



REGENCY



CHRISTINE
MERRILL

Lady Priscilla's
Shameful Secret

Christine Merrill

Lady Priscilla's Shameful Secret

Аннотация

A PROPOSAL SHE HAS TO RESIST Outspoken Lady Priscilla is the only woman in London brave enough not to simper at Robert Magson. As the Duke of Reighland he needs a wife to secure succession, and this captivating woman would surely keep life interesting! Despite the obvious sexual attraction between them, Lady Priscilla doesn't wish to marry – ever – for she hides a shameful secret. Surely a duke deserves more than a ruined woman? But Robert is not to be dissuaded. Once he sets his sights on something beautiful, he will do anything in his power to claim it!

LADIES IN DISGRACE Three women, breaking every one of society's rules

Содержание

CHRISTINE MERRILL	5
AUTHOR NOTE	6
About the Author	7
Chapter One	9
Chapter Two	20
Chapter Three	45
Chapter Four	60
Chapter Five	68
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	72



A playful and provocative Regency trilogy from

CHRISTINE MERRILL

Ladies in Disgrace

In London's High Society there are
three unconventional women who are
not afraid to break the rules of social etiquette!

And it will take a certain type of rake
to tame these delectably disgraceful ladies ...!

LADY FOLBROKE'S DELICIOUS DECEPTION

LADY DRUSILLA'S ROAD TO RUIN

LADY PRISCILLA'S SHAMEFUL SECRET

AUTHOR NOTE

After finishing *LADY DRUSILLA'S ROAD TO RUIN*, I was curious to see what had happened to her sister, Priscilla, after Dru left home. I could guess what the repercussions would be, after her behaviour in that book, but I knew there would be a man to love her.

And that was how I met Robert, a man who was more comfortable with horses than people. He brought with him a collection of slang terms that I had never heard before. I learned that it was possible to disguise the age of a horse by altering its teeth (bishoping), that a daisy cutter is a stumbling horse, and that a horse with bad lungs is a piper.

But I could find no reason to use a horse ladder anywhere in this story. This is a Regency era practical joke, where the new boy on the farm is sent to get the ladder so the horse can climb up to the hay mow to eat.

Happy reading. And don't let your horse climb any ladders.

About the Author

CHRISTINE MERRILL lives on a farm in Wisconsin, USA, with her husband, two sons and too many pets—all of whom would like her to get off the computer so they can check their e-mail. She has worked by turns in theatre costuming, where she was paid to play with period ballgowns, and as a librarian, where she spent the day surrounded by books. Writing historical romance combines her love of good stories and fancy dress with her ability to stare out of the window and make stuff up.

Previous novels by Christine Merrill:

THE INCONVENIENT DUCHESS

AN UNLADYLIKE OFFER

A WICKED LIAISON

MISS WINTHORPE'S ELOPEMENT

THE MISTLETOE WAGER

(part of *A Yuletide Invitation*)

DANGEROUS LORD, INNOCENT GOVERNESS

PAYING THE VIRGIN'S PRICE^{*}

TAKEN BY THE WICKED RAKE^{*}

MASTER OF PENLOWEN

(part of *Halloween Temptations*)

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To Diana Fox

and the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Chapter One

Robert Magson, Duke of Reighland, treated each new ballroom like an Indian jungle set with traps not for tigers, but for unwary men. There were so many mamas and daughters in London that he would not have been surprised to see them lurking behind the furniture at White's. And they were all eager to catch his eye, even for just a moment.

It was as though they thought he could decide on a bride based on a single glance in a crowded room. He spent more time buying a horse than that. He would never lay down money without checking teeth, feeling fetlocks and enquiring of the bloodline. Surely the choice of a wife should be made with equal care.

He frowned out into the mob and watched two or three young ladies curtsy as his gaze roved over them. It was an odd feeling, this sudden deference, as though his slightest glance was the withering glare of the noon sun in a garden full of delicate blossoms. The same girls would not have looked twice at him a year ago. Then his cousin had died. And suddenly he was the catch of the Season.

He frowned harder and watched the crowd contract to give him more space. It was not as if he did not mean to marry one of them. But there were far too many who had hopes in his direction. One could not appear too welcoming, if one wanted even a moment of peace in the evenings.

To be fair, the rout tonight was surprisingly convivial. And he had no reason to suspect his host, the Earl of Folbroke, was plotting against him. The man was too young to have marriageable children and, to the best of Robert's knowledge, had no sisters.

'I hear you are thinking of offering for Benbridge's daughter,' said Folbroke from his place at Robert's side.

It surprised him that that particular bit of news had travelled so quickly. While he had been paying court to several young ladies in a halfhearted and unenthusiastic way, the matter of Benbridge's daughter had been introduced into conversation only recently. But apparently, it was already *on dit*. 'What might have given you that idea?' he asked blandly. 'I have not even met the girl, yet.'

'According to my wife, Lady Benbridge is telling everyone that your back has been broken by the parson's mousetrap.' The earl smiled. 'As far as the bit that has trapped you? It does not surprise me that you have not met her. None of us has seen her for quite some time. Of course, I would not notice, even if she were here.' Folbroke adjusted his smoked glasses.

It was a continual surprise to Robert that the earl was so casual in calling attention to his blindness. He supposed it prevented people from treating him like an invalid, when there was no reason to. Although he tended to stay at the edge of the room during events such as these, Folbroke looked no more uncomfortable than the other gentlemen that lounged against the

walls to avoid the press of bodies at the centre of the floor.

Robert admired his studied casualness and sought to emulate it so that he might appear more comfortable in society than he felt. Four months after becoming Reighland it was still an effort not to turn and search the room for Gregory when someone called him by the title. He offered a silent prayer for the bright and smiling child that had been meant for this honour, just as he longed for the wise counsel of his father. Sometimes it felt that his family had not so much died as abandoned him to make his own way in a confusing world. Now, his frown deepened at the rumours swirling about him. 'Despite what Lady Benbridge might think on the matter, I wish to meet the girl before I offer for her. I might be new to the marriage mart, but not so new that I will take her sight unseen.'

Folbroke smiled in response, as he always did. He was a particularly good-humoured fellow. But Robert suspected that there was something about the situation that the earl found particularly amusing. 'In any case,' he said, 'you must meet Hendricks. He will want to welcome you to the family.' Robert hoped that Folbroke was not laughing at him for he quite liked the man and would hate to find him as false as some of the others who had been eager to offer friendship to his face while laughing behind their hands at his country manners.

'Hendricks,' Folbroke called, 'come here. There is someone you must meet.'

That was it, then, Robert thought, relaxing a little. Hendricks

was Folbroke's protégé. Apparently, this event had been meant to arrange a casual introduction to his Grace, the Duke of Reighland. There was no real harm in it, he supposed. He had heard that the Hendricks fellow was damned useful to know. And when it came to navigating the subtleties of London, Robert could use all the help he could get.

A bespectacled man all but materialised out of the crowd, as though the room was a stage and he had been waiting in the wings for an entrance. It was nicely done. Though Robert had been watching closely, he'd never have suspected that Hendricks had been watching for a cue from the earl.

'You wished something, Folbroke?' Hendricks's voice was raised to be heard over the noise of the crowd, but he still managed to sound quiet and deferential. His choice of words made him seem even more like an Arabian djinn.

'Only to present you to Reighland,' Folbroke shouted back at him. 'Your Grace, John Hendricks is husband to the lovely Drusilla Roleston. Dru is the elder Benbridge daughter and sister to your fair Priscilla.' He stared in the direction of Hendricks, who was dipping his head to hear over the roar of voices. 'John, Reighland is likely to be your brother-in-law. Make nice to him.'

Hendricks's eyebrows raised in surprise before he could master his emotion and turn to Robert with a bow. 'How do you do, your Grace?'

Robert gave him a stiff nod of response. 'Not as well as Folbroke seems to think. She is not my Priscilla, Folbroke.'

Despite what society claims, my intentions are not set in stone. I have not even met the girl,' he added again, wondering just what was wrong with people in London. They gossiped as though rumour was air and they could not survive without it. 'I do mean to seek an introduction to her. If there is compatibility between us ...' He gave a half-shrug.

Hendricks nodded. 'If you would permit, your Grace, I would like to introduce my wife to you. She is eager for all things to do with Priss and will be glad to know you.'

'She cannot ask Priscilla herself?'

'Sadly, no.' Hendricks smiled benignly at him. 'Because of me, I'm afraid. The Earl of Benbridge did not think me good enough for his family. To my eternal good fortune, Lady Drusilla did not share his opinion, but now my poor Dru is quite cut off from associating with her sister.'

'And if I might say so, Benbridge is a fool,' Folbroke said calmly. 'You will not find better company in this room than John Hendricks, nor will you find a sharper mind.'

Robert had heard similar sentiments voiced by others. Hendricks was seen as an up and comer in political circles for his pleasant demeanour and his uncanny ability to be always in the right place at the right time. 'Is the attendance of the older sister the reason I do not see the younger here?' Robert asked, slightly annoyed by the fact. On the few times they'd spoken, the Earl of Benbridge had seemed a stiff-backed old fool who was not nearly as smart or important as he seemed to think himself.

This was merely another confirmation of it. It was interesting to see that, having to choose between the company of one or the other, Folbroke would rather associate with his inferior than with Benbridge, a man of equal rank. Robert stored the information for future reference.

