. You must take us as you find us.'

'Do I take it,' Lord Lensborough had replied, his voice at its most glacial, 'that you do not approve of my intention to marry one of your daughters?'

His host had shrugged. 'Twould make no difference if I did—their silly hearts are set on it.'

While he was still reeling from this insult, Sir Thomas had cocked his head and observed, 'Though you are somewhat younger than I was led to believe. How old are you, exactly?'

'Eight and twenty.'

'Quite fit, too, by the looks of you.' Sir Thomas had run his eye over Lord Lensborough's physique with obvious approval. No need for padding in his coat to make his shoulders look broad. His lordship's shoulders were broad, the stomach beneath the neat, plain waistcoat was flat, and the muscularity of his thighs and calves was clearly delineated by the snug fit of formal knee breeches and black silk stockings.

'Oh, don't piker up like that.' Sir Thomas had matched Lord Lensborough's affronted frown with one of his own. 'If you are going to be my son-in-law, then you'll have to get used to my blunt speaking. I ain't the sort of chap to smile in your face and speak ill behind your back. You'll always know exactly where you stand with me.'

'And where, precisely, is that, sir?'

'How the devil would I know? I've only just clapped eyes on you.'

While Stephen had nearly choked with the effort of keeping a straight face, Sir Thomas had walked away, and only returned sporadically, to introduce the various members of his family as they made their way into the enormous reception room.

‘It looks to me,’ Stephen remarked, ‘as though this week is going to be an educational experience for you, Lensborough.’

‘I can certainly confess that I have never come across anything quite like the Gregory family en masse,’ he replied grimly.

‘The house adds a certain piquancy to the affair too, does it not? It could have been designed for the purpose, all those unexpected alcoves and staircases, passages leading to odd forgotten rooms where nobody goes any more.’

‘In some of which we are being forced to sleep. Did you smell the mildew in the corridors? The Holme is a rabbit warren—each successive generation since the Norman conquest seems to have tacked on whatever additions were currently in vogue with no thought to overall harmony—’

‘Oh, come. You could not wish for a more fortunate place to go courting two pretty girls at the same time.’

Lord Lensborough glowered at the two pretty girls in question. They were sitting on the sofa, hand in hand, regarding him with identical rapt expressions on their otherwise vacuous faces, dressed in a tasteless combination of low décolletage and explosions of ruffles that could only have come from a provincial dressmaker. He would have to write to his mother and ask her to invite whichever chit became his betrothed to stay with her in Brook Street for a week or two before introducing her into society. It was one thing plucking an unknown damsel from obscurity. Quite another to look as though he had no taste.

Not that either of them would object to purchasing an entire new wardrobe. Look at them, simpering and giggling behind their hands. They could not disguise their excitement at the prospect of landing such a magnificent catch. Never mind that on arrival he had been so shaken by the near accident outside their gates that their mother’s twitterings had provoked several quite brusque rejoinders from him. They had not cared. Their eyes had glowed as they looked him over, seeing nothing but the jewels and carriages they hoped he was going to buy them. They had overlooked his manners altogether.

He could not help contrasting their mercenary appreciation with the queenly disdain shown by that woman in the lane. That freckle-faced beggar maid had not cared what his rank was. His behaviour had been wanting, and she was not afraid to tell him so. She had nothing to lose by speaking her mind, since she had nothing he could take from her. Except her life.

A chill swept the length of his spine. He had gone over and over their encounter, and the devil of it was he could not remember if he had uttered a single word to express his regret. His valet would, of course, be making apologies on his behalf when he found the woman, but that was not quite the same. He wanted to see that reproachful gaze soften, those moss-green eyes glow with pleasure instead of glazing with fear. He had never seen eyes quite like hers. They had seemed huge in that white little face, changing from dull mossy green when she was afraid, to glowing amber when she had been angry. He did not want, he admitted to himself, to carry that image of a terrified white face for ever in his conscience. She would haunt him, if he did not take care. Already, her image was more real, in his imagination, than the other occupants of the room he was standing in. He could see her now, glaring at him from the shadows at the corners of the room, her body pathetically thin beneath the shapeless gown she wore, that wild red hair framing her sharp, pale features.

Dear God! He could see her standing in the shadows in a shapeless gown with a frown on her face. He reached blindly behind him for the mantel to steady himself as the floor seemed to pitch beneath his feet. What was a beggar woman doing in his host’s home?

‘We’ll be able to go in to dinner now Hester’s here,’ Sir Thomas said, strolling to Lord Lensborough’s side. ‘Can’t think what can have kept her,’ he added wryly, drawing a watch from his

waistcoat pocket ostentatiously. The red-haired woman, catching the pointed gesture, flushed and hung her head.

‘Hester.’ Sir Thomas raised his voice to make himself heard above the general hubbub. ‘When you have a minute.’ He beckoned to her.

The sound of Sir Thomas calling her name alerted every single child in the room to her presence. As one, they surged in her direction and broke about her knees in a wave of exuberance that she met by dropping down to their level and embracing as many of them as she could get her arms around.

Sir Thomas sighed. ‘I do apologise, my lord. I am afraid Hester is so fond of children she tends to forget little things like good manners when they enter the equation. You will be pleased to hear, I am sure, that after this evening, when they will all sit at table with us—’ he glared to make his point ‘—Hester will make sure they are all kept out of your way. She always organises the children’s entertainment when they come to stay, and as such she is a special favourite with them all.’

‘Hester?’ Lensborough repeated, his initial shock at seeing her turning to an icy rage that quickened his breathing. She was not a beggar woman, but a member of his host’s staff. This was the Hester who had organised a suite of rooms for him and Stephen in the farthest flung, most dilapidated corner of the house. The same woman about whom he had been fretting all day, who would never have been in any danger if she had stayed within doors attending to her duties. Worst of all, she must have known exactly who he was when she had flared across the lane, hair streaming behind her like a rocket’s tail, spitting fire and brimstone.

Sir Thomas uttered an exclamation of impatience when it became clear that Hester intended to stay exactly where she was, soundly kissing every single child that vied for her attention, instead of obeying his summons.

Lord Lensborough’s eyes narrowed as a mulish look replaced her unfeigned pleasure in the children when Sir Thomas pulled her to her feet and propelled her across the room in his direction. He drew himself up to his full height. The man intended to introduce her to him! Though why should that surprise him—he had not scrupled to introduce him to the nursery maid who had charge of his year-old grandson. A low growl of anger began to build in his throat as the pair came to a halt not a foot in front of him, Sir Thomas looking belligerent, and the woman, Hester, the housekeeper, glaring defiantly straight ahead.

Hester’s face felt as if it was on fire. She had tried to slide unobtrusively into the room, hoping that nobody would notice her late arrival. Time had slipped away from her once she had entered the gypsy camp. Jye had been surly, but he hadn’t ordered her to leave. Before she knew it, it was growing dusk, and she’d had to run all the way back, with time only to splash her hands and face in cold water, and pull on the first clean dress that came to hand. She’d been aghast when she’d looked in the mirror and seen the state of her hair. It looked just as if she had been swimming in mud before letting a hurricane blow it dry, which was pretty much what had happened. There was no time to wash it. All she could do was hack the worst of the matted clumps out with her nail scissors, then pin the cleaner bits on the top of her head in the hopes that nobody would notice the damage. She’d flown down the stairs, skidding to a halt with her hand on the handle of the salon door. She’d eased her way into the room with pounding heart and ragged breath, only to come face to face with Lord Lensborough. She hadn’t been prepared for the paralysing effect that coal-black glare would have on her. She had been banking on the hope he would not even recognise her. After all, he had barely glanced at her earlier, so preoccupied had he been with the welfare of his horses and winning his stupid race.

But there was no doubt he had recognised her. He had started in disbelief, his nostrils flaring as if he had just smelled something very unpleasant, and then his eyes had narrowed, impaling her with a malevolence that declared he did not think she had the right to breathe the same air that he did.

She dropped to the floor, weak kneed, immersing herself in a healing tide of affection. And then Uncle Thomas had dragged her from behind her human shield, and force-marched her across the floor. Why was he insisting on this formal introduction? She had told him over and over again

that she would much rather keep busy, behind the scenes, and leave the socialising to her cousins. She had hoped, using this excuse, she would be able to avoid the dratted man for the entire duration of the visit. She felt as though her uncle had betrayed her by forcing this introduction, particularly after the way their earlier, explosive encounter in the lane had gone.

‘Lord Lensborough, my niece, Lady Hester Cuerden,’ Sir Thomas said, releasing her elbow.

