



LAURA MARTIN

*Courting*  
the  
**FORBIDDEN  
DEBUTANTE**

MILLS & BOON  
HISTORICAL

**Laura Martin**  
**Courting The**  
**Forbidden Debutante**  
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**Аннотация**

Court a beautiful debutante... Or fulfil his quest for vengeance? Part of Scandalous Australian Bachelors. When Sam Robertson returns to London after making his fortune in Australia he has one mission—revenge upon the Earl who had him wrongly convicted and sent away years before. But when he meets Lady Georgina, the Earl's daughter, Sam's plan is thrown into disarray. Their admiration is mutual...but is his hunger for her stronger than his thirst for retribution?

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LAURA MARTIN writes historical romances with an adventurous undercurrent. When not writing she spends her time working as a doctor in Cambridgeshire, where she lives with her husband. In her spare moments Laura loves to lose herself in a book, and has been known to read from cover to cover in a single day when the story is particularly gripping. She also loves to travel—especially visiting historical sites and far-flung shores.

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Courting the Forbidden Debutante

Laura Martin

MILLS & BOON

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you fill my life with love.

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## Chapter One

‘It’s scandalous who they invite to these balls.’

‘I heard they were ex-convicts, recently returned from Australia.’

‘Surely not. Lord Gilham would have higher standards than that.’

‘A dear friend of mine told me they were fishermen, grown rich off the proceeds of smuggling,’ the first lady said in an exaggerated whisper, eliciting thrilled gasps from her companions.

Sam suppressed a smile. They’d been at the ball for less than five minutes and already the gossip was rife. He was surprised at how accurate this gaggle of middle-aged women were about their country of origin, at least. Despite spending much of his young life close to the sea, he’d never tried his hand at fishing before, or smuggling.

‘Enjoying yourself?’ George Fitzgerald asked as he clapped Sam on the back.

Surveying the room, Sam grimaced. This was not his world, not what he’d been born into. The cravat at his neck felt uncomfortably tight and the well-tailored jacket suddenly was too snug across the shoulders. Give him an open-necked shirt any day over the ridiculous garments the rich and powerful seemed to favour.

‘It’s certainly...different,’ Sam said.

‘Tell me about it.’

The two men stood side by side. So far no one had found the courage to come up and speak to them, despite the curious stares they were getting, but it would only be a matter of time.

‘These are your people, George. Shouldn’t you be off cavorting with the Lords and Ladies?’

Fitzgerald grimaced. He might have tenuous links to the aristocracy—his father was the second son of an impoverished baron—but George had spent his entire life in the wilds of Australia, raised on a farm. A very successful farm that made him one of the richest men in Australia but more at home around horses and hard work than the glamour of ballrooms and soirées.

‘Any sign of him yet?’ Fitzgerald asked.

Sam shook his head. The whole reason they’d secured the invitation to the Gilham ball was for Sam to start his search for the man who had ruined his life. Lord Westchester. Earl, influential member of the House of Lords and, in Sam’s eyes at least, the devil incarnate.

‘Boys,’ a high-pitched voice pierced the air, putting the two men at the centre of everyone’s attention again. ‘I’ve been looking for you for an age.’

‘Aunt Tabitha.’ Fitzgerald bent forward and kissed his aunt on the cheek, Sam doing the same on her other side.

‘Aren’t there supposed to be three of you?’ she asked. ‘Although maybe it is better to unleash you into society one at

a time. The wicked widows won't know which of you to seduce first.'

'Crawford is off dancing with some doe-eyed debutante,' Sam said, his eyes searching the room for their friend. Crawford had picked up the steps to the most popular dances quickly and easily and never seemed short of a partner on the dance floor. Sam was a little less of a natural, but he was agile and quick on his feet. As a result he could dance a waltz or a quadrille and fool a casual observer into thinking he'd been dancing all his life.

'A man who doesn't waste any time.' Aunt Tabitha grinned, a far more salacious smile than should appear on the face of a respectable member of the *ton*. 'Now, a little bird told me you are looking for a way to get close to Lord Westchester.'

Sam opened his mouth to protest, but was silenced by Aunt Tabitha's raised hand. He shot Fitzgerald a distrusting look.

'Now, none of that,' the older woman said. 'I'm sure I don't need to know why you need to gain an audience with the Earl, but that pretty young thing over there, the one in the blue dress, she is your ticket in.'