Hendricks nodded in answer to his question. 'Since we were invited this evening, Priscilla would not be permitted to come. It is damned unreasonable of him. My wife and I cannot forgo society just to prevent embarrassment for a family that will not welcome Dru back, no matter what she does.' He glanced at Robert and pushed his spectacles up his nose. 'If you should happen to marry Priss, you will have our felicitations, of course. But we will make no attempt to ruin the girl's wedding by expecting an invitation and upsetting her father.'

Robert found this even more annoying than the assumptions of his choice of bride. It had never occurred to him to care who was in the pews at St George's; now he had received his first refusal before the invitations had been engraved. 'This is hardly set in stone,' he repeated. 'I have spoken to Benbridge about it, of course, but I have not even met the girl.' Then a thought struck him. 'But you have, haven't you? How did you find her?'

There was a fleeting expression of caution in Hendricks's eyes, just before he spoke. Then he said heartily, 'She is a great beauty. All blonde curls, blue eyes and dimples. She will make someone a most attractive wife, I am sure. The children will be lovely.'

He'd managed to mention looks three times in as many

seconds. Yet Robert was sure that the man did not like her, or her blonde curls. He had chosen the other sister. And it was obvious that he doted on her.

But that did not mean Robert might not like Priscilla, if he ever saw her. A pretty wife was better than an ugly one.

‘You will have Benbridge’s favour as well,’ Hendricks added. ‘Priscilla is his favourite.’

‘The thought had crossed my mind,’ Robert replied. If marriage was to be little better than a connection between powerful families, he could do much worse than an earl’s daughter. If he wished to put forth any of his ideas in Parliament, it could not hurt to have an elder statesman at his back. And judging by the value Benbridge set on status and decorum, he must have drilled his daughter in the rules of good behaviour, practically from birth. She would rescue him from his tendency to social *faux pas*.

With the number of men between him and the title, he had never expected to be a duke. But Lady Priscilla had been bred to be a duchess, or at the very least a countess. She would know what was expected of her. And he would not have to give another thought to the running of his households and social life. It would be a great relief.

But it annoyed him that Hendricks could not seem to find any word for the girl other than that she was pretty. It made him wonder if there was some secret. Hereditary madness, perhaps? Given the choice between that or weakness of character Robert

almost preferred the second. While he had seen virtuous children with wanton parents, a lack of wit seemed to carry through the generations.

‘Priss is the apple of his eye,’ Hendricks affirmed, interrupting his musings. ‘And here is mine.’ The woman who was approaching them seemed sane enough. But she was neither blonde nor blue eyed. Nor did she share anything in common with Benbridge’s rather florid complexion. Years of horse breeding told him that such a variety of colouring was unusual in siblings.

‘Your wife is Priscilla’s stepsister, did you say?’ he guessed.

Hendricks gave him an odd look and Folbroke seemed more than usually impervious. ‘I said no such thing, your Grace.’

Which meant that too great a knowledge of biology had just led him to question the legitimacy of the former Drusilla Roleston. He doubted that the woman had heard him above the other voices. And her husband was too eager for his patronage to rebuke him.

But it was yet another proof that he needed a keeper to muzzle him in these situations and pave over any mistakes with gracious smiles.

Hendricks appeared to have forgotten the comment already and made the introductions. In response, Robert made a proper bow and responded, ‘Lady Drusilla.’

‘Please, your Grace,’ she said softly. ‘You may address me as Mrs Hendricks.’ She shot her husband a look that told the world

the man had hung the stars and the moon, and there was no greater title in the world than the honour of bearing his last name.

In response, the normally composed Hendricks blushed and grinned.

Even with his time spent travelling amongst the *ton*, Robert knew that it was unusual to see a couple so obviously fond of each other. He was secretly envious. That was what he had expected, before his life had taken its recent and dramatic turn: a woman who would be happy to have him, not just angling after his title. Would that the sister shared this woman's sweet nature. 'Mrs Hendricks, then. I am honoured to make your acquaintance.'

Drusilla turned to him with a hopeful smile. 'John tells me that you have some news of my sister?'

'Only that I might make an offer for her, if she is to my liking.'

He watched as Mrs Hendricks looked back at him with equal curiosity. 'You have met with her, then? Is she well?'

'I have not, as yet, made the lady's acquaintance.' But he must soon, if only to save him from admitting his ignorance, over and over.

'You do not know her, yet you would consider an offer.' The lovely Mrs Hendricks frowned. 'I take it you have been in communication with my father on the subject.'

He gave a little nod of acknowledgement.

'I would hope, sir, that you have the lady's best interests in mind as well. I am sure my father is concerned primarily with your rank and thinks little of my sister's future happiness. My

hopes for her are much more humble. I do not wish to see her bartered away from the family to a man who does not care about her.’

Robert glanced between Hendricks and Folbroke, waiting to see if either would prevent the lady from offering him further insult. Folbroke was smiling expectantly at him, as though it was a legitimate question that deserved an answer. Hendricks met his gaze as though he had been thinking much the same thing, despite his dislike for the girl they were discussing and the risk of offending a peer.

Very well, then. He would answer bluntness with bluntness. ‘It is true that I know far more of trading horses than I do of marriage, Mrs Hendricks. Until my recent elevation, I had little plan for my life other than the breeding and selling of cattle. But I was known for my sound judgement on the subject. I would have no intention of closing such an important bargain without at least riding the filly in question.’

Folbroke gave a snort of suppressed mirth.

He had done it again. ‘That is not to say that I wish to ...’ He glanced at Mrs Hendricks and then away. For if she understood the thing he had implied, but not meant to say ... ‘I only want to meet her,’ he said at last, exasperated. ‘We need to talk ... to know each other ... socially ... before such a decision can be made. But I can assure you that, once the deal is done, I treat anything and anyone under my care with the respect and affection it deserves.’

Hendricks looked more doubtful, as though calculating just how much respect his sister-in-law was entitled to.

And the former Lady Drusilla continued to stare at him, as though trying to gauge the value of a man who might compare marriage to horse trading and admit to an interest in riding her beloved sister. ‘A fair enough answer, I suppose. Knowing my father as I do, I could hardly have expected him to choose a husband for Priss based on some pre-existing bond of affection. I must trust that my husband and Lord Folbroke would not be introducing me to you if they did not think you worthy of my sister.’ She gave a small sigh as though the small matter of a dukedom meant nothing to her and Robert stifled his own inadequacy. Then, she softened. ‘Please, when you see Priss, inform her that I asked after her good health. And ensure her that, should she need me for any reason, she must feel free to call upon me, despite what Father might say.’ There was something in the final sentence that made him think that if the mysterious Priscilla experienced unhappiness, it had best not be at his expense, or the formidable Mrs Hendricks would take swift retribution.

‘Very well, then, madam. I will be happy to relay your message.’ And he would do it soon, he was sure. The vague interest he’d had in the girl had been piqued to actual curiosity with this interchange. Even if he did not wish to wed her, he very much wanted to meet her and see what all the fuss was about.

Chapter Two

‘You will be pleased to know that I have chosen you a husband.’ The Earl of Benbridge barely looked up from his newspaper as he casually made the announcement that might permanently alter Priscilla’s life.

Did he expect her to be pleased? She frowned down at her plate. She was not. Not in the least. It felt as if her insides were being squeezed with a metal clamp. Her heart ceased to beat and her breathing ground to a halt. Her stomach clenched until the little breakfast she had taken churned weakly inside it. ‘Is it someone of my acquaintance?’ She kept her tone uninterested. It was always easier to start an argument with Father than to win it.

‘Do you know him? Since you rarely leave the house, how likely do you think it is that you have seen him?’

‘I go when I have been invited,’ she said, as patiently as she could. ‘And to the events that you allow me to attend.’ That further limited her choices. ‘If you refuse to let me be seen in the company of Drusilla, you can hardly blame me for staying home. The hostesses know that if they lose her favour, they lose the Countess of Folbroke, and possibly Anneslea as well. My sister has become quite the social butterfly since her marriage.’

‘Her marriage to a nothing,’ her father announced. ‘And without my blessing.’

‘Do not be jealous of your sister, Priscilla. It does you no

credit.' Father's new wife, Veronica, seemed to think it was her place to act as a sage adviser to her stepdaughter on all womanly graces. After their brief time together, Priss found the idea that Ronnie had a store of accrued wisdom faintly ridiculous.

In any case, her statements about Dru were not so much a sign of jealousy as a simple statement of fact. Since the marriage to Hendricks, her father had forced the *ton* to choose a side. And after only a little thought, they had chosen Dru's. Priss's own scandalous behaviour, last summer, had put the last nail in the coffin of her social life and the trickle of remaining invitations had dried up almost completely. 'I am not jealous, Ronnie. I am happy that Dru has finally got the Season she deserves, even if it has come too late to get her a rich and powerful husband.'

'Bah.' It was the noise that her father often made, when confronted with the stupidity of his actions. If he had given her a Season, Dru would now be married to the man of *his* choosing. Then he would be satisfied. And poor Dru would have managed to be content, instead of as gloriously happy as rumours made her out to be.

Benbridge brightened as he dismissed all thoughts of the absent Drusilla and focused his attention on Priss. 'We will show her the error of her ways, girl. In a month or two you shall be married at St. George's and all the town shall wish for an invitation. You may pick and choose who you like and devil take the rest.'

At one time the thought of delivering slights and nods and

setting pace for the fashionable world might have interested her. Now that she had been on the receiving end of it, she'd lost her taste for gossip. At the moment, there was only one person in this imaginary wedding that she really cared about. But she was almost afraid to ask about him.