So he really was Lord Lensborough. Hadn’t she told Em that this black-haired, black-tempered man was the cold-hearted beast who was coming to pick one of her cousins like a pasha looking over slaves on the auction block? She resisted the urge to back away from the spot where her uncle had forced her to stand, though she felt acute distaste at being so close to the brute. It would be too much like a surrender.

‘Your niece?’ he echoed, in a tone that gave Hester a glimmer of satisfaction. He was thoroughly disconcerted. Hah—it could not be often that one of his victims rose up and confronted him with the vileness of his behaviour in a polite drawing room.

Lord Lensborough’s frown intensified. She was not the housekeeper either, but a member of the family. Yet, Lady Hester? When she had hauled herself out of the ditch, he had discounted the possibility she could be anyone of importance, despite her well-modulated accent, since her clothes had been so truly awful. No lady would go abroad dressed like a tramp. Even one in straitened circumstances would make some attempt to put together an outfit that flattered her, wouldn’t she? He ran his affronted gaze over the sludge-coloured gown that hung from her slender frame like so much mildewed sacking, finally coming to rest on the crown of her head, which she was presenting to him, since her own gaze was fixed firmly on the carpet before his feet. There were little truncated spikes of green amidst the copper curls. He could only surmise that rather than taking time to wash the ditch water out of her hair and make herself presentable for her uncle’s guests, she had flung on the first thing that came to hand, snipped off all the evidence of her afternoon’s escapade that she could see, then shoved a random assortment of combs into those wild tresses to fix the bulk of it on the top of her head.

‘I thought you were the housekeeper,’ he grated.

Her head jerked up. For a second they looked straight into each other’s eyes, his contemptuous look heating her own anger to flash point.

‘And that excuses it all, does it?’ she snapped.

Feeling her uncle stir uncomfortably, she clamped her teeth on the rest of the home truths she would dearly love to spit at the vile marquis. She had no wish to embarrass her family by letting rip before they had even sat down to dinner. She contented herself by glaring at the tie pin that was directly in her line of vision. Her lip curled when she noted it was not a diamond, or a ruby, but only a semi-precious tiger’s eye. Provincial nobodies only rated the wearing of semi-precious jewels, even though he was one of the wealthiest men in England. His whole attitude demonstrated the contempt in which he held his prospective brides, from the curt tone of the letters he had written, right down to the tie pin he chose to stick in his cravat.

‘Ah, well,’ her uncle broke into the protracted silence that simmered between them, ‘Hester is of invaluable help to her aunt in the running of the house, especially when we have such a large influx of guests.’

‘I believe we have you to thank for arranging a most charming suite of rooms for us, Lady Hester,’ Stephen added gallantly.

To Lord Lensborough’s astonishment, Sir Thomas gave Lady Hester a hefty shove, which propelled her some three feet to her left, so that she was standing directly in front of Stephen Farrar while he made the introduction.

He continued to glare at her. She was angry with him, still. She had been clenching and unclenching her fists as though she would like to throw a punch at him. He conceded that she had

some justification for that anger, considering he had subjected her to a couple of doses of language no well-born lady should ever have to hear, but he would never forgive her for snubbing him like this.

‘It is a pleasure to meet you,’ Stephen began, reaching out to take her hand. It was the opening gambit to the charm offensive he invariably launched against the fair sex, no matter what their age or condition.

Lady Hester whipped her hand behind her back before he could grasp it, never mind raise it to his lips, stepping back so abruptly she would have stumbled had not one of her cousins, Sir Thomas’s oldest married daughter, Henrietta, chosen that moment to drape her arm about her waist.

‘Come and sit by me, Hester darling,’ the heavily pregnant woman cooed. ‘You will excuse me, gentlemen? We have so much to talk about. Barny is cutting another tooth, you know.’

While the woman bore Lady Hester away in a flurry of silk skirts, Sir Thomas glared from Stephen to Lord Lensborough as though challenging them to make any comment on the extraordinary rudeness of his niece.

‘Odd kick to her gallop,’ he eventually conceded. ‘But for all that, she’s worth her weight in gold.’ He cleared his throat and changed the subject. ‘Well, now we’re all here, we can go in to dinner. You will escort my sister, Lady Valeria Moulton, of course, since she is the highest-ranking female present,’ he said to Lord Lensborough, turning to beckon the venerable lady to his side.

Stephen took the opportunity to murmur into his ear. ‘This just keeps getting better and better. We’re staying in a decaying labyrinth, populated by a family of genuine eccentrics—and to think I was afraid I was going to be bored while you clinched this very sensible match you claim to have arranged.’

‘And I never dreamed,’ Lensborough growled in retaliation, ‘to see a female back off in horror when confronted by one of your waistcoats.’

‘Ah, no. You have that quite wrong.’ Stephen ran a hand over the cherry-striped silk. ‘It was coming face to face with a genuine marquis that did for Lady Hester. She began to shake the minute she set foot in the room and you raised your left eyebrow at her.’

The Great Hall, to which the entire assembly then trooped, was, according to Lady Moulton, the Saxon thane’s hall around which successive generations of Gregorys had built their home. It certainly looked as though it could have been around before the Norman invasion. The exposed roof beams of what reminded him forcefully of a barn were black with age, the stone flags were uneven, and the massive oak door looked as though it could withstand an invading army. Mullioned windows were flanked by dented suits of armour, and he couldn’t help noticing that every single child that sat down at the refectory-style table was gazing round eyed at the impressive array of antiquated weaponry, from broad swords to chipped battle axes, which hung upon the walls.

Lady Moulton guided him to a seat near the head of the table, rather closer to the fire than he would have liked. In the event, he need not have worried about being excessively hot. Though the fire was large enough to roast an ox whole, and had probably done so on numerous occasions, the heat that emanated from it was tempered by the vast quantities of freezing air whistling in through cracked window panes and gaps under the doors. The faded banners that hung from the minstrel’s gallery fairly fluttered in the ensuing breeze.

Both Julia and Phoebe, who were seated opposite him, one on either side of Stephen, broke out in rashes of extremely unattractive goose pimples. Even he, in his silk shirt and coat of superfine, was grateful for the warming effect of the fragrant onion soup that comprised the first course. As footmen cleared the bowls away, he grudgingly revised his opinion of Lady Hester’s gown. Seated as she was at the far end of the table, among the children and nursery maids, it now looked like an eminently practical choice, given the arctic conditions that must prevail so far from the ox-roasting furnace. While he watched, she absentmindedly hitched a toning green woollen shawl around her shoulders, knotting the ends around a waist that appeared hardly thicker than his thigh.

‘Marvellous with children,’ Lady Moulton commented, noting the direction of his gaze. ‘Which makes it such a shame.’

‘A shame? What do you mean?’ For the first time since being partnered with the voluble dowager, he felt mildly interested in what she was saying.

‘Why, that she is so unlikely ever to have any of her own, of course.’ She addressed him as though he were a simpleton.

He quirked one eyebrow the merest fraction, which was all the encouragement Lady Moulton needed to elaborate. Once the footmen had loaded the board with a variety of roast meats, raised pies and seasonal vegetables, she continued, ‘You must have wondered about her when she was introduced to you and your charming young friend. Nobody could help wonder at such behaviour.’ She clucked her tongue as he helped her to a slice of raised mutton pie. ‘Always the same around unattached gentlemen. Crippled by shyness. Her Season was a disaster, of course.’

He dropped his knife into a dish of bechamel sauce. Shy? That hoyden was not shy. She had erupted from that ditch, her hair like so much molten lava, screaming abuse at the hapless groom he had sent to help her while he single-handedly calmed his nervously plunging horses by forcing them into a manoeuvre that distracted them from their stress at having a woman dive between their legs while they had been galloping flat out. He had never seen a woman exhibit such fury. It was anger that had made her quiver in silence before him in the saloon. Anger, and bad manners.

‘She came out the same season as Sir Thomas’s oldest girl, my niece Henrietta.’ Lady Moulton waved her fork in the direction of the pregnant lady. ‘To save expense, you know. Henrietta became Mrs. Davenport—’ she indicated the ruddy-cheeked young man sitting beside her ‘—but Hester disgraced herself...’ She leaned towards him, lowering her voice. ‘Ran out of Lady Jesborough’s ball in floods of tears, with everyone laughing at her. She stayed on in London, but very much in the background. Got involved in—’ Lady Moulton shuddered ‘—charitable works. Since she has come back to Yorkshire she has made herself useful to her aunt Susan, I can vouch for that. But she will never return to London in search of a husband. Poor girl.’

Poor girl, my foot! Lady Hester was clearly one of those creatures that hang on the fringes of even the best of families, a poor relation. It all added up. The shabby clothes she wore, her role as a sort of unpaid housekeeper—for all that she had a title, she relied on the generosity of her aunt and uncle. And how did she repay them? When they brought her out, even though she could not fund a Season for herself, she had wasted the opportunity by throwing temper tantrums. Just as she abused their trust today by wandering about the countryside when she should have been attending to the comfort of her family’s guests.