'A relation of the Earl?' Sam asked, his senses suddenly heightened.

'His daughter. I'm sure a catch like that will have a full dance card already. But George tells me you're a resourceful man. I'd wager my pearls you can find a way to steal her away from one of these bores for a dance or two.'

'Lady Winston, you're a gem,' Sam said, stooping down and

kissing her on the cheek.

Straightening up, he took a moment to square his shoulders, stiffen his spine and focus in on his prey. He rather thought this was how a general would feel when sighting his enemy on the battlefield.

He strode across the ballroom, ignoring the curious stares that followed him. Everyone wanted to know the truth behind the three mysterious *gentlemen* who had appeared in society as if by magic, but he would not be stopped by even the most persistent of enquirers.

The Earl's daughter stood in the middle of an eager gaggle of men of varying ages, all of whom seemed desperate to see to her every need, even those she didn't know she had. Sam paused for a moment, listening to the men clamour for her attention, and the young woman's polite but uninterested replies.

'Perhaps another glass of lemonade, Lady Georgina?' a boy who couldn't have been more than twenty suggested.

'I'm perfectly fine, thank you, Mr Forrester.'

'Would you care for some fresh air, Lady Georgina?' another young man suggested.

'I think our dance will be starting soon,' a slightly older man said, eyeing the younger bucks with distaste.

The popular Lady Georgina smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes, and Sam knew instantly that she wouldn't object to being taken away from her many admirers.

'Excuse me,' he said, his voice deep and low, clearing a space

through the crowd that surrounded her. ‘Your mother asked me to find you. She has an urgent matter to discuss.’

Lady Georgina’s eyes snapped up and she regarded him with a half-smile on her face for a few seconds. She knew he was lying, knew it was a ruse to get her to himself for a little while, and for a moment he wondered if she was going to call his bluff. As her eyes met his Sam felt a *frisson* of excitement and a sudden burst of attraction. She was pretty, with thick, dark hair and deep green eyes set in a heart-shaped face with smooth, creamy skin, but it wasn’t until she looked at him that Sam understood the gaggle of suitors surrounding her. There was life in her eyes and Sam felt the pull, the unconscious urge to rush in and join her in whatever adventure she suggested.

‘Oh, I do hope it’s nothing serious,’ she said, raising a dainty hand to her mouth and trying to effect a worried expression.

‘Don’t overdo it,’ Sam murmured in her ear. He’d managed to manoeuvre most of the admirers out of the way and place himself firmly by her side. ‘Just a family matter,’ Sam said brightly. ‘I’m sure you’ll be back to...everyone very shortly.’

She placed the dainty hand in the crook of his arm and together they took a step forward. Through the thin material of her dress Sam could feel the heat of her skin and for an instant he wondered what it might feel like under his lips. Quickly he dismissed the thought. He’d only just met the woman and, more importantly, she was a means to get closer to his objective, not a suitable companion for a dalliance.

‘I say, shouldn’t I accompany you, Lady Georgina?’ a man of about Sam’s age said, his brow furrowed with suspicion. ‘Rather than this...stranger.’

‘What makes you think I’m a stranger?’ Sam asked, enjoying himself for the first time this evening.

‘Surely you don’t want to be going off with *him*,’ another man prompted. ‘You must have heard the rumours?’

‘Gentlemen, my mother has asked for me and Mr...’

‘Robertson,’ Sam supplied helpfully.

‘Mr Robertson has been kind enough to deliver her message and escort me to her. I’m sure I will be back shortly.’

Without a backwards glance Sam led Lady Georgina through the crowds, noting the curious looks from the assembled guests.

‘What’s your plan now, Mr Robertson?’ Georgina murmured in his ear.

‘Perhaps we could find somewhere a little more private,’ he suggested. Images of a deserted room, darkened except for the light of a few candles and Lady Georgina seductively draped across the arm of a chair popped into his mind. That wasn’t what he’d meant, but it was appealing all the same.

‘With the entire ballroom watching us? I have my reputation to think about.’ Sam wasn’t sure if he imagined the moment of hesitation, the slight blush to her cheeks as if she’d been imagining the same as him.

‘They do seem unnaturally interested in our every movement,’ Sam said, feeling at least twenty pairs of eyes on him at that very

moment.

‘I think people are worried the big bad stranger might take advantage of innocent little me.’