'I am more interested in the groom than the guest list. Who have you chosen for me?'

'Reighland. That freshly acquired title has made him something of a nine-days' wonder. When you capture his attention, it will be a coup.'

She racked her brain, sorting through the guests at the few parties she had attended in recent months. Had she seen him? Had he been there? Had he seen her? She could find no memory of him. 'And why would he have me?'

'I have spoken to him on the subject. I need an ally in the bill that I am presenting. He is a logical choice. But he has been quite standoffish. When he expressed a half-hearted desire to marry, I informed him that I had an eligible daughter. It was the first overture in what I hope will be a long and fruitful alliance.'

When Benbridge said fruitful, he thought of nothing more than bills and laws. There was no mention of the other fruits that might result in marrying his daughter off to a stranger—nor the acts she would have to perform to achieve them. 'How nice for you,' Priscilla said weakly. 'And now, if you will excuse me, I think I shall retire to my room for the morning. I am feeling quite tired.'

‘It is nearly noon, Priscilla. Too late to be asleep, and far too early to retire for the day.’ Veronica was eyeing her critically.

Priss searched for an excuse that might meet with the woman’s approval, yet allow her to be alone with her thoughts. ‘I mean to spend an hour in prayer.’

Veronica took another sip of her coffee. ‘Very well then. It is not as if your character does not need reforming. But remember, too much piety is unbecoming in a girl. I have no objections, as long as you have recovered from the effects by evening and are attired in your newest gown. We will be attending a ball at Anneslea’s and you will be meeting your husband-to-be.’

Tonight, already. That left her only a few hours to find a way out of her father’s plans for her. It seemed she would be praying for deliverance.

A few hours later, Lady Priscilla Roleston surveyed the ballroom and wondered if Veronica might have been right about the dangers of prayer and solitude. She felt for all the world like a girl on her first come out. Her gown was fashionable and she’d been assured that it flattered her. But the neckline, which had been acceptable when she’d ordered it, now felt exposing to the point of immodesty. People would stare.

At one time, she would have welcomed the attention that a daring dress would bring her. Now, she just wanted to be left alone.

But it seemed that was to be a hopeless wish. Her father’s mind had been set on the subject of the impending introduction. No

amount of feigned megrims or foot dragging had had any effect on him or his new wife.

And that was the best she could manage, really, when thinking of Ronnie. Although the woman had attempted to force Priss into calling her 'Mother' their ages were close enough to make the idea laughable. Even the word 'stepmother' was a struggle. She did not wish a female parent of any variety, though Papa had claimed that it was out of concern for her that he had married again so late in life. She needed a chaperon and wise guidance.

Perhaps he was right. At barely one and twenty, Priss expected her character was fully formed, for better or worse. But if she had wished to use her youth and good looks to capture the attentions of a foolish, old peer, she could not think of a better teacher than the new Lady Benbridge.

Since Priss heartily wished to remain unmarried, Ronnie was proving to be more hindrance than help. She must hope that the Duke of Reighland, whoever he might be, was not as willing to take a pig in a poke as her father expected.

'Straighten your shoulders, Priscilla. We cannot have you slouching tonight. You must put your best foot forwards. And smile.' Veronica prodded her in the back with her fan, trying to force her to straighten.

Priss took care to let no emotion show on her face as they approached the knot of people in the corner of the room. Why should she bother being nice, just to please whomever Father had chosen as the latest candidate for her hand? Considering the men

he had threatened her with over the years, she had very good reasons not to encourage an attraction.

But she straightened her shoulders, just a little. The continual effort of hunching, trying to seem a little less than she was, was both taxing and painful.

Veronica surveyed her appearance with a frown. 'I suppose it will have to do. Now come along. We are to be presented to the guest of honour. It is rare for an eligible peer to come to London, almost out of nowhere, right at the height of the Season.'

'Which means he will be surrounded by girls,' she said to Ronnie, trying to dash her hopes. 'There is no reason he should choose me from amongst them. Or be thinking of marriage at all. I am sure he has other things on his mind. Parliament, for example. No amount of good posture and manners on my part will make an impression.'

'Nonsense. Benbridge assures me that he is practically in awe of his own title and enjoys the attention immensely. How can he not? He never in a million years expected to be more than a gentleman farmer. Suddenly, his father, cousin and uncle are all dead in the space of a year. And here he is. It really is the most tragic thing.' But Veronica grinned as she said it, all but salivating at the thought of such an eligible, yet so naïve, a peer.

'Yes,' Priscilla said firmly. 'It is tragic. Devastating, in fact. His cousin was barely three years old. I am sure there will be another year at least for me to meet the man. He cannot intend to marry so quickly when he is still grieving for his family.' But

though the new Reighland wore unrelieved black for the boy who had been his predecessor, his mourning did not extend to a complete withdrawal from society if he was attending parties all over London.

‘On the contrary. Rumours say that he is on the hunt and means to return to his lands properly wed by the end of the session. He has seen the results of waiting too long to get an heir, with his uncle dying of age while the heir was still so young and vulnerable. The Reighland holdings are too remote to see much society. It makes sense to him to choose a bride while he is at market.’

‘Inadequate breeding stock in the north, I suppose,’ Priscilla said. There were rumours that the duke had been much better with horses than he had with people, and that his Grace’s general gracelessness extended to his doings with the fair sex. But for all of that, he was still a duke and much could be forgiven—especially by one who was eager to marry.

He seemed just the sort of man her father would choose for her. One with little else to recommend him other than rank. As she glanced at him from across the room, she had to admit that there was nothing about him that she imagined would make for an easy husband. He did not need the title to intimidate her. He was an exceptionally large man with broad shoulders, bulging muscles and large hands. His thick black hair hung low over his face, which had matching heavy brows. The slight shadow on his jaw meant his valet would have to keep a razor sharp and ready

more than once a day. If he would at least smile, she might have thought him jolly, but his looks were as dark as his coat.

The simpering virgins that surrounded him were dwarfed in comparison. But it was a mob and, thank the gods, she would be lost in it. Perhaps her father was wrong about the understanding they had. Priss could be just another face in the crowd. The introduction could pass out of his memory as quickly as it had entered and she could return home to her room.

‘Make some effort to distinguish yourself ...’ Veronica prodded her again ‘... or I shall speak for you.’

That would be even more embarrassing than being forced upon the man by her father. ‘Very well, then,’ Priss said, with a grim smile. If Benbridge and Ronnie were so eager for her to make this a memorable evening, she would give them what they wanted in spades. It would be so unforgettable that they would have no choice but to remove her from town to avoid further embarrassment.

And so she was brought before the estimable Duke of Reighland, who was even larger up close than he had seemed from a distance. She was glad that this would be her only meeting with him, for prolonged contact would be quite terrifying. She kept her head bowed as she heard Ronnie speaking to the host and hostess, who then turned to their guest and offered to present Lady Benbridge and Lady Priscilla.

Reighland’s voice boomed down at the top of her head. ‘How do you do?’

She heard Veronica's melodious, 'Very well, thank you, your Grace.'

Priscilla made her deepest, most perfect curtsy, offered her hand and then, looking up into the face of the man, smiled and whickered like a horse.

There was a stunned silence. But she did not need words to know what Veronica was thinking. The horror emanating from her was so close to palpable that Priss was surprised she had not already turned and shouted for Father to summon the carriage. They would make a hasty retreat and she could expect the lecture to continue nonstop until such time as they had a mind to remove her from the house.

No one moved. It was as though they could not dare breathe. And now that she had created the situation, she was unsure how to get out of it. Judging by his looks, she had expected immediate outrage and an angry outburst from the duke. He might even be moved to shout at her and storm from the room.

It would not matter. She had been shouted at by experts, now that her poor sister was no longer in the house to take the brunt of Father's temper. What could this stranger possibly say that would hurt her?

But Reighland was staring at her with no change of expression and an unusual degree of focus. She felt the slightest upward tug on the hand he held to move her out of her curtsy to stand properly before him. She did not need Veronica's advice to straighten her spine for she needed every last vertebra to hold her

own against the tower of manhood in front of her.

At last he spoke. 'Lady Priscilla, may I have the next waltz?'

If he wished to upbraid her for her manners, he could do it in company and not by hauling her around the dance floor and trapping her in his arms for the scolding. 'I am sorry, but I believe I am promised.'

'How unfortunate for the gentleman. When he sees that you are dancing with me, I am sure he will understand.' He cocked an ear towards the musicians. 'It seems they are beginning. We had best go to the floor. If you will excuse us, Lady Benbridge?'

And so she was headed for the dance floor with the Duke of Reighland. She had little choice in the matter, unless she wanted to have a tug of war over her own evening glove. His grip on her arm was gentle, but immovable.

And now they were dancing. He was neither good nor bad at the simple step. She did not fear that he would tread upon her toes. But neither did she feel any pleasure in the way he danced. He approached the waltz with a passionless and mechanical precision, as though it were something to be conquered more than enjoyed.

'Are you having a pleasant evening?' he asked.

'Until recently,' she said.

'Strange,' he said, staring past her. 'I'd have said just the opposite, if you had asked me. It has suddenly become most diverting compared to other recent entertainments.'

'I would not know,' she said, 'for I have not attended any.'

‘I understand that,’ he said. ‘It is because of your sister’s recent good fortune. I met her last evening at the Folbroke rout.’