‘You are frowning at her, my lord,’ Lady Moulton observed. ‘I do hope her odd manners have not put you off her cousins. They do not have the same failings, I promise you.’

No, he mused, flicking an idle glance in their direction, causing them both to dimple hopefully. Though it was highly unlikely they would ever become leaders of fashion, he was confident his mother could make either of them presentable with minimal effort.

Lady Hester, on the other hand, would never be presentable. Socially she was a disaster, was ungrateful to the family that had taken her in. He shrugged. No point in dwelling on a female he would be unlikely to see much of this week. Sir Thomas had stressed that it was only this one night, the first night of the house party, that egalitarian principles held sway. He turned to glare at her, just as she was shooting him a withering look. Face reddening, she turned to cut up a portion of the veal for a golden-haired moppet who was sitting beside her.

As he reflected with satisfaction that, come the morrow, servants, poor relations and children would be kept well out of sight, in the background where they belonged, a freckle-faced boy on her other side piped up, ‘Tell us about the pike, Aunt Hetty.’

‘Oh, dear,’ said Lady Moulton, reaching for her wine glass.

‘Yes, the pike, the pike,’ two more boys began to chant, bouncing up and down on the bench.

Lady Hester looked to her uncle, who raised his glass to signal his permission for the telling of the tale.

‘Well,’ she began, ‘there was once a man at arms, who served Sir Mortimer Gregory, in fourteen hundred and eighty-five...’

Lady Moulton turned to Sir Thomas. ‘Must we have these gory tales while we are eating, Tom? It quite puts me off my food.’

Perhaps she heard the complaint, for Lady Hester lowered her voice, causing the children to crane eagerly towards her, their little bottoms lifting from the bench in determination to catch every single word.

‘Family history, Valeria,’ Sir Thomas barked. ‘The young ones should know that the weapons hung about these walls are not merely for show. Every last one of ’em has seen action, my lord.’ He turned to address Lord Lensborough. ‘The Gregorys have been landowners in these parts through troublesome times. Had to defend our home and our womenfolk against a host of threats, rebels and traitors, and down through all the centuries—’

‘Never fought on the wrong side!’ Half a dozen voices from along the table chorused, raising their glasses towards Sir Thomas, who laughed in response to their teasing. Hester’s sibilant murmuring was drowned out by a collective groan of gleeful horror from the children. The tale of the pike had evidently come to its conclusion.

The golden-haired moppet crawled into Lady Hester’s lap, her blue eyes wide. As she curled an arm protectively about her, Lord Lensborough found himself saying, ‘Do you think it appropriate to scare such a young child with tales of that nature?’

He had not heard one word of the story, but from what others had told him, he judged it was as inappropriate as all the rest of her behaviour.

An uneasy silence descended upon the gathered diners when Lady Hester turned and met his accusing stare with narrowed eyes.

‘A girl is never too young,’ she declared, ‘to be taught what vile creatures men can be.’

Chapter Three

When the ladies and children withdrew, Lord Lensborough sank into gloomy introspection over his port.

Captain Fawley, a man who never minced his words, had told him to his face that he was a fool to be offended by the hunting instinct of single females who scented that, with Bertram dead, he would have to find a wife swiftly to secure the succession.

‘Women are mercenaries, Lensborough. The same shrinking violets that shudder at the sight of my face would steel themselves to smile upon a hunchbacked dwarf if he had money, leave alone a title. You are deluding yourself if you think you will ever find one who ain’t.’

It was depressing to accept that if he were to treat the Gregory females to the sort of language he had vented on the prickly Lady Hester, they would still fawn over him for the sake of getting their greedy little hands on his title. They were the same as all the rest. It appeared to be his destiny to marry a woman he could not respect.

He tossed back the rest of his port, reflecting that however much a man might kick against his fate, he was powerless to alter the final outcome. All he could do was bear himself with dignity.

So far today, he had not done so. His reckless mood had almost resulted in a woman being killed. True, she was not a pleasant woman, but he ought not to have let her make him forget he was a gentleman. When he had thought she was a beggar maid he had determined to ease her want with generous financial compensation. Now that he knew she was gently born, did he owe her any less?

Her position was one of dependence. Life for a poor relation could be well-nigh intolerable. She was vulnerable, and men of his station routinely abused such. Whatever she may have done, he needed to make her understand he was not of that fraternity. In short, he would have to make some form of apology, and it rankled.

* * *

There was precious little respite, Hester found, from the malign influence of the Marquis of Lensborough in the drawing room with the ladies. He was the prime topic of conversation, at the forefront of everyone’s thoughts. Even her own, she reluctantly admitted.

She had been all too painfully aware of his gaze boring malevolently into her throughout dinner, even though she managed to maintain a cheerful demeanour for the sake of the children.

He had sat at the head of the table, garbed head to toe in unrelieved black like some great carrion crow, waiting to pick over the shredded remains of her dignity.

She shuddered, trying to shake off such a fanciful notion. The marquis could not possibly know where she had been, or with whom, that afternoon. He disapproved of her, that was all, and why should he not? She had given him enough cause to despise her without him knowing the whole truth. Hadn’t she been out, unchaperoned? Hadn’t she physically assaulted his groom and shrieked at him like a fishwife?

Still, she huffed, he had never inquired how she was, never mind who she was. And he had the nerve to look down his nose at her?

She forced herself to smile and look interested as Henrietta chattered merrily away. How she wished she had the courage to flout convention and tell him to his face what a blackguard he was. But of course she hadn’t. Besides, she had to consider the repercussions. Firstly, she would make herself look like a hysterical ill-bred creature, while he, no doubt, would remain in full control. Perhaps just raising that left eyebrow in disdain, but that would be all.

Secondly, her aunt and cousins had already made up their minds to welcome him into the family, so eventually she would have to deal with him as a cousin by marriage. She had no wish to be barred from any of his homes. If he was as bad as she guessed, whichever of her cousins married him would soon find herself in need of moral support and she fully intended to provide it.

‘Of course, I can tell you don’t like him.’

Hester forced herself to pay attention. Henrietta could only be referring to Lord Lensborough.

‘No, I do not.’

Henrietta rapped her wrist playfully with her fan. ‘I shan’t take any notice of that. You have disliked every eligible male you have ever been introduced to. In fact, during our come-out, I used to think some of them quite terrified you.’

‘Some of them did,’ Hester admitted. ‘Most of their mothers did too.’

‘Oh, weren’t some of the patronesses dragons?’ Henrietta agreed with feeling. ‘And so cruel about your looks, as if there is anything wrong with having freckles and red hair. I do wish you could have found some nice, kind man who could have restored your confidence. You are not unattractive, you know, when you forget to be shy. If only you could have refrained from blushing quite so much, or stammering whenever a man asked you to dance.’

‘Or managed to control the trembling so that I could have got through a dance without tripping over my feet, I know. But I could not. And I would rather not hark back to that particular episode in my life. Altogether too painful. Besides, I am happy living here with your mama and papa. I don’t feel I am missing anything by not being married. In fact, on the whole, I would much rather stay single for the remainder of my days.’

‘You won’t let your shyness with them keep you away from us this week though, will you? Peter and I, and the children, would all be sorry if you hid yourself away altogether.’

‘I cannot even if I would.’ Hester sighed. ‘Your mama has strictly forbidden me to skulk, and your papa has backed her up.’

‘Quite right too.’

The door opened and the first of the gentlemen began to saunter into the drawing room. Phoebe and Julia scurried to the piano, hastily arranging the music they had been practising for this evening’s entertainment.

‘Oh, my. They’re doing it,’ Henrietta squealed, stuffing a handkerchief to her mouth.

‘Who is doing what?’

‘Lord Lensborough and Mr Farrar.’ Henrietta leaned closer and lowered her voice. ‘Harry told me how they are known for entering fashionable drawing rooms arm in arm, just as they are doing now, and of the stir it creates among the ladies present.’

Hester cast a withering look at her cousin Harry Moulton, who, as usual, had slouched to a chair at the farthest end of the room from where his rather faded-looking wife was sitting.

‘They call them Mars and Apollo,’ Henrietta continued. ‘The one broodingly dark, and the other sublimely fair, and both possessed of immense fortunes. Harry says the combined effect is such that he has known ladies to faint dead away.’

That was exactly the sort of tall story Harry would tell the impressionable Henrietta. Hester’s lip curled as she looked from one to the other as they lounged in the doorway, gazing complacently upon the assembled company. The arrogant black-hearted peer and the self-satisfied golden dandy.