‘Unlikely,’ he said, realising that he meant it. Lady Georgina might be the pampered daughter of an earl, used to having her every need seen to by a bevy of servants, but she was no shy and retiring innocent. She’d known he was lying about the message from her mother from the very instant the words had left his mouth, yet here she was on his arm, enjoying the break from the mundane for a few moments, those exotic eyes looking up at him with anticipation.

‘Perhaps the terrace?’ Lady Georgina suggested. ‘There will be plenty of couples taking the air, but it may be a little quieter.’

Sam led her on another loop of the ballroom and out on to the terrace. She was right, of course, there were couples dotted along the stone balustrade and strolling backwards and forward taking the air, but there were fewer eyes on them here. He realised suddenly how out of his depth he was in this world. It had never even crossed his mind that there would be a terrace for couples of withdraw to. The whole scene, the whole evening, was completely foreign to him. He felt more at home on horseback, galloping through the Australian countryside on a mission to find out why a remote well had dried up or scouting for valuable land for crops.

‘You’re quite the talk of the ballroom,’ Lady Georgina said as they paused at one end of the terrace.

‘All good things, I’m sure,’ Sam murmured.

She laughed and immediately Sam knew it wasn’t the laugh she reserved for her suitors. This was Lady Georgina’s true laugh. It lit up her face from her eyes to that perfectly pointed chin.

‘If *all* the rumours are to be believed, you’re a pirate, one of those ruthless corsairs based off the coast of Africa. You’re an ex-convict from the wilds of Australia. And you’re a French spy, eager to find a way to restart the war that ended six years ago.’

‘I am a busy man,’ Sam said, feeling the easy smile spread over his lips. ‘I wonder I have enough time for so many pursuits.’

‘And you managed to fit in a visit to this humble little ball.’

‘No doubt to further one of my nefarious goals.’

She laughed again, attracting curious glances from another couple who were strolling past slowly. Quickly she composed her face into a more serious expression, but Sam had caught a glimpse of the woman underneath.

‘What are you doing here?’ Lady Georgina asked.

\* \* \*

For a moment she thought he might answer her, but instead he flashed her that dazzling smile that was a little too distracting for anyone’s good and winked.

‘Running errands for your mother,’ he said.

‘Now I know that is nonsense. My mother is tucked up in bed with an awful headache, with no plans to surface until at least midday tomorrow.’

‘Ah, I see my little lie has been uncovered,’ Mr Robertson

said, treating her to that lazy smile again that Georgina knew had melted many hearts over the years. He was handsome with dazzling blue eyes set in an open face with the widest grin she had ever seen. He exuded charm and had that easy confidence of someone who is sure of who they are and what they want. It was difficult not to like the man on first impressions, but as Georgina's insides did a little flip she knew spending too much time with him would be dangerous—he was the sort of man young women lost their heads over.

‘You still haven’t answered my question,’ she said, resolutely trying to avoid his eyes in case she found herself unable to look away.

‘Would you believe me if I said I just wanted to make your acquaintance?’

It would be easy to take the compliment, far too easy, and even easier to let his charm and beguiling smile lull her into doing something she might regret. She’d never understood before how young ladies allowed themselves to be ruined, how they forgot everything they had been told time and time again about stepping into dark corners with men who could not be trusted, but right now she felt the fizz of anticipation deep inside her and knew it would be all too tempting to do something she might regret. Quickly she rallied and set her face into a serious expression.

‘Then you should have had someone introduce you,’ she said primly.

‘But you forget, I’m a pirate, a French spy and an ex-convict,

I have barely any connections in English society and no one to introduce me to a beautiful young woman at a ball.'

'Yet here you are,' Georgina murmured.

It was curious, how he and his two friends had just waltzed into society, rumours bouncing off them left and right, without anyone really knowing who they were. One of the more believable pieces of gossip was that one of the young men was related to Lady Winston, which would explain their easy entrance to the ball, but other than that Georgina didn't know what to believe.

'Tell me,' Mr Robertson said, leaning casually against the stone balustrade, 'Do you like all the attention from your little crowd of admirers?'

Georgina sighed. She'd been out in society for three years after making a rather late debut at the age of eighteen and ever since she'd been followed around by a persistent group of men. Every ball, every evening at the opera, she would find herself with too many glasses of lemonade, too many offers of an escort, too many eager faces ready to do her bidding at the snap of her fingers. At first she'd enjoyed the attention—what young woman wouldn't?—but after a few weeks she'd realised why they were quite so attentive.