Now she had to struggle to remain blasé. *He had seen Silly.* She must remember to think of Silly as Dru, just as Drusilla’s friends did. Dru had many of those now and not just a little sister to tease her with nicknames. It had been months since the last time they had been in the same room together. But then they had not spoken and stayed on opposite ends of a ballroom that might as well have been an ocean. Priss had been forced by Veronica to cut her own sister dead.

If Ronnie got wind of it, she would snap this tenuous thread of communication, even if the man offering it was a duke. Priss replied to Reighland’s news with a single, ‘Oh.’ It hardly summed up the extent of her feelings. She wanted to pull him to the side of the floor and interrogate him until she had gleaned every last detail of his exchange with Dru and could recall them as clearly as if she had been there herself.

But the dance could not go on for ever and she did not want to give the man reason to speak. She would have to do without.

He had noticed her silence. ‘It surprises me to find you so uninterested. Mrs Hendricks was most eager for any news of you. Do you find yourself jealous on her account?’

‘Certainly not. It is about time that Drusilla had the chance to be happy.’ She looked longingly back at the wallflowers, wishing she was amongst them. Perhaps one of them had been at the Folbroke’s party and could give her the information she craved.

'It seems I am out of practice in social settings.' She glared up at him. 'I do not remember the conversation being quite so rude, when last I waltzed.' He would let her go now. That had been a direct insult and he could hardly ignore it.

But her barbed words bounced off his thick skin as though they meant nothing. 'You must make an effort to get out more,' he replied. 'It was at my request that you were invited here. I wished to meet you. I will see to it that you receive further such invitations.' He said it without a smile. Did the man have no emotions at all?

'If you wish,' she added for him.

'Of course I wish. That is why I will do it.'

'You misunderstand me, your Grace. What I meant was that you should have finished your last sentence with the phrase "if you wish." Then it would mean that you would see to it I received further invitations and could accept them if I desired. It would imply that I had a choice.'

He ignored her lack of enthusiasm. 'If I give you a choice, I can well guess what your answer would be, although I am at a loss as to the reason for it. You seem to have taken an instant dislike of me, though you have known me for all of five minutes. I suspect that you would have formed the same opinion of me without even leaving your house, if I had given you the chance. But that would not do at all. It is time that you are brought out into the light so that a man can get a proper look at you.'

'Why would you need a proper look at me?'

‘I mean to marry,’ he said, as though it were not obvious. ‘And you are a front runner. But no matter what your father might think, I cannot be expected to make a decision based on his word alone.’

‘He could have shown you a miniature and you could have made a judgement from that,’ she said. It was clear that her opinion did not matter. Of course, she supposed, since the man was a duke, her acceptance was assumed. Why would she refuse?

Other than that he had the manners of a stable hand.

‘It would not have been the same,’ he assured her. ‘You are quite lovely and I am sure no picture would do you justice.’

‘I am not so different from many others,’ she insisted. ‘If you wish for a pretty bride, you would be better served to make the rounds at Almack’s. Everyone who is anyone is there.’

‘In knee breeches,’ he added. ‘There is a limit to what I will go through, simply for the sake of marrying.’

‘They are proper attire for evening,’ she said bluntly.

‘They are uncomfortable,’ he said with equal bluntness. ‘And they do not suit me. I will wear them at court, of course. I mean no disrespect to the Regent. But beyond that, trousers will have to do.’

‘So you are willing to limit your choice of bride, based on your unwillingness to dress for evening?’

‘Just as you are limiting your choice of husbands by not attending Almack’s,’ he said.

Touché. She could not explain her way out of that without

admitting that she could no longer get vouchers. ‘Perhaps I do not wish to marry,’ she hazarded.

‘Then you should go for the dancing,’ he suggested. ‘You are very good at it.’

‘Thank you,’ she said glumly.

‘If we marry, I will not worry about having to hire a dancing master for you.’

She stumbled. *He knew*. Not all, perhaps. But enough. She pulled her hand from his, prepared to quit the floor.

He grabbed it back again and kept her in place. ‘You will not get away from me so easily. Wait until the end of the music. Anything else will make you appear skittish.’ He looked into her eyes. ‘I do not tolerate skittishness.’

‘And I do not care what you do or do not like,’ she said.

‘Then we are not likely to get on well.’ He gave a thoughtful nod as though he were marking a check on the negative side of some invisible list of wifely qualities. ‘Other young ladies are much more agreeable,’ he said. ‘One might even say that they fawned.’

‘I expect so. You are a duke, after all. A marriageable miss cannot aspire higher than that.’

‘Then why do you not express similar behaviours?’

‘Is there anything about the title that imbues it with an amiable nature, a pleasant companion, a loving mate, or ...’ she struggled to find a delicate way to express her misgivings ‘... any kind of compatibility between us? You are young, of course.’

‘Twenty-six,’ he supplied.

‘That might be an advantage in your favour. Barring accident, I would not have to be worried about widowhood. But I have met many men to whom I would much rather be a widow than a wife.’

His rather forbidding face split in a smile that was as surprising as it was brilliant. Straight white teeth, full lips, which had seemed narrow as he’d frowned at her. And there was a spark in his eye. For a moment, she almost found him attractive.

Then she remembered that he was her father’s choice, not hers.

‘I intend to live to a ripe old age,’ he affirmed. ‘Do you ride?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I said, do you ride? Horses,’ he added, as though there could be any other sort of riding.

‘No,’ she said hurriedly, hoping that this was the correct answer to put him off. ‘I am deathly afraid of horses.’ In truth, she quite liked them—probably better than she liked his Grace. But one could not be expected to marry a man based on the contents of his stables.

His smile had turned to thoughtful disappointment. ‘That is a pity. You do a creditable imitation of one, I notice. Although it does not suit you. This Season, I have met several young ladies from whom a snort and a neigh would not have surprised me in the least.’

The joke was not subtle. She almost upbraided him for his cruelty before he added, ‘That did not bother me much, however. Looks are not everything in a woman. And I quite like horses. I

breed them, you know. I have rather a lot of land devoted to the business of it. In the country, of course.'

'Then it is as I said. We would not suit at all. I cannot abide the country.' Another lie.

'You would not be there all the time, you know. Much as I do not like to be away during the prime foaling time, now that I am Duke, I will be forced to attend parliament, and all the balls, galas and entertainments that accompany the Season. I suspect you could have your fill of town were you married to me.'

And then retire for the rest of the year to a country estate, far away from the prying eyes of the *ton*. She imagined acres of soft rolling green dotted with grazing mares and their little ones nudging at them. It was tempting, when he put it that way. 'As you complained earlier, I rarely attend the events of the Season now that I am here. It is just as likely that I would be forced to socialise when I did not wish and then be forced into a solitude I did not enjoy.'

He gave her a sidelong glance. 'It sounds rather like you have taken it into your head not to be happy with anything I might offer you.'

She returned the glance. 'Is it so obvious?'

'Quite. Since you are prone to such candour, will you tell me the reason for it? If I have given you offence, as I frequently do, it would be useful to know how. I would welcome a critique of my approach, so that I do not repeat the mistake with the next young lady.'

Her lips quirked as she tried to suppress a smile. ‘There. Just now. You should have said, “If I have given offence, I humbly apologise”.’

‘Without knowing why?’

‘Definitely. That is the way to a lady’s heart.’

‘And if I were to begin with this apology, you would feel differently towards me?’

‘No.’

He drew back a moment, as though running through the conversation in his head. ‘Then I shan’t bother.’ He stood in silence next to her, as though plotting his next move.

Why did he not just go away? She had been the one to give offence. And he was the one with all the power and new enough so that he hardly knew how to wield it. Did he not realise that his rank would allow him to take umbrage at the most trivial things, storm off or deny patronage? By now, he should have reported to her father that there was no way he could be leg shackled to such a thoroughly disagreeable chit and that would be that.

It would be a Pyrrhic victory, of course. There would be punishment and frigid silences awaiting her at home. But it would be one step closer to spinsterhood and the forced rustication that she craved.

Instead he seemed stubbornly attached to her. ‘Now, let me see. You do not like riding, or balls, or the city, or the country. What does that leave us? Books?’

‘I am not a great reader.’

‘Shopping?’

‘I have no wish to outfit myself in such a way that I am merely an ornament to my husband.’

‘But you are most charmingly arrayed and, as previously noted, quite pretty.’

‘I do not like flattery either.’ But if she were totally honest with him, she would admit that she quite admired persistence.

‘I suppose pleasant conversation cannot be a favourite of yours, or we would be having one now.’ He gave her another sidelong glance. ‘Clearly, you enjoy arguing. And there we will find our common ground. I can argue all night, if necessary.’

‘To no avail. I will never agree with you, on any point.’

‘If I sought your agreement, then that would be a problem.’

‘That is precisely the problem I have with you,’ she snapped back, growing tired of the banter. ‘No one seeks my agreement. I am to be presented with a *fait accompli* and expected to go meekly along with it, for the sake of family connections and political benefit.’

‘Aha.’ He was looking at her closely now. ‘You are trying to avoid a favourable match because it has been presented by your father. You have someone else in mind, then? Someone not quite so rich? Or without a title?’

‘Do not flatter yourself to think that I love another,’ she replied. ‘Perhaps I simply do not want you.’

‘But that is not true either. You hardly know me. But you have formed an opinion on the Duke of Reighland, have you not? Your

answer to him is a resounding no.’

‘You are he.’