She turned her head away abruptly as Lord Lensborough’s hard black gaze came to rest upon her.

‘Oh, my,’ Henrietta breathed. ‘Lord Lensborough is looking straight at you. With such a peculiar expression on his face. As if you’ve displeased him...oh, I expect it was the way you answered him back at the dinner table. You know, you really should not have spoken so sharply—whatever possessed you?’

‘I couldn’t seem to help myself,’ Hester confessed. ‘He just...’

Henrietta collapsed against her in a fit of giggles as Hester struggled for a reasonable explanation.

‘He brings out the worst in you—my, you really don’t like him, do you?’

* * *

Lord Lensborough gritted his teeth as he strolled towards the vacant seat beside his hostess. The ensuing conversation with Lady Susan hardly exercised his mind at all, leaving him free to wonder what Hester had just said, after looking at him with her lip curled so contemptuously, to make her companion collapse with laughter.

He managed to commend the accuracy of Julia's playing, and compliment the sweet tenor of Phoebe's singing voice whilst reflecting with annoyance that, while they were doing their utmost to impress him, it was their red-headed cousin that was uppermost in his mind. So intense was his irritation with her that he began to feel as if he was bound to her by some invisible chain. Whenever she moved, she yanked on that chain, drawing his attention to whatever she was doing. And she was always on the move, flitting from one group of chairs to another, seeing to the needs of the guests while their hostess lounged indolently beside him.

He took a deep, calming breath, taking himself to task. Wasn't it a guiding principle for any horseman to get over heavy ground as lightly as possible? The woman was impossible, ill mannered, shrewish, all that was true. But it behooved him as a gentleman to apologise for his own part in their unfortunate first meeting. He would explain that he had initiated proceedings to reimburse her for her losses. Then it was up to her whether to accept a truce or continue hostilities.

When Sir Thomas called for some card games, Hester went to a side table and began to rummage through its drawers. Lensborough took the opportunity to get the thing over with, crossing the room in half a dozen purposeful strides.

He cleared his throat. She jumped, as if truly startled to find him standing so close behind her. For some reason the gesture seemed like the height of impertinence. Women usually fell over themselves to attract his attention. How dare she be impervious to him, when he was gratefully aware of her every move?

'Do you mean to stand there glowering at me all night, or is there something specific you wished to say?'

Hester's head was still bowed over the packs of cards she was laying out on the table top.

A smile tugged at the corner of his lip. She might keep her head averted, but she was as aware of him as he was of her.

'Vixen,' he murmured, reassured. 'You just cannot help yourself, can you? I suppose it is on account of your red hair.'

It was not a true red, though. Standing this close, in flickering candlelight, he could see strands amidst the copper that were almost black. The effect was of flames flickering over hot coals. The fire was spreading to her cheeks, too, a tide of heat sweeping down her neck. She turned suddenly, glaring directly up into his face.

'I...you...' she stammered, her fists clenching and unclenching in pure frustration. Hadn't he already done enough? Sworn at her, abandoned her in her sopping clothes at the side of the roadside, and lastly provoking her to retaliating, in the most unladylike manner, to his jibe at the dining table, causing the shocked eyes of her entire family to turn in her direction. It hadn't helped that Phoebe had promptly dissolved in a fit of the giggles, drawing a scathing glance for her own lack of self-control.

'We must talk, you and I,' he purred. 'This matter between us needs to be addressed.'

They had nothing to talk about. Every time they got anywhere near each other disaster struck. She could not see that changing when everything about him infuriated her. The only way to avoid further clashes was to stay as far from him as possible.

She took a hasty step backward, preparing to dodge away. 'I would far rather we simply not speak of it again.'

'I can well believe that,' he drawled. 'However, I, at least, feel the need to explain my lapse of good manners.'

She gasped. How dare he imply her manners needed explaining? Even if they did, it was certainly not his place to say so.

She stepped smartly to one side, intending to get right away from him. He mirrored her movement so that they remained in the same relative position. He was determined that she should understand the cause of the language he had subjected her ears to, at least.

‘The way you were dressed, the fact you were on a public highway unescorted, led me to believe you were—’

‘A woman of no account,’ she flashed, her eyes blazing. ‘Yes, I had already come to that conclusion for myself.’ She drew herself up to her full height. ‘I suppose you are one of those imbeciles who think that if a lady of good birth goes visiting the poor she should do so in a carriage, attended by footmen, flaunting her wealth in the face of their poverty and making everyone ten times more wretched in the process.’

Visiting the poor? So that was what she had been doing. Didn’t she consider herself poor? He raised one eyebrow, considering the possibility. In relation to some people, no, she probably was not. He pursed his lips. He would have to be doubly careful how he handled the next part of what he wished to say to her, then. That telling remark showed exactly how she felt about being the recipient of charity herself. He would try to make light of it.

‘At least I can call my valet off, now I have found out your true identity.’

‘Your valet?’

‘Yes. I had him scouring the countryside for a woman fitting your description so that I could reimburse you for the clothes that got spoiled when you...ah...fell into the ditch.’

First he sent his groom to see to her, now his valet. ‘Do you always get your servants to do your dirty work for you, my lord?’ She thought of the letters. ‘Or your mother? You odious, pompous... Do you think your money can buy anything, or anyone?’

‘That’s enough, Hester.’ Sir Thomas appeared at Lord Lensborough’s elbow. He had been so involved in his altercation with Lady Hester, the rest of the occupants of the room might as well not have been there. ‘We are all still waiting for the cards.’

All her wrath evaporated, leaving only a quivering lower lip to show where it had been. As the light of battle faded from her eyes they reverted to that dull, indeterminate hue between brown and green that he had first supposed them.

‘Sorry, Uncle Thomas. I was...’ she faltered. ‘That is, Lord Lensborough...’

‘Yes, I could see what was going on over here.’ Sir Thomas’s voice was grim. ‘Go on, girl, off you run. Your aunts Susan and Valeria are waiting for their game of whist.’

She scooped up the packs of cards and dodged round both men in her haste to get away.

Lord Lensborough eyed Sir Thomas with new respect for dousing that violent temper with only a few firm words.

‘My lord, I hope you will not take what I am about to say amiss, but I really think it would be better if you were to stay away from my niece.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I need hardly remind you that it was my daughters you came here to look over, not her.’

Did the man think he was a complete imbecile to even consider that hoyden as a fitting wife for a man in his position? She was so far from being suitable, the very suggestion was an insult.

‘If you think I was attempting to flirt with that person, you are very much mistaken. I was merely trying to reassure myself she came to no serious hurt this afternoon, and to assure her I would make good any damage her clothing may have sustained when...’

‘When what?’

Lord Lensborough hastily explained, ‘Your niece took a tumble into a ditch this afternoon, and I happened to witness the accident, that is all, sir.’

‘A ditch? On the lane you drove up...Dear God, she wasn’t carrying a basket, was she? I can see by your expression she was.’

Dear heaven, was the woman in the habit of stealing from the kitchens in her misguided zeal to help those she considered even worse off than she was? His mouth thinned. He had not meant to give away the fact that she had been neglecting her duty to her aunt. He had just been so determined to correct the ludicrous misapprehension that he had been flirting with her that for perhaps the first time in his life he had spoken without taking thought of the consequences.

Sir Thomas stormed across the room, bending to murmur words in Lady Hester's ears that had her turning first red, then deathly white. And when he straightened up, Hester leapt to her feet and fled from the room, turning just one look of reproach in his direction before she closed the door behind her.

It was hardly his fault she had been sent from the room. Sir Thomas must have known her behaviour was beyond what was acceptable. He should never have introduced her to him if he did not wish him to converse with her. Poor relations ought to be kept out of sight, especially ones who did not know how to behave themselves.

And how dare Sir Thomas forbid him, Jasper Challinor, fifth Marquis of Lensborough, from talking to any female he wished? It was the height of impertinence.

He would take pains to demonstrate that no man had any right to so much as comment on his actions. He was going to make a point of seeking that woman out at every opportunity and, if nothing else, wringing a damned apology out of her.

Chapter Four

Lord Lensborough strode down to the stable yard at first light with a sense of having endured a night of unmitigated torture. The bed, his temper, the troupe of clog dancers who'd been practising in the room above his all night, had all conspired to rob him of sleep.

After a few nights, he'd grow accustomed to sleeping in a semi-recumbent position, or exhaustion would inure his feet to dangling off the edge of a bed that only a midget could stretch out on in comfort. He could even deal with the clog dancers by stuffing cotton wool in his ears.

Which only left his temper. And he had a nasty suspicion that was not going to improve until he'd left The Holme, and one infuriating red-haired shrew, far behind.