'Sometimes I think I might marry the next man who asks just to be rid of them,' she said, surprising herself with her honesty.

Throwing his head back, Mr Robertson laughed, drawing curious looks from the other couples on the terrace.

‘It sounds terribly conceited, I know,’ Georgina said quickly. ‘You think they’re after you for your family connections?’ ‘And my dowry.’

Georgina knew she was pretty enough and her mother had ensured she was tutored in all the things women were supposed to be accomplished in; she could play the piano and sing like a lark, she could organise a household with military precision and she could paint a vase full of flowers with any type of paint, but all of these things were just little bonuses. The real prize was being married to the daughter of an earl, an earl who was one of the most influential men in England.

‘You’ve turned down marriage proposals?’ Mr Robertson asked.

Nodding, Georgina felt the heat rise in her cheeks when she thought of quite how many men she’d turned down. Her father hadn’t minded, not at first, but she knew soon his patience would wear out. The next well-connected, titled gentleman who asked for her hand in marriage would be pushed upon her whether she liked him or not.

‘I should be getting back,’ she said, taking a step towards the glass doors.

A hand on her arm stopped her instantly. It was warm and firm and made Georgina want to throw caution to the wind.

‘Surely a couple more minutes couldn’t hurt,’ Mr Robertson suggested. ‘Or will your father be looking for you?’

‘My father?’ Georgina asked, frowning.

‘You said your mother was home in bed...’

‘My father never attends these sorts of events. I came with a friend and her mother.’

There was a flash of something in Mr Robertson’s eyes. For an instant it looked like disappointment, but whatever it was the look was gone quickly and replaced by the relaxed amusement Georgina was already beginning to associate with her companion.

‘Then there really is no reason we shouldn’t tarry a little longer.’

‘You forget my reputation, Mr Robertson. If I am not back in the ballroom within the next couple of minutes, all fashion of rumours will begin to spread.’

‘I find rumours are best ignored.’

‘But some of us are unable to ignore them. A young woman is only worth as much as her reputation. It has been lovely talking to you, Mr Robertson, but I must return to the ball.’

With a small bow he offered her his arm and led her back towards the glass doors. As they stepped inside Georgina felt the collective stare of the guests upon her. It had been foolish allowing Mr Robertson to lead her outside in the first place, foolish to want a break from the monotony of a ball she felt as though she’d attended a thousand times. Now there would be whispers, nothing *too* malicious, she was the daughter of an earl after all, but whispers all the same.

‘They’re striking up for a waltz,’ Mr Robertson said, his lips

surprisingly close to her ear.

‘I think I’m meant to be dancing with Mr Wilcox,’ Georgina said, glancing around the room to see if she could spot her next companion.

‘Dance with me.’

She laughed, thinking he was joking, but the expression on his face told her he wasn’t. It was tempting, oh, so tempting. Just the thought of being held close by his strong arms, being smiled down upon with those lips that never seemed to stop smiling, but Georgina knew she had to have more willpower than that.

‘I cannot disappoint Mr Wilcox,’ she said, pulling away.

‘Even though you want to?’

Before she could stop him, Mr Robertson had pulled her into his arms and manoeuvred them into a free spot on the dance floor among the other couples getting ready to dance the waltz. Out of the corner of her eye she spotted Mr Wilcox striding towards them, stopping as he saw Georgina in the arms of another man, taking her first steps as the music began.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ Georgina hissed.

‘Dancing with the most beautiful woman in the room.’

‘I told you I was engaged for this dance. With someone else.’

Mr Robertson shrugged, managing to complete the movement and continue to hold her in the correct position without missing a step.

‘I wanted to dance with you, Lady Georgina, and I find not much is achieved in this world if you are content to stand back

and wait your turn.’ Normally she would shy away from a man with quite so much self-assurance, but it suited the man in front of her and she found herself pulled in by his easy manner and strong arms in equal measure.

He was a good dancer, certainly not a natural, but managed to twirl her round with a practised ease. She wondered how a proficiency at dancing a waltz fitted in to any of the rumours about his origins, but then as he gripped her a little tighter all thoughts of corsairs and French spies left her mind.

‘You’re a good dancer,’ he said as he executed a turn, taking the opportunity to pull her in another inch closer.