‘Not until recently,’ he informed her. ‘But I am quite aware of the pressure to marry according to one’s station, at the expense of one’s wishes. That is the purpose of this interview and several others I have organised recently.’

She smiled in relief, sure that if he had spoken to any other girl in London, it would cement his poor opinion of her.

He smiled back and once again she was surprised at the blinding whiteness of it. ‘I must inform you that you have passed with flying colours. I look forward to calling on you, at your home, and on speaking to your father about a further acquaintance.’ And with that the dance was over and he was escorting her, in stunned silence, back to her stepmother.

He liked her.

Even now, thinking of that rude whinny, he could feel his lips starting to twitch. He carefully suppressed the emotion. It was far easier to deal with people if they suspected that ‘Reighland’ was hovering on the edge of displeasure. They jumped to attention, in a vain attempt to keep the impossible man happy and not be the one upon whom the impending storm would break.

If he had been amiable, or, worse yet, laughed in their faces at their ridiculous behaviour towards him and offered friendship, it might be possible to dismiss him, title and all, as the unworthy upstart he sometimes felt he was. They would remember that he was the same lad they teased unmercifully at school. Robert

Magson, the bear with no teeth. Once they had realised he would not fight back, it had been declared great fun to bait him. The torment had not stopped until he had gained his majority and retired to the country estate.

Now, those same men and their wives feared him, because they feared the title. If they realised that Reighland was just a thin veil over his old self, they would know how much power they still held. And it would all begin again.

So he glared and felt the crowd tremble at the possibility of his disapproval. It was better that they were kept off balance and at a distance, as they had been since his arrival in London. It meant he had made no friends, but neither had he any real enemies.

And until recently, tonight had been going according to course. Though she might sneer at his manners tomorrow, tonight the hostess was fawning over him, desperate to keep his favour. Several young ladies had been nudged into his path by their mamas, rather like birds forced from the nest into the mouth of a waiting cat. And just like those birds, they had been, to the last, wide-eyed, gawky and rather stupid. He had done the nice, of course, danced with them and fetched several glasses of lemonade, which allowed him to avoid adding his own dull wits to theirs.

Then he had spotted his supposed intended, just as he had hoped to. Hendricks had been right, the girl was a prime article. Pretty enough to put the others in the shade.

Or shadow. For there could not exactly be shade, could there,

if the sun had set?

He brooded on that for a moment, then returned to the matter at hand.

The beautiful Lady Priscilla had seen through him in an instant. Apparently, she was not impressed by the farmer with the strawberry-leaf coronet.

In response, he'd been instantly attracted to her. But it was obvious that the sentiment would not be easily returned. Perhaps that was why he found her so fascinating. Of the three or four likely candidates he had found for his duchess, she might not be the prettiest in London. Close, perhaps. He almost preferred the dark good looks of Charlotte Deveril, despite that girl's lack of a titled father.

Lady Priscilla was an earl's daughter, with connections equal to two of the other girls he favoured. And her reputation ...

There were rumours. When he'd questioned friends, no one had had the nerve to speak directly of the flaw. But he was sure it existed, if her own brother-in-law could not manage unequivocal approval of her. Even without the presence of Mrs Hendricks, he'd had to give a more-than-gentle hint to tonight's hostess that he wished the presence of both Benbridge and his family. He had been informed that the new Lady Benbridge would be welcome, of course. But there had been something in the tone of the discussion that implied everyone would just as soon forget that there was a Lady Priscilla.

Perhaps it was that they knew she would misbehave in his

presence. She did not offer shy and hopeful glances through her eyelashes. She did not flatter. She did not hang upon his every word, no matter how fatuous. She would not pretend one thing to his face, only to talk behind his back.

What she felt for him was plain and undisguised dislike. And it was directed to the duke and not the man inside. She refused to agree with him, in even the slightest details of his speech. She wanted no part of him and did not bother to hide it.

Therefore, she was the only one worth having. Whatever she might be, she did not bore him. And if he could win such a proud creature for himself he would know that the past was finally dead. Once Priscilla was married, whatever small scandal lay in her past would be forgotten. His wife would be beautiful, well bred and the envy of the *ton*. He would give her free rein in wardrobe and entertaining. Their house would be a show place and the feigned respect of his peers would become real.

But it was still a surprise to find that the most perfect woman in London was dead set against marrying above her station. Perhaps, a year ago, when he was a not particularly humble horse trader, she'd have courted him, just to spite her father. Or perhaps not. It would take time to find the full reason for her contrary behaviour, but he was willing to be patient.

Her distaste of riding was another problem. What was he to do with a woman who did not like horses? Granted, he had escorted two of his final four candidates down Rotten Row just this week. In the saddle, they were mediocre at best, sitting their beasts like

toads on a jossing block. It had pained him to watch.

At least, when he could persuade the Benbridge girl to take to a mount, she would have no bad habits that needed to be broken. He could teach her not to fear and eventually she would enjoy it. He imagined her fighting every step of the way. The thought excited him, for sometimes it was the most spirited mare that made for the best ride.

Then he reminded himself, yet again, that women were not horses. Life would be easier if they were. He could not exactly break her spirit with a rough bit and a whip. But it would be better to have to argue and cajole for every compromise than to have a woman with no spirit to break.

The combination of riding and spirited women made him smile into his glass and take a long savouring drink. He had not expected to feel the low heat he was feeling for the woman he had met tonight. He had imagined the getting of an heir to be a momentary pleasure, surrounded by a lifetime of awkwardness and frigid courtesy. At best they would develop a fondness for each other. But suppose there could be passion as well?

Then it would be better if it were mutual desire, he reminded himself. He already knew the foolish course he was likely to take. He would do well to remember, before it was too late, that a passionate dislike from his spouse might make him long for the frosty indifference he was avoiding now.

And here was her father, eager to know how the dance had gone, but too subtle to ask directly. If Robert did not

acknowledge him, the man would be hanging about all night, waiting for an opportunity to speak. ‘Benbridge,’ he said. ‘A word, please.’

‘Of course, your Grace.’ The old earl looked at him speculatively and it reminded him, as always, of a stallion he’d had that would give the impression of docility, only to bite suddenly at the hand that held the apple. Reighland held precedence and they both knew it. But Benbridge thought in his heart that he was the superior and would show him that, if he could find a way.

‘I have had the opportunity to speak with your daughter, and have found her to be ...’

Fractious, ungrateful, uninterested and bad tempered.

‘... quite charming. She is most lovely as well. May I have your permission to pay further visits upon her, with the object of a possible match?’

‘Certainly, your Grace.’ Benbridge gave only a slight lowering of the head, as though the honour were equal.

‘The girl would have to be interested as well,’ Robert reminded him. ‘I would not wish to press my suit upon her, if she were otherwise engaged.’ Despite her objections, it would make the most sense if she was pining for another.

‘She is not so promised,’ Benbridge said firmly. ‘Even if she had plans in that direction, I would forbid all but the most appropriate match for her. After the misfortune of her sister ...’ There was a slight narrowing of the eyes and an even slighter

twitch of the cheek to show what he thought of his other daughter's marriage. 'Priscilla will not reject you, your Grace. She would not dare.'

For a moment, Robert felt quite sorry for the girl. He wanted to pursue her, but his slightest interest was seen by her father as tantamount to an accepted offer. No wonder she refused to show him partiality.

'I must see her again, so that we might decide if we suit each other.' The earl might not care, but Robert would much prefer a wife who could at least tolerate him.

'Of course,' the earl replied, with just the slightest touch of obsequiousness. Then he stared across the room at his daughter, as though deciding on the best way to bully her into good behaviour to secure the proposal.

Silently, Robert damned him for his overconfidence. At the very least he would meet with the girl again and press the advantages of marrying a man who was not only rich and titled, but well on his way to being fond of her—and warn her of the danger of disobeying such an unaffectionate father.

Chapter Three

‘Priscilla, you have a visitor.’

No, she hadn’t. For whom that she actually wished to see would be likely to make a call? Her old friends had cast her off quick enough, after her fall from grace. The sister she longed to see had been banned from the house. And she had gone out of her way to do nothing on the previous evening to warrant a call.

But rather than scolding her for her rudeness during the ride home, both her father and Veronica had seemed inordinately pleased with the turn events had taken. It was as though they’d shared some bit of information between them that she was not privy to.

Please do not let it be the duke. Because what would she do with the man, should he persist? ‘Tell whoever it is that I am indisposed.’

Her bedroom door opened and Veronica poked in her head. ‘I certainly will not. Reighland is in the sitting room, and you are going to see him.’ She crossed the room, seized Priss by the arm and pulled her to her feet, brushing the wrinkles from her gown and smoothing a hand over her hair to rearrange the flattened curls.

‘I am not prepared. I do not wish to see him.’ *And I do not wish to marry him.* She doubted pleading with Ronnie would help, but neither would it hurt.

‘You are unprepared because you spend your days hiding in bed with your Minerva novels, feigning illness to avoid company. Now come downstairs.’

‘Send him away.’

‘I certainly will not.’ Ronnie was pushing her out into the hall and put a firm hand in her back to hurry her along. ‘If you mean to put him off, you must do it yourself. And if you do, you will suffer the consequences for it. Your father will not be pleased.’ She said it in a dark tone to remind her that there were worse things awaiting her than social ostracism, should she fail.

Priss gave her a mutinous look. ‘Do not be so melodramatic. Father will do nothing worse to me than shout and sulk, as he has done the whole of my life. Perhaps he will banish me from the house, as he did Dru. Although how that is a punishment, I do not know. It is clear to all of London that she is the better for it.’