No sooner had his thoughts bent in her direction, than Lady Hester trotted into the yard on a pretty little grey mare. He shook his head in disbelief. Not only were there not many people who could beat him down to the stables in the morning, he had the peculiar feeling that he had summoned her up, like a genie from a magic lamp, exactly as he'd done the night before.

Grudgingly, he admired her splendid seat. Then noted, as she bent forward and patted her mount's neck, that her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes sparkled with pleasure almost like a woman who had just made love. No, he corrected himself, annoyed that such a comparison had sprung to mind in relation to Lady Hester. She looked just like she had done when she had been surrounded by the children last night, until she had seen him and all the animation had drained from her face.

Her clothing was in better condition than the frightful rags he had seen her in before, though. The bottle-green habit fitted her like a glove, outlining a figure that, though it was slender, was not totally without womanly curves. The jacket hugged a surprisingly full pair of high, firm breasts. As she slid from her mount, her skirts snagged briefly on the pommel and he caught a tantalising glimpse of a booted ankle. Rooted to the spot, he had sudden, total recall of endlessly long legs, encased in torn black stockings, splayed out as she lay face down in the mud.

He frowned at the inappropriate image that had lodged in his mind, forcing his eyes to return to her face. They widened at the sight of a garland of paper flowers decorating her riding hat. What could have prompted her to adopt such a touch of whimsy to what was otherwise quite an austere outfit? Was she, in defiance of her hopeless state, the kind of girl who rode through the morning mists, dreaming of a prince on a black charger riding to sweep her away from her life of drudgery and dependence? Who would place a coronet among those vibrant curls, deck her swanlike neck with jewels, and murmur the sort of flattery she would never hear from a real flesh-and-blood male? The notion amused him.

He could certainly understand her very evident pleasure in having been out on such a fresh, clear morning, whatever had prompted it. There was nothing like having the world to yourself before the business of the day crowded in.

As she smoothed down her skirts his eyes followed her gloves' progress over the contours of her hips. Having been privy to a breathtaking display of her athleticism the day before, he just knew that little posterior would be firm and muscular.

She looked up, catching his very masculine appreciation of her feminine attributes, her whole body tensing as the colour leached from her face. He frowned, feeling truly sorry that her antipathy for him had the power to destroy her pleasure in a pursuit that was so dear to his own heart. With a sigh, he began to cross the yard. All his anger towards her had achieved so far was to deprive him of sleep. It was time to call a truce.

He would use their mutual love of riding as a means of extending an olive branch.

'Good morning, my lady. I see you enjoyed your ride.'

'Yes.' Her tone was guarded, her eyes wary. He supposed he ought not to be surprised she was gearing up to do battle after the way their previous encounters had gone.

‘I am very fond of riding myself.’

‘At this hour? I assumed you would lay abed till noon like most gentlemen of fashion.’

‘Ah, but I am not a gentleman of fashion. And when I am in the country I keep country hours.’

‘But I don’t suppose you ride every morning.’

‘Ah, but I do.’

‘Before breakfast?’ She rapped the side of her boot with her riding crop in vexation.

He nodded. ‘I never breakfast until after my morning ride.’

‘Bother,’ was all she answered.

The smile this response produced died on his lips as Hester suddenly shrank back against the stable wall, guilt written all over her face. He whirled round, following the direction of her horrified stare, to see Sir Thomas and his ruddy-cheeked son-in-law enter the yard. Sir Thomas was glaring from one to the other of them as if he could not decide which of them he was most annoyed with.

Lord Lensborough’s hackles rose. The man had every right to deal with his own niece as he saw fit, but did he think that he should meekly obey his dictum to avoid her company?

Sir Thomas raised his crop as he approached Hester, and for one awful moment he thought the man was going to strike her with it. Instead, he used it to point at the paper garland on her riding hat and growled, ‘I suppose I do not need to ask where you have been.’

Lady Hester’s hand fluttered up to her hat in an unconscious gesture of self-defense.

‘No, Uncle.’ She lifted her chin defiantly.

‘Peter,’ Sir Thomas barked.

His son-in-law jumped at the sound of his name.

‘Perhaps you would be so good as to show his lordship around the stables, and, if he wishes to ride out, accompany him round the estates in my stead. I am going to be occupied with other matters for a while.’

While Hester hung her head, Lord Lensborough leaned against an open stable door, folding his arms across his chest.

‘I had no idea you were such an early riser, my lord,’ Sir Thomas addressed him with forced politeness.

‘Neither had I, Uncle. Truly,’ Hester blurted, raising her head. For some reason, that statement caused amusement to flicker across her uncle’s face.

‘That I can well believe.’ He chuckled, before turning to Lord Lensborough and remarking, ‘Harry mentioned last night that you keep extensive stables, my lord. He spends a lot of time in London, does my nephew, and seems to regard you as a regular Corinthian.’

Lensborough dipped his head in acknowledgment of an accolade he often received, though on this occasion he recognised it for the attempt it was to divert attention from Hester.

Peter ambled forward. ‘I’m a keen rider myself,’ he began, ‘though not up to your standard, I warrant. But I would be honoured to show you around the place. There are some good gallops to be had up towards the moors.’

‘A word of warning, Peter,’ Sir Thomas interjected. ‘Keep well away from The Lady’s Acres—the ground is not fit. And as for you—’ he rounded on Lady Hester, jerking his thumb over his shoulder ‘—my study. Now.’

Sir Thomas turned and strode out of the yard and Lady Hester, to Lord Lensborough’s surprise, meekly followed him.

Her dejected demeanour wrung a pang of sympathy from him. Perhaps her punishment might be less severe if he were to explain to her uncle that their meeting had been accidental.

But then a groom brought his hunter, Comet, to the mounting block, and good sense reasserted itself. It really was none of his business, and he could not deny that the girl needed disciplining. Her behaviour was atrocious. And as for Sir Thomas thinking there was the remotest possibility he

might respond to any advances she might make towards him... Why, he could not find a less suitable candidate to become his marchioness if he scoured the known world.

Lady Hester was hopeless, he thought, swinging into the saddle. If any man was ever foolhardy enough to contemplate marrying her, he would find his hands full with the battle to curb her wilful nature, and no guarantee of eventual victory. He'd wager the taming of Lady Hester would be a well-nigh impossible task.

Julia and Phoebe, on the other hand, were exactly what he'd told his mother to find. Plump and pretty, and willing to be content with such crumbs of his attention as he chose to throw their way. How could Sir Thomas seriously think Lady Hester could compete with them?

It was a pity that he could not work up more enthusiasm for either of Sir Thomas's daughters. But then he had never expected marriage to be anything other than a duty to be got through with as little unpleasantness as possible. That was why he had been adamant that he required a wife who would not cavil at his keeping a mistress. He would need some compensation for the tedium of doing his duty to the family by getting heirs from a woman who only saw him as a means of social advancement.

He reined in his impatience with Peter, who was leading him through the park at a sedate trot when what he was aching for was a seriously hard gallop.

So little did Julia interest him that he could not remember having attended her come-out ball, though his mother had insisted he had, as a favour to her goddaughter. But then he routinely attended several such events in the course of an evening during the Season, and they all merged into a vague oneness in his memory. Not that there was anything amiss with his memory. He could name every winner of every race meeting he had attended at Newmarket that same spring.

His mother had indicated that Phoebe would enjoy being introduced to society as an engaged woman, but he thought it would be rather unfair to rob her of the fun girls seemed to take in attracting a bevy of suitors. And she would have plenty, she was so pretty. He had to make it look as though he was giving her serious consideration, however. She looked at him with such awe he suspected it would crush her if he dismissed her out of hand.

Finally, Peter urged his mount into a canter, and Lord Lensborough dug his heels into Comet's flanks. The stallion shot forward like an arrow in flight, and the blood began to sing through his veins as they gathered speed. This was what he had been waiting for.

His breath caught in his throat as the wild notion that marriage to Hester would feel something like this—a wild gallop over unknown terrain, never knowing if your mount was going to put its foot into a rabbit hole and toss you over his head. Julia or Phoebe would never exercise him beyond a brisk trot.

He laughed aloud as he let his stallion have his head. Wasn't that the whole point of coming to The Holme in the first place—to pluck some damsel from obscurity and flaunt her in the mercenary faces of the harpies who had been pursuing him so relentlessly? Lady Hester would be even more of a slap in the face to them all than her prettier, more accomplished cousins. Above all, he had wanted a woman who had never set her cap at him. Well, that was Hester all right. While her cousins had fluttered and flattered, she had spoken her mind, and given as good as she got on every occasion their paths crossed. Even the way she walked showed that she was totally resigned to her spinster state. When she was not creeping about like a cowed little girl, she strode about with a purposeful air, almost mannish in her bearing. Never did she adopt that seductive little sway to the hips that females employed to entice a man's eye.