‘I’m an adequate dancer,’ she corrected. It was true, she could remember the steps, seldom stomped on her partner’s toes and was able to keep a conversation going throughout the less energetic dances, but she would never be one of *those* debutantes. The ones who sailed across the dance floor with barely any effort and looked as though they were skating across ice, their movements so smooth.

‘You’re a difficult woman to compliment,’ he murmured, silencing her protest with a stern look. ‘Not because it is difficult to find things to compliment you on, but you do argue back rather a lot.’

‘Not normally,’ Georgina said under her breath. Normally she accepted compliments with a small smile and a demure downcasting of her eyes. Her many suitors often extolled the beauty of her hair, her eyes, the curve of her mouth, and

Georgina found it all rather ridiculous, but normally it was easier just to accept the compliment rather than get into a discussion about why her eyes weren't like two shimmering emeralds.

'You owe me,' Georgina said, hastily changing the subject.

'I owe you?'

'Now I will have to find a way to make it up to Mr Wilcox for missing his dance.'

'Lucky Mr Wilcox.'

Georgina ignored the provocative remark and pushed on. 'So as my reward I want to know the truth about you.'

'Whether I'm a French spy or an evil criminal?'

'Exactly. Who are you, Mr Robertson?'

He leant in closer, far too close for propriety, but Georgina couldn't bring herself to pull away. All eyes would be on them, and she knew by midday tomorrow her mother would be aware that Georgina had danced a little too closely with an unsuitable gentleman, but still she let his breath tickle her ear.

'If I tell you, that would ruin the intrigue,' he whispered, 'and then you'd have no reason to want to see me again.'

Georgina felt a shiver of anticipation run down her spine. Mr Robertson was hardly a suitable suitor, her parents might not even allow him to come to call on her, but he was refreshingly different. And different was alluring when you'd been courted by most of the eligible bachelors in London and still found them hard to distinguish from one another.

The music stopped and Mr Robertson held on to her for just a

moment longer than was proper, then leaving her feeling bereft, pulled away and bowed formally.

‘I think someone is trying to get your attention,’ he said, indicating into the crowd of guests.

‘Lady Yaxley, my chaperon for the evening.’

‘No doubt to scold you on your choice of company.’

‘It has been a pleasure, Mr Robertson, but now I must take my leave.’

‘Until next time, Lady Georgina. I hope it will not be too long an interval.’

## Chapter Two

‘Georgina, you must be more careful in the company you keep,’ Lady Yaxley scolded her as they took a slow walk around the ballroom. ‘And running off and abandoning those nice gentlemen like that. Your poor mother would have a seizure if she knew.’

Georgina had to stifle a smile as Caroline peered over her mother’s head and rolled her eyes. When Lady Yaxley got started on the subject of propriety and good manners it was best to let her scold until she ran out of steam.

‘The rumours about that man, Mr Robertson, you would not believe. It is entirely inappropriate for you to ever speak to him again. Perhaps if you keep your distance now the damage will be minimised.’

‘Mama...’ Caroline groaned.

‘You’re no better, young lady. Don’t think I didn’t noticed you crossing nice Mr Fielding off your dance card. That is unacceptable.’

‘His breath is worse than a pile of manure,’ Caroline informed Georgina over her mother’s head.

‘This is no laughing matter. Three seasons you girls have been out and neither one of you married off.’

‘Not from lack of proposals on Georgina’s part,’ Caroline teased.

‘Yes, your father has been rather indulgent,’ Lady Yaxley said disapprovingly.

Georgina had known the Yaxleys for her entire life. Born just days apart, she and Caroline had been destined to be friends. Their families lived on bordering estates and there were no other titled families for forty miles in each direction. It had been luck that meant they were perfectly suited to one another and from the age of five had been inseparable. Lady Yaxley was more like family than merely her friend’s mother, but that did mean Georgina was scolded by the older woman as if she were another errant daughter.

‘Mother, isn’t that Lord Westcott trying to get your attention?’ Caroline said, nodding to the other side of the ballroom.

Watching in amazement, Georgina smiled as her friend caught the Baron’s eye and raised a hand in greeting, directing her mother’s gaze just as the Baron returned the gesture, making it seem as though he was the one who initiated the contact.

‘I need a trip to the retiring room,’ Georgina said quickly, to save them from having to talk to Lord Westcott. ‘Caroline, will you help me straighten out my dress?’