‘It is not your father who should worry you, dear,’ Ronnie replied, voice cold and venomous. ‘You should know, after spending several months under the same roof with me, I will be far less forgiving. If you will not go to the duke, I will bring him to you and lock the bedroom door behind him until the matter is settled.’

The image of being so trapped with such a forbidding man made Priss a little sick, and she thanked the fates that she had not been caught *en déshabillé* today. While her father might view this as an alliance with a powerful man, she had no doubt that Ronnie would engineer her total disgrace with any man available, simply

to have her out of the house. The woman was all but thrusting her through the door of the salon where her guest awaited.

But she showed no sign of following. Priss grabbed her arm, trying to pull her into the room as well. 'You are going to sit with us, of course,' she said hopefully. 'For surely a chaperon—'

'He is a duke,' the other woman whispered. 'He does not require a chaperon.'

'It is not for him,' Priss snapped back, embarrassed that the duke could likely overhear this interchange, for he was scant feet across the room. Could they not at least pretend that she had some honour left?

'You were happy enough to escape the care of your sister, while she was still here. It makes no sense, a year later, that you are having a fit of the vapours over a few minutes alone with a man.' Her stepmother pushed harder. 'He is a duke. He wishes to speak to you alone. Benbridge said he was most specific on that point. I do not mean to be the one to argue.'

'My father is allowing this?' Priss felt another small bit of her world crumbling. She had received continual signs from Ronnie that her presence was an inconvenience. But usually Papa was more subtle with his displeasure.

'Your father thinks that Reighland is an excellent catch. He is amenable to certain laxities if it smoothes the way for an offer.'

'But what if Reighland is not as honourable as he seems? What if he takes advantage?' Priss whispered back, directly into Veronica's ear.

The other woman's eyes narrowed and she pulled her head away. 'Do not play the sweet-and-innocent miss with me, Priscilla. If he takes advantage, then you are to do as he says and come to me afterwards. We will tell your father of it and the duke will be forced to offer with no more nonsense. But whatever you do, do not ruin the opportunity, for I doubt you will have a better one.'

Priss's heart sank. It was plain what her father expected of her. Society expected it as well. But knowing what she did, she could not imagine how she would manage it. If Reighland offered today, she would have to say no. The skies might open and hell might rain down on her if she disobeyed, but then perhaps Papa would see she was in earnest and she would have some peace. She disentangled herself from Ronnie and glanced into the mirror on the hall wall, touching her hair and straightening her skirts. Then she turned and went into the salon, where Reighland awaited her.

The footman announced her and she waved him away with a flick of her hand, trying not to flinch as she heard the door closing behind her. She focused all her attention on the man in front of her, muttering, 'Your Grace', and dropping a curtsy letting her eyes travel up from the floor until they met his face.

And it was such a long way for her gaze to travel. He was well over six feet. She noticed the sprinkling of dark hair on the backs of his hands and up his wrists, disappearing into his shirt cuffs. It made her wonder what the rest of him would be like, without his clothes.

She quickly stifled the thought, for it only made her more frightened. There was a harmony to him, as though nature had sought to make an animal both intimidating and powerful. In the bedroom he would be just as large as he had been in the ballroom.

‘Please, Lady Priscilla, if we are to be friends, let us not stand on ceremony. You must call me Robert.’ His voice matched the rest of him. Deep, growling, with just a taste of a rasp that made the hairs on her neck stand to attention.

He was examining her now, top to bottom, as she had him. There was no hint of lust in it, which was just as well. If she’d thought that that was the first thing on his mind, she’d probably have run from the room in terror. This was more clinical, as though he was wondering about sound teeth, good wind and strong limbs.

But the desire that she use his first name was a very bad sign.

‘Has your father explained the purpose for my visit?’

‘No, your Grace,’ she said, avoiding the offered intimacy. ‘But I am not so dim that I cannot guess it.’

‘And what say you to it?’

She searched her mind for a response that did not use the word that came most easily to mind: *trapped*. ‘I thought I made it clear to you yesterday evening.’

He gave her the same blank look as he had on the previous evening. ‘You merely said you would not be agreeing with me. I do not see that as an impediment to matrimony.’ No talk of wooing at all. The man did like to cut to the chase.

He thought for a moment. 'You would have to agree at the altar, of course. But after that ...'

Was he joking? It almost seemed that he might be. But his expression was so closed that it was impossible to tell. 'Are you sure you are quite sane?' she asked. For madness was the only other explanation.

'Is it necessary to be so?' he asked innocently. 'I was given to understand that my title was hereditary. From what I have seen of others in the peerage, you are the only one concerned with my sanity. If you mean to ask next if I am stupid, I will admit that I am not as quick as some. But in my brief stay in London, I have found many who were greater dullards.'

He was joking, then. But did he expect her to laugh? He seemed most sober. Perhaps he was seeking a mate who would be amused by him. More likely, she would be the butt of the joke, once he knew her better. His dry comments would seem innocent enough when he spoke them in public, but she would know the true meaning and would be left burning with shame.

And she could not abide a lifetime of that. 'May I be frank with you, your Grace?'

'It shall be an exciting change from the hesitant sentiments you have thus far expressed.'

'My rejection is not against you, personally,' she lied. 'It is only that I do not wish to submit easily to marrying any titled man that my father might choose.'

He gave her a sad smile. 'Then I fear you will submit with

difficulty. With force, if necessary.'

Was this meant to be a threat? She would receive no help from Veronica, should he choose to make good on it. Priss felt another rising tide of panic. 'Do you mean to force me, then?'

'I shall not have to. Your father seems quite sure of your cooperation, no matter what you might say. You know better than I what he is capable of.'

Maybe it had been a warning, then. But her obvious difficulties had not bothered him enough to give him a distaste for a union with the family. 'And you would accept a wife who was so unwilling.'

'Benbridge will see you bound to someone, this Season. If you hold any choice in contempt, then you could do worse than to take me, should you be obligated to marry.'

Papa could not drag her screaming to the altar, but he was crafty, and Ronnie even more so. They had ways that she could not comprehend. The duke was right. There could well be worse choices. Her dislike of this particular man was not as instantaneous as she'd expected. But the size of him was simply too intimidating, and time was not likely to change it. 'You are no better than he is, if you care so little about how I come to you.'

'But I am hoping that you might come to think of me as the lesser of two, or more, evils,' he said, still without smiling. 'The devil you know, rather than the devil you don't. Personally, once I am set upon a course, I do not intend to take no for an answer. And I am set on having you.'

She stared back, planning her next move. If he would not let her cry off, then she would have to work harder to give him a distaste of her. She smiled back at him, with a suddenness and brilliance he would know was false. 'I am happy to be given the opportunity for such an advantageous match.'

He snorted. 'Are you, really? You did not look it a moment ago.' He was examining her again. 'But I believe the last half of the statement. This will be an advantageous match. From your side, at least'

She bit back a furious retort. He was correct, after all. It was simply rude of him to mention the fact.

'I am recently come to the title, of course,' he said, with humbleness that was as false as her smile. 'I did not expect it. The old duke's heir died within the same year as his father, my father already having passed ...'

'It matters not to me how you came to be a duke,' she said, still half-hoping her bluntness would put him off. 'It only matters that you are one at the time of offering. Beyond that, I have little interest in you.' She tried to look eager at the notion of such a prestigious match. Perhaps he would not want a title hunter.

He was staring at her again, thoughtfully. 'Considering your pedigree, it should be advantageous to the man involved as well. You are young, beautiful and well born. Why are you not married already, I wonder? For how could any man resist such a sweet and amenable nature?'

'Perhaps I was waiting for you, your Grace.' She dropped her

smile, making no effort to hide her contempt.

‘Or perhaps the rumours I hear are true and you have dishonoured yourself.’

‘Who ...?’ The word had escaped before she could marshal a denial. But she had experienced a moment’s uncontrollable fear that, somewhere Dru had been that she had not, the ugly truth of it all had escaped and that now her happily married sister was laughing at her expense.

‘Who told me? Why, you did, just now.’ He was smiling in triumph. ‘It is commonly known that the younger daughter of the Earl of Benbridge no longer goes about in society because of the presence of the elder. But I assumed there would be more to it than that. And I was correct.’

Success at last, though it came with a sick feeling in her stomach and the wish that it had come any way but this. She had finally managed to ruin everything. Father would be furious if this opportunity slipped through her fingers. It would serve him right, for pushing this upon her. ‘You have guessed correctly, your Grace. And now I assume that this interview is at an end.’ She gestured towards the door.

‘On the contrary,’ he replied. ‘You have much more to tell me before I depart from here. Does the sad state of your reputation have anything to do with your family’s willingness that we might meet alone?’

‘There is no reason that we should not,’ she replied. ‘He expects that you will offer for me, not rape me on the divan in

the lounge.’

If her frankness startled him, it did not show. ‘And what if I did?’

‘Then I would cry to my father and he would demand that you marry me.’

‘As you might at any rate,’ he pointed out. ‘The door is closed and we are alone. Should you wish to tell tales about my behaviour, I would have no evidence to refute them.’

‘Perhaps I would if I wished to trap you into marriage,’ she snapped. ‘It is you who have come to me and not the other way round. I never gave you any reason to think I wished a union. If your intentions are not in that direction, then, as I said before, you had best leave.’