Why not? the thundering hooves seemed to echo. Why not? Why not?

Marrying such a harridan would be disastrous. So what? He had never expected his marriage to be anything other than a farce, after all.

They crested a brow, and momentarily he admired the rolling vista opening up below him. His plan had been to find a woman who would be content to remain for the most part on one of his estates and breed his heirs. He had thought to pick a woman too complaisant to interfere with his life in

London, or his interests in his racing stables. But Hester—well, she was so socially inept she would not want to spend much time in London, if the account of her disastrous Season was anything to go by.

And in her case, boredom would not be an issue. On the contrary, getting heirs by her was likely to be a tempestuous affair—a vision flashed into his mind of her fists raining blows onto Pattison's chest—if he could teach her to channel all that passion and energy more productively, he might even think about putting off his mistress altogether. Lush curves were not all that a man sought from his bedfellow.

He might do it. He really might do it.

Both men slowed their horses to a walk, their breathing laboured, their faces flushed with exertion. He turned in his saddle towards Peter.

‘Can you satisfy my curiosity with regard to Lady Hester? Am I right in assuming she performs the duty of unpaid housekeeper for her aunt?’

‘Ah, in a manner of speaking. That is, shouldn't say so, but dare say you've noticed already. My mother-in-law gets flustered very easily. Not sure how she would cope with us all descending on her like this if Hester wasn't here to help out, but Hester loves that sort of work, you know. Brilliant organiser. According to my wife, she loves planning things down to the last little detail.’

He had already deduced that Lady Gregory could not be the brain behind the smooth running of her establishment. So, Lady Hester would not shine at tonnish parties, but then he did not care overmuch for them anyway. She could certainly cater to the needs of guests he might invite to any one of his estates for hunting, say, or a shooting party.

‘And she organises the most marvellous games for the children, treasure hunts and what have you. They all love coming to stay here.’

Yes, they did. A smile curved his lips at the thought of her rapport with children. He had never voiced his hope that he could find a wife with strong maternal instincts. But that was what he wanted. A woman who would not regard presenting her husband with an heir as a chore to be endured, nor regard successive children as expendable spares. His smile faded. It would hardly matter in the long run if his wife and he came to detest each other. If he could only provide his children with a mother who would want to be with them, who would lavish affection on them as his own mother so conspicuously had not. She had not even shed a tear, so far as he knew, for Bertram, so little did she care for anything but the fashionable world.

Lady Gregory would be livid if he chose her gauche, neglected niece over one of her pampered daughters. And as for Sir Thomas... His lips curved into a malicious smile. It would almost be worth marrying Hester simply for the joy of putting that jumped-up country squire in his place.

He would have to conduct his campaign with care, though. He wouldn't put it past Sir Thomas to prevent his access to Lady Hester altogether if he got wind of his intentions.

His smile widened. From what he had already learned of Lady Hester, he would warrant she would revel in a clandestine courtship. Her propensity for sneaking off when she ought to be about her duties, her very desperation to escape the confines of her existence, would soon drive her into his arms in spite of the poor start they had made, if only he could somehow alert her to his intent.

As they turned their mounts towards The Holme, he discovered that he no longer felt depressed at the prospect of matrimony. On the contrary, he was looking forward to the many challenges it represented.

* * *

Sir Thomas tossed his riding crop on to the cluttered desk, raising a cloud of snuff.

‘How could you, Hester?’ He turned to stare out of the window, his hands clasped behind his back as she slunk into the room and softly closed the door. ‘I was prepared to let it go yesterday, especially when I learned his lordship saw you. I did not want to add insult to injury by reminding you what a foolish risk you took. However did you think you would get away with sneaking off like that?’

Hester sighed wearily and lowered herself into the chair that faced his desk. 'I didn't think anyone would miss me with all the excitement his lordship's arrival had stirred up. I thought the servants would assume I was above stairs with the family, and that the family would assume I was below stairs tending to household matters. Indeed, if his lordship had kept his mouth shut, nobody would have been any the wiser.'

'Then I am glad he did.' He turned, bracing himself upon the desk, his fingers splayed. 'I knew the temptation would be great. As soon as Baines came and told me the gypsies were camping on your land, I knew how much you would want to go down there and see Lena. And before we get into that old argument about whether or not they poach game from my coverts while they denude yours, I must insist you consider the possible repercussions of your clandestine visits to Jye's caravan.'

'I was careful—both times.'

'Yet the marquis almost discovered what you were about both times,' her uncle snapped. 'Yesterday, as I said, your visit was understandable, given that they have been away a full year, and your heart is so deeply involved. But to go down there again this morning... And there is no point in denying the gypsy camp is where you have been. I can tell from the artwork adorning your hat.'

She fingered the paper flowers ruefully. How ironic it was that a gift given with affection had betrayed her.

She sighed. 'Truly, Uncle, I never dreamed Lord Lensborough would be up and in the stable yard so early.'

'No...he is not what your aunt led me to believe he would be at all. In fact, the more I learn about him, the more I think...'

He shook his head. 'Did you know he breeds racehorses? But we are straying from the point again. The point is, if anyone should see you hobnobbing with gypsies, the fat will be well and truly in the fire.'

'But nobody will see me. And even if they did, what could they possibly suspect, other than that I am a bit eccentric for wanting to help children that most would shun. They will only see me teaching a group of children to read and write.'

'Hester, anyone with eyes in his head will take one look at Lena's pale, freckled skin and see that she is not a pure-blood Romany. Then they will look at you beside her, and wonder why her hair and eyes are exactly the same colour as your own.'

Hester wound a tendril of burnished chestnut round her gloved finger guiltily.

'How do you know how closely she has grown to resemble me?'

'Because,' he admitted with a rueful smile, 'I went down there myself yesterday to take a look at her too.'

Hester's eyes filled with tears. For all Sir Thomas's anger when he found out about the liaison of gentry with gypsy, for all his refusal to allow the offspring of that illicit coupling to be reared in his home as Hester had once begged him to do, he could not quite quench all feelings for the little girl, Lena, his great-niece.

'Well, then...'

Hope flared, only to be abruptly extinguished by her uncle's next words.

'Hester, we cannot undo the past, but I will not permit another's sins to threaten the welfare of my own daughters. Julia and Phoebe are both insistent they want a match with their marquis, and believe me, a man of his stamp will not take kindly to the scandal we have sitting—literally, as it happens this week—on our doorstep.'

He added briskly, after Hester had brooded over his words in silence for some minutes, 'Besides, consider the sensibilities of your aunts, Lady Susan and Lady Moulton. You must see how upset finding out about Lena would make them? So far we have managed to keep her existence secret from all but our two selves. I would like it to stay that way. I particularly do not wish any scandal to break this week, while my own girls' futures hang in the balance.'

Hester sighed. 'You are right, Uncle Thomas. I have been abominably selfish. It is just that the few hours I can snatch with her are so precious. And I want so much for her to be able to read and write, to have at least a rudimentary education. She has already been denied so much.'

'I know, I know. But, do you think it wise, now that she is older, and more noticing, to put her in the way of guessing she is different from the other gypsy children? It would not be fair to raise her expectations, or make her dissatisfied with her lot.'

'Oh, you need not worry on that score.' Hester gave a wry laugh. 'Jye will never permit me access to her alone, or give her any special treatment. If I want her to read, it will be because she is one of a class with all the others. In fact...' she frowned '...she is quite a poor scholar. She sits in class with the others, but does not pay much attention. I suppose you have already guessed it was she who made me this garland.' She sighed. 'From the paper she was supposed to be practising her letters on.' The little imp had given her such a cheeky grin when she tacked the crown round the brim of her hat at the end of the lesson, that she had not had the heart to scold her. But if she were not permitted to even try to teach her...

Her uncle came round the desk with a handkerchief in his hand as silent tears began to trickle down her cheeks.

'It is better she never knows about her origins. Jye was wise to insist on that when he agreed to raise her himself.'

'It is so hard, Uncle—' her breath caught '—for her to be only a few fields away and not go to her.' She drew in another ragged breath. 'Not to be able to sit her on my knee and hold her while she tells me what adventures have befallen her since last we met.'

Her uncle pounced on her statement. 'Then you do agree. Until our guests have left, you will stay away?'

'Yes.' The single word was an admission of complete surrender. 'I know you are right. I have no wish to upset anyone else with what is, after all, purely my own affair.'

She blew her nose and rose shakily to her feet. 'I should be about my work. I have wasted enough time.'

Sir Thomas heaved a great sigh. 'Oh, Hester, my girl, no female should have to bear the burdens you have borne. Especially not at the age you were when...'