Lady Yaxley gave them a suspicious glance, but nodded for the young women to take their leave.

‘Now tell me,’ Caroline said, linking her arm through Georgina’s. ‘Tell me everything about Mr Robertson.’

They made their way through the ballroom and out of the double doors at the end, keeping up the pretence of heading for

the retiring room, knowing Lady Yaxley's eyes would be on them until they were out of sight.

'There's nothing much to tell,' Georgina said with a shrug, realising it was the truth. Although she'd spent at least twenty minutes in the man's company she didn't really know any more about him than anyone else in the ballroom. 'Don't look at me like that. I'm not being coy.'

'You went outside with him,' Caroline declared. 'You never go outside with anyone.'

Paranoid about being caught in a compromising situation with a man she didn't want to marry, Georgina had a rule about not being alone with a gentleman, ever.

'We weren't alone,' she mumbled. 'There were plenty of other couples taking the air.'

'I've known you far too long, Georgina Fairfax. Don't play coy.'

'He was very forward,' Georgina said, trying her best to sound disapproving rather than impressed. She didn't want to be a stereotypical empty-headed young woman who was swept away by the first man to break with convention.

'Did he try to kiss you?'

'No.' He hadn't tried to kiss her, and Georgina realised she felt a little disappointed. He *had* looped an arm around her to pull her into the waltz and then at the end of the dance held on to her for just a few seconds longer than was strictly necessary, but Georgina wasn't sure whether that had been deliberate or just a

sign that he hadn't spent much of the last few years honing his ball etiquette.

'He hasn't danced with anyone else. Just stood there with his friend, surveying the room in that brooding fashion.'

'You sound smitten,' Georgina said suspiciously.

Her friend sighed. 'I'm fed up, Georgie, fed up of the balls and the dinner parties and the operas. Fed up of boring young men pretending to want to get to know me when in reality all they want is an introduction to you.' She waved off Georgina's protests. 'If a dashing French spy or an Australian convict asked me to run away with him, then I probably would. Don't you want adventure? A little excitement?'

Caroline had made her debut at the same time as Georgina, and people had started to whisper that three years was a long time to go without even a single marriage proposal. Georgina knew her friend was more than worthy of the bachelors of the *ton* and, with a substantial dowry and her family connections, there really should have been at least one proposal. Some times Georgina wondered if Caroline deliberately discouraged any proposals to allow her to remain free and unmarried a little longer, but mostly dismissed the idea. They'd been raised to be wives and mothers—even Caroline wasn't so rebellious to actually *want* to be an old maid.

Still, Georgina could see the appeal of being left alone to live the life you wanted, with no husband to dictate what you could and couldn't do. Far too often she found herself daydreaming

about a life where she got to make her own decisions, from the small things about where to reside to the bigger things such as leaving everything behind to travel the world. It was a dream that was so far-fetched Georgina knew it could never happen, but in quieter moments she still found herself thinking of a life where she was her own mistress.

‘Indulge me,’ Caroline said as they exited the ballroom and started to make their way through the hall towards the retiring room. ‘Tell me every last detail about him.’

‘About whom?’ A deep voice sounded behind them, making both young women jump.

Even before she turned Georgina knew who it would be. His voice was unmistakable, clear and sharp, but without the refined tones of the hundred other men at the ball who’d attended one of the three most prestigious schools in England.

‘Mr Robertson,’ Georgina said, turning slowly, ‘may I introduce my dear friend Miss Yaxley.’

‘A pleasure to meet you, Miss Yaxley.’

‘We were just talking about you, Mr Robertson,’ Caroline said, and inside Georgina groaned. She loved her friend more than anyone else in the world, but some times she wished Caroline wouldn’t blurt out everything that was in her head. ‘Although Georgina is being a little reserved.’

‘Unlike you,’ Georgina muttered under her breath, giving Caroline a dig in the ribs.

Mr Robertson gave her an amused look. ‘May I escort you

somewhere, ladies?’ he asked. ‘And perhaps on the way I can answer some of your questions.’

‘I am just popping to the retiring room,’ Caroline said quietly. ‘But, Georgina, why don’t you go with Mr Robertson and I will come join you in a moment.’

With her mouth parting in disbelief, Georgina shot a warning look at her friend.

‘I’ll only be a minute or two,’ Caroline said cheerfully, walking away.