He ignored the door and looked her up and down again, walking slowly around her, so as to view her from all angles. Then he spoke. ‘Truth now. I will not tell your father, if that is what you fear. You have my word. Is there another, perhaps someone inferior to me, that you might prefer?’

‘Would it matter?’ she asked in exasperation. ‘Between the two of you, you and my father seem to have settled the matter.’

‘It might,’ Reighland said, after a moment. ‘And you did not answer my question.’

‘If we are taking my opinions into account at this late date, then I shall tell you again: there is no other. All the same, I prefer to remain unmarried. Even if I sought marriage, it would not be with you. We do not suit. I thought I made that clear to you, when

we danced.’

‘I see.’ He was staring at her again, appraising. ‘You do not wish to leave the loving bosom of your family.’

She almost laughed at the absurdity of it. ‘Of course I do. There is a dower house on the property in Cornwall that stands empty. And land further north where I might stay with my mother’s sister. Perhaps I could go to Scotland. Any of those would do for a genteel spinsterhood. That is all I seek for myself.’

‘Then I am sorry to disappoint you. As I said before, your father has no intention of allowing that. You will be married. If not to me, then to some other. Since you have no concrete objections, other than an illogical dislike of me, I will speak to your father. We will formalise this arrangement by the end of the month.’

Arrangement. Was that all it was to him? She had known when it came time to marry that there would be no love match. But she had not thought it would be quite so passionless as this. And so she blurted, before he could leave, ‘If you mean to go ahead with this, then you had best know the whole truth, so that you do not reproach me with it on our wedding night. I am no longer innocent.’ She would pay the price for her honesty, she was sure. The duke would storm out and tell her father. Then she would get a long lecture from Benbridge and his new wife about her stupidity in disobeying their orders and casting aside the only match they had been able to make for her.

But at least it would be over.

The Duke of Reighland was still standing there, giving her the same curious, up-and-down examination that he had been. Then he asked, ‘Are you pregnant?’

‘Certainly not!’ Her cheeks heated and her palm itched to slap him for being so bold as to ask. Then a thought struck her. ‘If I was, then why would I bother to tell you?’

‘Why would you have told me anything?’ he asked back, just as sensibly. ‘If you wished to marry me, you would have kept quiet on the first point. But if you truly wished to frighten me away, you’d have lied about the second. The two statements, taken together, only make sense to me if they are true. They seem to imply that you are a most candid young lady. The truth is an admirable quality and quite rare in London. It must be cherished when it is found. I have learned all I wish to know. I will have you.’ He stepped closer to her and she felt a sudden panicked scrambling desire to move away, back across the room before he would touch her.

But he did nothing more than bow before her, taking her cold hand in his and offering a kiss that was the barest touch of his lips against the skin. ‘Now, with your permission, I will depart.’ He rose and smiled. ‘And with or without your permission, I will visit you again. While I am decided, I think we have more to discuss before an announcement can be made.’

She sat down on the couch behind her, numb with shock. He left the room and she could hear him speaking to her stepmother in the hall, arranging for another visit.

He was decided.

What had she said to him that had made the decision? She had done everything in her power to put him off. The truth, there at the end, should have been enough to send him running from the room. She was not good enough for him. Any rumours he might have heard of her elopement were true. She was ruined.

Yet he meant to come again. To persuade her. She felt a shudder rising from deep within her and tried to tell herself that it was revulsion. That was not true. But neither was it desire. She did not find him attractive. He was too large, too imposing and in all ways too blunt. She was not exactly frightened of him. That would be like fearing a mountain, or perhaps a cliff that one had no intention of standing on. It was more like awe, really.

She was not used to being in awe of anyone. The glamour of a title had been tarnished to her years ago.

And as for men?

She removed a handkerchief from her sleeve and delicately mopped her brow. Those secrets had been stripped away as well. Men were not nearly as pleasant as they appeared. She would be quite content to do without them, if only it would be permitted.

Veronica's voice, as she saw the duke to the door, was light, flirtatious and sycophantic. Whatever Priss might feel on the subject, her prospective husband was a favourite of the household and she was unlikely to escape him.

She thought of the size of him and the way he would come to her, naked, hairy as a bear, crushing her body with his weight,

sweating and grunting over her as he pushed and thrust.

There was a soft rip and she noticed that she had torn the lace on the corner of the handkerchief she'd forgotten she was holding. She would need to mend it before an explanation was required of her. There had been a time when she might have lost a hundred such linens and experienced no punishment. But that was when Dru had still been in the house and there had been no Veronica, eager to find fault with her.

The duke was barely gone from the room when the doors to the salon burst open and her stepmother entered. 'Well, then?'

'He has offered,' Priss affirmed glumly.

Veronica clapped her hands together in triumph. 'Lucky for us and far better than you deserve. I will put the announcement in *The Times* immediately.'

'He does not wish to announce it yet,' she said.

'Then we will allow him to make that decision.'

'I have not said yes.'

Veronica was across the room in a moment, her hands in Priss's hair to pull her gaze up to meet her. 'Perhaps your father might permit your wilfulness, but we have seen where that led. When the time is right, you will say yes, like any sensible girl, because, my lady, in a few months there will be no space for you in this house. I will need your room for a nursery.'

'There are a dozen rooms that will suit just as well,' Priss said, glaring back at her and feeling the claws tightening against her scalp.

‘But I favour the light in yours,’ Veronica said with a small tight smile. ‘You will be out of this house and you will be thankful that we are sending you to such a fortunate marriage and not out into the street as you deserve. But you will not be allowed to remain here, courting further disgrace. I will not let a girl who does not have the sense to keep her legs closed associate with children of mine.’ She released Priss’s head with a jerk that cracked her neck.

And then Veronica was smiling again. ‘Come, my dear. We will go to Bond Street and buy you a trousseau.’

Chapter Four

John Hendricks owned an unassuming house in an equally humble neighbourhood. Robert scolded himself for the assessment, remembering that he'd have thought no such thing before the title had foisted on him the various entailed properties in all their grandeur. There was nothing really wrong with this place, although he wondered what Lady Drusilla made of it, after living as Benbridge's daughter.

He knocked upon the door; when it opened, he announced himself and pushed his way past the housekeeper, tossing his gloves into his hat and giving her his most aloof ducal glare. Then he demanded to be shown to the receiving room, or whatever place was deemed best for a meeting with Mr Hendricks.

He watched the servant melt before him with a subservient curtsy. 'I will get him immediately, your Grace.'

Of course she would. It was late for an uninvited call, of course. Not the thing to arrive at a man's house without some kind of warning. But now that he was 'his Grace' instead of plain old Mr Magson, the rules no longer applied.

Sometimes, he rather missed the rules. Dammit, he liked Hendricks. At least a lot more than he liked being Reighland and throwing his weight around. But today there would be no more pussyfooting about the truth. He wanted answers and he wanted them now, before his own native foolishness overcame

good sense and he continued to press his suit on a girl who was showing every sign of being completely inappropriate. Even in his worst and least confident days, he'd had more sense than to chase after the leavings of other men when seeking a wife.

'Your Grace?' Hendricks stood in the doorway of his own home, offering an unironic bow as though it were he who had entered unexpectedly. 'How might I be of assistance?'

'You can leave off bowing at me, for one thing,' Robert muttered, unable to control the impulse. 'You might well want to bounce me out into the street when you hear why I have come. The respectful greeting will only make that more difficult.'

'Perhaps,' said Hendricks, with the faintest lift of an eyebrow. 'But we will not know until you have made your request.'

'Tell me about Benbridge's younger daughter. And not the nonsense you were spouting at the party. I want the truth this time.'

'It really is not my place—' Hendricks began.

'Yours as much as anyone else's. I will have the story in the end. She's already told me the more interesting half of it. The girl is no longer a maid.'

Hendricks sucked his breath in between his teeth in a sudden hiss, but said nothing.

'If the circumstances mitigate the truth, I should like to know it now. Who? When? Why? And who else knows of it? I heard rumours of an elopement with a dancing master. But I refuse to base my decisions based on tittle-tattle from gossiping old ladies.'

Any accurate information you can provide about Lady Priscilla will be welcome.’

Hendricks rose and went to the door of the sitting room, glancing into the hall to be sure that they were alone, before shutting it. ‘I would rather my wife not hear what we are discussing. It is a sensitive subject in the family as you can imagine. Dru was charged with watching the girl and feels quite responsible for anything that might have happened. And I do not know the most intimate details, of course. It was several days before we caught up with the couple. The situation might not be as dire as you make it out.’

‘I make nothing of it,’ Robert said. ‘It is Priscilla who seems sure of events. She should know them, if no one else does.’

Hendricks swallowed. ‘And I can trust that, since I am speaking to the Duke of Reighland, the story will travel no further than this room.’ The statement was obvious and unnecessary. Apparently, Hendricks did not trust him to keep the secret, without reminding him that he was a gentleman. It rankled.

He swallowed his pride, reminding himself that the man before him was near to Benbridge’s family, no matter what the old earl might think of him. Then he responded, ‘You have my word. I mean the girl no harm. But neither am I some poor gull in a country market, willing to buy a horse with bishoped teeth and piping lungs. An alliance between Benbridge and myself would be useful. But there is the succession to think of.’

‘You think you might still consider her a suitable choice, after

knowing the truth?’ Hendricks pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose as though seeking a better look at him.