Hester stood with her hand poised on the doorknob, her head averted, bracing herself for what he would say next. She was immensely relieved when he only cleared his throat noisily, before turning abruptly to glare at the frost-ravaged shrubs that huddled round the lawn outside his window.

Chapter Five

By the time Lord Lensborough had eaten his breakfast, he had begun to have second thoughts. Out on the moors, with the cold wind whipping his cheeks, and his horse pounding the frozen ground beneath him, the idea of considering marriage to a shrew had possessed a certain kind of logic to it. A crazy, defiant sort of logic.

Determined to put her from his mind, he spent a pleasant afternoon strolling through the shrubbery with the two blond beauties, and Stephen to act as chaperon. It was only when he went to change for dinner that he realised he could not remember a single thing either one of them had said. Discarding his ruined neckcloth, he frowned at his reflection in the mirror. He had no trouble remembering every scathing word Lady Hester had ever flung at him, nor every minute expression that flitted across her sharp-featured little face.

* * *

It was galling in the extreme when he was aware of the very second she entered the saloon where they gathered before dinner. Though there were no children to herald her arrival, all his senses went on the alert. He did not need to watch her progress round the edges of the room. He could feel her determination not to come within forty feet of him. Her relief, when she gained the sofa on which her cousin Henrietta was sitting, was just as palpable. And just as irritating.

In one swift, penetrating glance, he absorbed the fact that the dress she wore was as outmoded as the greenish thing she had donned the night before, being long sleeved, high necked and made for somebody several sizes larger than she. At least the bronze colour toned in with the lighter shades in her hair. It was a great pity she did not dress that hair in a more becoming style. With a little effort, it could become her crowning glory. The shade was truly unique. Only an unimaginative fool would dismiss it as merely red. It was elemental flame. A man could warm his hands on it on a cold night.

He gave up. There were many highly sensible reasons why he should not marry her. And he might not, in the end. But she was as eligible, in many ways, as his host's daughters, and he could not deny that he was becoming increasingly intrigued by her.

And so, as soon as was possible after he had finished a very excellent dinner, the menu of which, the butler confirmed, Lady Hester had devised, he made a point of seeking out her company in the withdrawing room. As he paused on the threshold, her cousin Henrietta happened to make a comment that made her throw back her head and laugh.

The result was astonishing. It was as if the rough outer shell of an oyster had been prised open to reveal the pearl glistening within. With her head tilted slightly back, her eyes half-closed and her lips parted, revealing evenly spaced white teeth, Lord Lensborough saw that Lady Hester had the potential to be a quite remarkably attractive woman. If she would only laugh more often, displaying just that mischievous tilt to her head, even the freckles that sprinkled her little tip-tilted nose were not such a disadvantage as all that—they showed character, that she was a woman who would pursue activities out of doors whether they spoiled her complexion or not.

Or if she would only wear the sort of clothes that flattered her willowy frame, he smiled to himself. It was not as if the other two girls would impress the ton without the benefit of his mother's tuition. All three needed to learn how to dress. She could as well make Lady Hester presentable as Julia or Phoebe. On that score they were all even.

While he was musing, she made her way to a quiet corner and took out some knitting. He pursued her.

'May I join you?' he inquired, pulling a chair up to the table on which her work bag lay open.

She started, though her eyes never left the work that was growing visibly as her nimble fingers made the needles fly. She was fashioning a tiny garment out of wool, a sock or a glove, he could not tell which. It seemed typical of what he had gleaned of her character so far, that she spent her

evenings making something that was going to be of use to someone, rather than waste it on some decorative embroidery.

‘I don’t suppose I can stop you,’ she murmured.

‘No...’ he leaned back and crossed one leg indolently over the other ‘...nor can anyone else.’

She shot him a mutinous look at that, just one, but it heartened him.

‘Not completely cowed, then,’ he drawled. ‘I am glad that whatever punishment your uncle decreed this morning has not managed to quench your indomitable spirit altogether.’

Bewildered, she frowned. He did not like her, nothing about her, least of all what he drily referred to as her spirit. She cast about as to what he might mean, and after a moment could only suppose that he took delight in tormenting her. That contrary to what he said, he was glad to think her uncle might have punished her, since it was what he was itching to do himself. Anger swept her confusion away. Before she could stop herself, she snapped, ‘What possible concern is it of yours? What do you want?’

‘Why, to get to know you better, of course. I have already discovered that you like riding, that you are as competent in that as you appear to be at everything else you attempt.’

If she had felt confused before, this last statement sent her mind reeling. Why would he want to get to know her better? He was here to decide whether he was going to marry Phoebe or Julia. She was nothing to him. Less than nothing—he had made that all too clear when he had driven away leaving her soaked and freezing. His sneering, scowling looks spoke more clearly than his words did. She darted a look at him from under her sooty eyelashes. A faint smile hovered about his lips.

He was enjoying this, like a cat playing with a mouse; he would toy with her for a while, before swatting her with one of his great paws. She looked down at the hand that lay in his lap, relaxed now, resting on the silk fabric that clothed a muscular thigh. Resentment swept through her.

‘Well, thanks to you I will not be doing any more riding while you are staying at The Holme.’ She glared at him. ‘I suppose that makes you glad.’

Amusement faded from his face. So. Her uncle had withdrawn the use of a horse, because he feared that their mutual love of riding might throw them together. His breathing quickened. No wonder she was looking daggers at him. She had few enough pleasures in her life, and unwittingly he had been the cause of her losing one—and what it must have cost her. He could not imagine what it must feel like to be unable to get out on horseback whenever the fancy took him. At least when she was his wife, she would have access to some of the finest mounts in the country—aye, and she would probably be able to manage a fair proportion of them too. A smile tugged at the corner of his lips as he thought of how her face would light up when he showed her round the stables at Ely.

‘Yes,’ Hester hissed as she saw, and misinterpreted, his slow smile of anticipation, ‘I thought you would be pleased to know you can now go to the stables without fear of running into me. I would so hate for you to be put out...bother.’ She sighed, returning her attention to her knitting. ‘Now you have made me drop a stitch. I will have to start this row all over again.’

Lord Lensborough was disconcerted that she had misconstrued his smile so badly. Of course, she could not have known what direction his thoughts were taking. He would have to make sure there were no more misunderstandings of that nature. The poor girl was upset enough about losing her riding privileges without thinking he was gloating. Her fingers were shaking quite badly.

‘Leave off that knitting and talk to me instead,’ he urged her, leaning forward and laying one hand over her trembling ones.

She jerked them away, her whole body rigid. Yes, she was right, he must move with extreme caution lest her uncle suspect he had begun to consider her in earnest, and contrive to remove her from his sphere altogether. He withdrew his hand, picking up instead a stray hank of wool that lay on the table between them.

‘Talk...’ Her voice had become quite husky. A tide of red swept from her cheeks, down her neck, to disappear into the tantalisingly concealing folds of her voluminous gown. ‘What about? What can we possibly have to talk about? Please go back to Julia and Phoebe and leave me be.’

‘No. Not yet.’ The tone of his voice was implacable. ‘I have a fancy to discuss politics, and I don’t think either of them have any political views one way or another.’

‘Well, neither do I,’ she exclaimed. ‘At least, none that a man like you would respect.’

Her eyes sought out her aunt, and her expression was such a speaking mixture of fear and guilt that he shifted his chair slightly, blocking the woman from Hester’s view.

‘I shouldn’t be the least bit surprised if I found your views novel, though. They might amuse me. Come, tell me what you thought about Wellington’s crushing defeat of Napoleon.’

Hester didn’t even pause to take a breath. To speak of amusement, and war, in the same sentence! She had known he was callous, but not to the extent of regarding men suffering and dying as a topic for amusing conversation.

Her wool fell to the ground and rolled unheeded across the polished parquet as she struggled to find words that were adequate to express the depth of her disdain for such a man.

‘I suppose you regarded Waterloo as a glorious victory,’ she hissed. ‘I suppose you admired Wellington’s determination to stop Napoleon at any cost.’

‘And you didn’t?’ He leaned forward, suddenly arrested by the notion that if her feelings ran counter to his own on this, he was going to be bitterly disappointed.

‘I think it was wicked of him to send so many men to their deaths. I don’t think there was anything glorious about the grief of the widows and orphans left behind. Nothing noble about the conditions those who survived were forced to endure when they returned home, crippled fighting for their country, unable to work. And I think it monstrous that the government does nothing to help them.’

By God, Captain Fawley could do with meeting Lady Hester Cuerden. She was the perfect antidote to all the shrinking society damsels that had done the man’s self-esteem so much damage. She would see beneath the scars, to the man, and whether she liked him or no, it would have nothing to do with the way he looked.