Left alone with Mr Robertson, Georgina turned on him suspiciously.

‘Were you following me?’ she asked.

‘Do many men follow you?’

‘Not so brazenly,’ she muttered, feeling completely set up by Caroline and needing to take her annoyance out on someone.

‘I find it pointless to be subtle,’ Mr Robertson said, with that confident smile lighting up his face and causing Georgina to lose track of her thoughts for a moment.

‘Evidently.’

‘You lied to me,’ he said, leaning in a little closer. Georgina felt her pulse begin to quicken as his arm brushed innocently against hers.

‘No, I didn’t.’

‘You said a woman should never be alone with a man...’ he paused ‘...yet here we are.’

Quickly Georgina looked around the hallway. Damn him, he

was right. They *were* alone, not out of any machinations on her part, but alone all the same. If some particularly nosy matron caught them here in the hall together, then rumours would start to fly. No matter that a few minutes ago there had been more than half-a-dozen people escaping from the heat of the ballroom, milling around the spacious hallway, now it was just she and the mysterious Mr Robertson.

‘You should leave,’ she said, keeping one eye fixed on the door from the ballroom. ‘Before anyone catches us together.’

‘Tell me,’ he said, not making a single move to depart. ‘What would happen if we were found alone out here?’

‘My reputation would be ruined and my father would marry me off quickly and quietly to any man that would have me.’

‘We can’t be having that,’ Mr Robertson said, taking her gently but firmly by the arm and pulling her around the corner just as two elderly women exited the ballroom, discussing the musicians as they headed in the same direction Caroline had disappeared in.

Georgina found she was holding her breath, hoping they wouldn’t pause and glance in the opposite direction and see her pressed into a corner with an entirely inappropriate gentleman. Only when they were safely out of sight did she realise quite how close she was standing to her companion.

‘Safe?’ he asked, moving to one side so he could check over her shoulder. He was close, his body barely a few inches from hers, and she could feel the heat of him emanating through the layers of his clothing. It wasn’t a contrived closeness, though—in

fact, he barely seemed to register her and certainly wasn't moving in to try to touch her or kiss her.

An unfamiliar disappointment started to uncurl inside Georgina. Most men would have used this situation to their advantage and, while normally that irritated her beyond belief, she realised with surprise that she wouldn't have minded Mr Robertson moving in for a kiss. Of course she would have rebuffed him, but the attempt would have been nice.

'We need to leave,' Georgina said, pulling herself together. 'Separately.'

He looked at her then, a gaze that seemed to take in every inch of her body, and she fancied she saw something change in how he was standing.

'As you command, my lady,' he said, executing a mock bow. 'But only if you grant me one favour.'

With her heart pounding in her chest Georgina nodded, wondering when she had reverted back to a giddy eighteen-year-old.

'Allow me to call on you tomorrow.'

She'd expected him to ask for a kiss and had been prepared to offer him her hand. Momentarily thrown, she found herself nodding before she'd thought through the request.

'Then I will take my leave a happy man,' he said, catching her hand in his own and planting a kiss just below her knuckles.

With a quick glance to ensure they were still alone Mr Robertson walked away, returning to the ballroom without

looking back. Georgina still hadn't moved when Caroline exited the retiring room two minutes later and quickly had to find her composure before her friend guessed something had happened.

## Chapter Three

‘Mercenary,’ Ben Crawford commented as he took a long slurp of tea from the delicate china teacup. In his hands the drinking vessel looked foreign and out of place, but Crawford didn’t seem to notice.

‘What’s mercenary?’ Sam asked, rising from his seat to help himself to another portion of smoked haddock from the serving plate on the sideboard. His normal breakfast consisted of porridge and some bread—it seemed a strange luxury to be eating fish for breakfast.

‘You are.’

Raising an eyebrow, he waited for his friend to continue, tucking into his breakfast while the silence dragged out.

‘I know you want to get your revenge on the old Earl, but compromising his daughter—that’s dark, even for you.’

‘I’m not...’ Sam began to splutter, then paused, swallowed his mouthful, took another sip of tea and continued to talk. ‘I’m not planning on compromising the daughter.’

‘You went halfway there last night. All I heard the entire evening was how scandalous Lady Georgina was acting over a *ne’er-do-well* stranger.’

‘I only danced with the girl.’

‘And led her off into dark corners.’