‘I am here, aren’t I? Most men would be gone already.’ Men smarter than himself, perhaps. But he had taken a liking to her and there was no reasoning with his first impression. He was still half-hoping that Hendricks would tell him he had misheard the girl. Or that he was the victim of some horribly unfunny joke. ‘I have no real proof that Lady Priscilla will have me. Although she would be a fool to turn down the offer, she is resisting.’

‘Priss is not known for her foresight,’ Hendricks said drily.

‘Obviously.’

‘But if you mean to pursue her, then you shall have all I know of it.’ Hendricks moved into the room, gesturing to a chair and offering port, before taking a seat himself. It was a decent wine and a comfortable chair. Robert appreciated the gesture, which seemed sincere, and not an effort to get on his right side for some gain later. If Hendricks was the climber he appeared to be, he was subtle and not some common sycophant.

Hendricks began. ‘Late last summer, I met Lady Drusilla Roleston in a mail coach on the way to Gretna Green. She was seeking word of her sister, who had eloped with a dancing master named Gervaise. I offered my assistance. We caught the couple before they crossed the border and I dispensed with the fellow.’

‘Permanently?’

Hendricks laughed. ‘Hardly. He ran off with little encouragement, when he saw that he was more likely to come

away with a beating than any money. Without guarantee of settlement, he had no real desire to take the girl for a wife.'

'So there was no real affection between them?'

'I cannot speak for man or girl. I can only report what I observed. Although Priss made a fuss at the time, she was over it by the next morning. It did not appear to me that either of them was broken hearted at the parting. I brought the sisters back to London safely and made my offer for Drusilla. Benbridge showed no desire to hear it. But Dru was willing, even though it meant an estrangement from her family.'

'How many days was Lady Priscilla unchaperoned?'

'At least three.'

Which probably meant that the elder sister was just as compromised as the younger had been. And willing to have Hendricks to spite her father. There was a story there, he was certain. But it was no real concern of his, since it did not figure in his bid for the other girl. 'Three days is more than enough time for mischief to be done.'

Hendricks shrugged. 'If a man is determined, three minutes in a drawing room is enough, even under the eyes of a chaperon.'

Robert gave the man a stern look. 'Not what I wished to hear from a man who had ample opportunity to be alone with my intended on the way back to London.'

'But true, none the less,' Hendricks admitted. 'Although it was unorthodox for me to be travelling with either of them, my affections were quite firmly fixed on the other sister by the time

we turned back towards the city.’

‘And when Priscilla returned, was it to the censure of the *ton*?’

‘There were rumours, perhaps. But nothing more than that. Without Gervaise, there were no facts to back them with. It was not the disaster it might have been, had she been both imprudent and unlucky. If she is avoiding society, it is more from her own sensitivity than fear of embarrassment.’

Robert nodded in agreement. ‘Disgrace can be swept under the rug, if one meets it with a bold face.’ While Priscilla did not seem to be the sort to melt in the heat of society’s stare, he had hardly known her long enough to make a judgement.

‘Benbridge has done more to hurt the girl than she did with her own behaviour,’ Hendricks added. ‘The foolish feud he seeks with me makes it appear that Priscilla has some biological need to avoid society. But it has been nearly eight months since my marriage to Dru. From what I can tell, Priss looks just the same as she did on the day that I met her.’

No unwanted pregnancy, then. There had been time enough to see the results of that. ‘Since that time, how has she behaved? Have you had wind of any new scandal?’

‘I think it is likely that Priscilla learned a hard lesson and did not need to learn it twice. As far as I am aware, there have been no further incidents. She does not appear to be embracing rebellion. Benbridge hardly lets the girl out of his sight. Her social life was much constrained, once her sister was not there to serve as escort.’

‘And now there is the new Lady Benbridge.’ Robert dropped the name and waited for the reaction.

There was the faintest pursing of Hendricks’ lips, as though he had no desire to think ill of a woman who was now his wife’s stepmother. ‘Perhaps I speak from affection. But Dru was a much steadier influence and more likely to act in the best interests of her sister, although Priss did not always see it as such.’

‘Not as likely to hitch Priscilla to some ill-mannered stranger, just because he is a duke?’

Hendricks looked him up and down, then, as though appraising him. And for a moment, Robert was sure that, no matter how much the man might make of a connection himself, he would choose family over rank. ‘I would think it little business of mine what the manners of the man were when he spoke to others, as long as they were good enough to suit his wife. And I would add that I wished to see Priscilla married to a man who, regardless of title, had at least a modicum of affection for her. She is far more likely to be loyal to someone who cares for her, than one who wishes to marry her father.’

‘And you are wondering if I am such a man?’

‘Perhaps I think it is time that someone wondered it. My wife is right. For all her faults, Priss deserves some happiness. She is unlikely to gain it if her father is left to choose a husband for her. If you wish the truth, then I will tell it to you: it matters not how you behave, or what Priscilla thinks of the matter. When Benbridge sees you, he will look no further than the title. After

the coup of catching an earl, Lady Benbridge sees Priss as being little more than an inconvenience and will have her out of the house one way or another. If, after what you have learned today, you are not interested in pursuing this matter, then a rapid and strategic retreat is in order. Lady Benbridge will not be pleased that Priss has told you of her past to scare you off. She will trick you into dishonouring the girl, if she can make the match in no other way.'

'I suspected as much. It was only confirmation I sought when coming here.' Robert rose, setting his wine glass aside, and Hendricks followed him to his feet. 'Should you see her, you may tell your wife's sister that, at this time, I have no intention of retreat. I have learned nothing that has changed my intention to make a match with Lady Priscilla. But I do not intend to force an offer on a woman who does not want me. Further study of the situation is in order. And then we shall see what we shall see.'

Chapter Five

‘Priscilla, whatever am I to do with you?’ Veronica was standing in the doorway to her bedroom again, shaking her head in disapproval. ‘You knew to expect a caller, yet you have done nothing to ready yourself. You cannot greet a duke in such a shabby dress.’

Priss had assumed that, when given the time to reflect on what she had told him, he would see his error in courting her and sever the connection. But it appeared that he was more persistent than sensible. ‘I had quite forgotten,’ she lied. ‘Tell him to return another day. Perhaps tomorrow I shall have enough time to prepare.’ She was being childish, to the point where she bored and annoyed even herself. But when man and family would not listen to a plain refusal, she was forced to use any trick she could muster.

‘I most certainly will not send him away.’ Veronica came to the side of the bed and hauled her upright, spilling a half-finished game of Patience off the unmade bed. ‘If you refuse to dress, then he will see you as you are now. Perhaps it will embarrass you sufficiently that we will not have this problem when he comes again tomorrow.’

They were planning for tomorrow already? Then she had just as well let him see her in a sad state today. Until she could manage to make him see that she was not appropriate, he would stay

camped out in the salon and she would have no peace at all. ‘Very well, then, I am justly punished for my lack of preparation. Let us go downstairs so that I may humiliate myself.’

Veronica frowned at her, as though recognising that she had been caught in her own trap. But she released Priss’s arm and allowed her to proceed under her own power to the main floor. When the footman opened the door to the salon, her unwanted suitor half-turned to see her entrance, clearly interested but using his status to remind everyone that he expected to see those around him scurry to attention and not the other way round.

It annoyed her no end. She took her time with the short walk to his side, turning the last few steps into a dawdle as the doors closed behind her, leaving them alone. ‘Your Grace?’ She made a proper curtsy, feeling much as she had on the previous day, only perhaps a little more desperate. This meeting should not be happening. Her revelation should have put an offer well out of reach.

Which might mean he had other things than marriage on his mind. It might amuse him to keep the daughter of an earl as a mistress and would certainly tell the *ton* just how high above them he considered himself. If he made an inappropriate advance, she could do little to counter it. Her only chaperon was hiding on the other side of the house so that she would be unable to stop an indiscretion until it was far too late.

She watched him uneasily, waiting for him to speak.

‘I have a gift for you.’ The duke seemed almost childishly

pleased with himself as he pulled a long thin box from under his arm and held it out to her.

She took it cautiously and lifted the lid just a crack before letting it fall closed again as her worst fears were realised. 'I cannot accept these,' she said flatly.

'Why ever not?'

'They are too intimate.'

'They are gloves.'

'Yes. I know.' Long, spotless and white. She was sure, if she touched them, they would be of the finest and most perfect kidskin and a rival to anything she might have bought for herself. She placed her hand on top of the box lid so that she could not be tempted to open it again and pushed it back towards him. 'A lady would never accept a gift of clothing and a gentleman would never offer.'

His brow furrowed, as though struggling with an unfamiliar concept. 'They are hardly indecent.'

'That is not the point. They indicate an interest in my person.'

'Of course they do,' he said, still surprised. 'Because I am interested in your person. It would make no sense to marry a woman who did not interest me in that way.'

So he was still talking about a wedding. That was some consolation, since it proved he would not spring across the room and fall upon her like a ravening beast. If she had actually wanted to marry him, she'd have been in alt. But clearly he did not understand what he must do, when making a proper offer to

a lady. 'If you really wished to marry me, you'd have brought another sort of gift entirely. A book, perhaps. Or flowers.'

'Flowers will die,' he said firmly. 'That cannot send the sort of message I would wish. And as for books? It is not that I never read, but I doubt that the things I favour would hold any interest to you. What would you have said if I'd brought you a stack of stock journals, tied up with a pretty ribbon?'

'I'd have thought you mad.'

'There. You agree with me.' He pointed to the gloves. 'Those are pretty, practical and will last you longer than the average bouquet. And do not argue modesty, for they cover an extremity I can see quite plainly now.'

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