‘And you think the government should...?’

She turned her face to his, puzzled by something in his voice that sounded like genuine interest. ‘Provide relief, of course. Those men died, or were wounded, fighting for their country. Their country should now help them in return. Men like you...’

Her voice died away in her throat. His face was less than two feet from hers, his eyes fixed on hers with an expression that was so like admiration that for a moment she forgot what she had been about to say. His eyes, she noted, were not black at all, but dark brown, flecked with amber. Almost exactly like the patterns on the tiger’s-eye pin he was wearing in his neckcloth again.

‘Men like me... what?’ he prompted in a voice so gentle that suddenly he did not seem like the Marquis of Lensborough at all.

She swallowed, but found it impossible to break eye contact. And she resented that. What business had she noticing that his eyes were a fascinatingly unusual colour? His heart was still black.

‘You should pass a law. It’s no good saying such men are a menace and try to sweep them off the streets. If they are menacing, it is only because they were trained to be menacing by their drill sergeants. It was their ferocity that ensured our freedoms, wasn’t it?’

‘I cannot pass such a law, if I would. It takes more than the word of one man to get a law through parliament.’

‘Even a marquis?’ she jeered. Then, flushing, she lowered her head, aware of muted conversations going on all around her. The rest of her family was managing to engage in the sort of polite conversation fit for a drawing room. Why couldn’t she turn aside his barbs with some innocuous remark? Why did his proximity rob her of the ability to keep a civil tongue in her head?

Lord Lensborough seemed able to reduce her to the point where all she wanted to do was slap his rugged, arrogant face.

She heard him sigh, and waited for his reproof. When it did not come, she felt even more in the wrong, which only served to make her angrier at herself. And at him.

‘You could do something if you wanted to, a man of your influence. Why, any charity would be glad of your patronage. People would queue up to make donations if they thought that by doing so they could curry favour with you.’

‘A charity,’ he mused. ‘A trust.’

A trust, in his brother’s name, to bring relief to the dependents of his regiment. What a fitting memorial that would be. He could not imagine why he had not thought of such a thing before.

It had taken this woman to inspire him, this remarkable woman who did not think or act like anybody else.

‘My brother fell at Waterloo,’ he confided quietly.

Hester’s hand flew to her mouth, her eyes filling with mortified tears as she looked up into his grave countenance.

‘Oh, I am so sorry. I spoke without thinking. I did not mean to wound you...at least I did, but I would never have said quite what I said if I had known of your own loss.’

Lord Lensborough searched her face intently. There was a remorse there that showed she knew she had touched upon a pain that nobody else had even guessed might lie concealed beneath his impenetrable façade. Hardly anybody so much as suspected there was anything but the façade.

Determined to alleviate her distress, he explained, ‘Bertram looked on battle as an adventure. He died doing what he loved, what he believed in.’

To finally acknowledge this truth, out loud, was like healing balm pouring over his aching soul. Much of his grief, he suddenly realised, had stemmed from regarding his brother’s death as a sinful waste. He went to grasp her hands for a second time, feeling an irresistible urge to raise them to his lips in gratitude.

She snatched them away, shrinking back into her chair as a shadow fell over them both.

‘Uncle Thomas,’ she squeaked.

‘I saw you drop your wool, Hester.’ His voice was barely more than a growl. Lord Lensborough turned and saw that the man had painstakingly rolled the wool into a neat ball and was holding it out to his trembling niece. ‘Is anything amiss?’

Lord Lensborough’s hackles rose. ‘Nothing is amiss here, sir. We were discussing Waterloo, and Lady Hester was making some very helpful suggestions about what might be done for the relief of war widows.’

Sir Thomas did not even bother to turn his head in Lord Lensborough’s direction. He pointedly addressed his next remark to Lady Hester.

‘My dear girl, you have no need to stay here if you do not wish to. You may retire to your rooms whenever you please.’

Without a word, Lady Hester leapt to her feet and quit her chair, scattering her knitting in all directions as she fled without so much as one backward glance. Lord Lensborough rose to his feet somewhat more slowly, his glare boring into Sir Thomas’s back as he followed his niece at a steady pace from the room.

* * *

‘Hester,’ Sir Thomas called out as she began her headlong flight up the stairs.

She turned, forcing a tremulous smile to her lips.

Sir Thomas looked up at her, frowning. ‘You know, my dear, if that fellow makes you uncomfortable, you need not suffer his manners.’

‘But my aunt wishes us all to—’

‘Bow and scrape to him. I know.’ He made a dismissive gesture with his hand. ‘You gave us all fair warning that you objected to his coming here, and that you wanted nothing to do with him. I should have listened. My girls must put up with his overbearing ways, since they are set on marrying the fellow, but for my part you may tell him to go to the devil if you wish.’

Hester’s smile faded altogether. ‘Oh, Uncle Thomas, I have already said the most terrible, unforgivable things to him. Now I know you will not disapprove, I think it would be as well to keep out of his way. In fact, I rather think Julia and Phoebe would do better if I kept out of sight. I appear to annoy him almost as much as he annoys me. I really do not set out to provoke him, Uncle Thomas.’

‘I know, I know, it’s like a red rag to a bull. The atmosphere would certainly be less fraught if you were kept apart. We are all holding our breath, waiting for the next explosion to take place.’ He smiled. ‘Why don’t you go back to Em’s after church tomorrow, and have the afternoon to yourself?’

Hester came down one step. ‘Will Aunt Susan be able to manage without me? Dinner tomorrow is quite elaborate, and I had planned on a treasure hunt for the children.’

‘I am sure any domestic crises can await your return. Nor will it harm the children to remain in the charge of their nurses for one afternoon.’

Hester looked more relaxed immediately. ‘About dinner,’ she began hesitantly.

‘No need to put in an appearance unless you want to. Have a tray up in your rooms, if you like. If you want a gossip with Henrietta about Barny’s progress, or whatever else it is you two girls find to talk about, you could always invite her to one of those midnight feasts you used to have when you were schoolgirls.’

Hester shook her head. ‘Uncle Thomas, those midnight feasts were supposed to be secret.’

‘With everyone who was invited to them having to traipse through the servants’ hall to get to your staircase?’ he asked. ‘Stealing biscuits and jugs of lemonade from the kitchen on the way?’

Hester felt a warm surge of affection for her uncle, for his forbearance with her prickly insistence on maintaining the complete privacy of her rooms. Nobody went into them without an express invitation, not even a maid to clean.

She had felt at a loss when she first came to live at The Holme after her parents had died during an epidemic of typhus. They had been so demonstrably affectionate, and her uncle was rather gruff. But when she had removed up to the attics he had supported her decision, as though he sensed she needed some territory she could still call her very own. She did. Her rooms were her sanctuary.

‘I will give it serious consideration, Uncle Thomas. Em always manages to talk me into a more reasonable frame of mind. And entertaining my own chosen guests, in my own rooms, will certainly be preferable to being downstairs with him prowling about the place like a caged tiger.’

What a relief. No need to dread any more confrontations with the insufferable Lord Lensborough. She went up to her rooms in a more cheerful frame of mind than she had experienced for weeks.

Chapter Six

‘Of all the dull days that we’ve spent in this Godforsaken hole,’ Lord Lensborough drawled late the following evening as he tossed back his second brandy, ‘Sunday has to rank as the dullest.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Stephen countered, stretching his legs out towards the fire, which crackled cheerfully in the grate of their shared sitting room. ‘I got a great deal of amusement from attending church this morning.’

Lord Lensborough shot him a look of loathing.

‘Julia informed me over dinner,’ he remarked, barely able to keep a straight face, ‘that the congregation has not been so large since the pig-face lady passed through this district on her way to the fair at Scarborough. People attended from several adjoining parishes in the hopes of catching a glimpse of a genuine marquis.’

‘If you think I enjoy being trotted out like some specimen at a freak show...’

‘And then, of course, we must not forget the treat of coming across the divine Miss Dean, the lovely Emily.’ Stephen raised his glass in tribute.

‘Good God.’ Lord Lensborough’s eyes narrowed as he saw the lustful expression on his friend’s face. ‘You are contemplating setting up a flirtation with the vicar’s daughter.’

‘Well, as you yourself pointed out, what else is there to do in this neck of the woods? You have appropriated every single female within these four walls, although...’ He stared abstractedly into his brandy glass for a few seconds, before continuing, ‘I feel obliged to warn you that you are not likely to be successful if you decide on Cinderella.’ Stephen had so nicknamed Hester on account of her station in the house, her marked shabbiness in contrast with the two girls who were vying for the marriage prize, who were sisters, though not hers, nor the least bit ugly.

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