‘Hardly.’

‘They have different rules here,’ Crawford mused, his voice dipping. ‘No dragging your intended off over one shoulder and holding a pistol to their head until they capitulate into marrying you.’

‘Because that happened all the time in Australia.’ Sam paused, leaning back in his chair, rocking on the back two legs in a motion that he knew irritated his friend. ‘I’m not going to compromise Lady Georgina,’ he said firmly. ‘I merely need an acquaintance with her to gain me entry into her house and a little familiarity with the family.’

‘So you’re not going to punish the father by ruining the daughter?’

‘No.’

The thought had briefly crossed his mind, if he was being completely honest, but Sam, despite his past conviction, thought himself as an honourable man. It was one thing to seek vengeance against the man who had ruined his life, quite another to drag an innocent into it all merely because she was his daughter.

He hadn’t expected to like her. She was the daughter of the man who’d nearly destroyed him and he’d been fully prepared to have to pretend to enjoy her company to get close to her. But in reality he’d found her interesting and, in truth, perhaps a little too alluring. It was the way she’d looked at him with those intense green eyes, the heat he’d felt deep inside when his arm had looped around her waist, the overwhelming urge to kiss her he’d had to fight as they’d waited in the hall together. All in all he knew

he shouldn't like her, but he did, and it made him resolve not to involve her more than was absolutely necessary in his plans for revenge.

'Did you get what you wanted?' Ben asked, reaching out and tugging on his friend's chair until all four feet were on the floor again.

'Lady Georgina agreed to me calling on her today,' Sam said, feeling inordinately pleased with himself.

When he, Ben Crawford and George Fitzgerald had decided to return to England, Sam's main motivation had been revenge. He wanted to look Lord Westchester in the eye and confront the man about how he'd treated him eighteen years previously. Lord Westchester had been solely responsible for Sam's false conviction for theft and his transportation to Australia. Now he would always be an ex-convict; that never left you. Nor did the years of back-breaking labour, the months spent in the filthiest conditions on the hulk ship or the grief of a ten-year-old boy being ripped from his home, his family and everything he held dear. The day he'd been sentenced had been the last day he'd ever seen his family. Meanwhile the Earl had been living his life of luxury and probably hadn't given a second thought to the young boy he'd handed over to the magistrate all those years ago.

'And you're hoping the Earl is at home?' Ben asked.

Nodding, Sam swung back on his chair again, balancing perfectly until he heard footfalls behind him.

'You boys are up early,' Lady Winston said as she entered the

dining room.

They'd returned from the ball in the small hours of the morning, but the years of getting up before the dawn to work on the vast Australian farms meant neither Sam nor Crawford were in the habit of sleeping past seven o'clock and even that was a rare luxury.

'Good morning, Lady Winston,' Sam said, standing as the older woman waved a hand for both men to desist with the formalities.

'Aunt Tabitha,' she insisted, not for the first time.

'Good morning Aunt Tabitha,' Crawford said, placing a kiss on her cheek before returning to his seat.

'George warned me about your charm,' Aunt Tabitha scolded and Sam had to suppress a smile. Crawford was irresistible to the ladies, whatever their age. He had that easy-going confidence that meant they just seemed to fall into his arms.

'Now, have you boys been well looked after this morning?'

Nodding in unison, Sam wondered why he felt like a young lad again rather than a successful landowner of nearly thirty. Aunt Tabitha was no relation to him or Ben, but she treated them in the same way she did George, her nephew. The three men were like brothers, despite their different starts in life, but not many people saw fit to treat them that way. George Fitzgerald was a wealthy landowner, but his father had started life as the second son of an impoverished baron. To many people that title was important and they couldn't understand why a man of good family, like

Fitzgerald, would associate with two ex-convicts, however rich and successful they might be now.

Aunt Tabitha, however, accepted their adopted fraternity and treated all three men equally, albeit like errant youths.

‘Did I hear you’re going to call on the lovely Lady Georgina today?’ Lady Winston asked.

‘Yes, I thought I’d pop around after breakfast.’

‘My dear boy, one does not just *pop around* and especially not after breakfast.’

Sam grimaced. Of course there would be some long-winded social convention for paying a call on a young lady. There was for everything else after all.

‘Enlighten me, Aunt Tabitha.’

‘First, the proper hour to pay a call is some time after eleven, but definitely before three.’

Sam glanced at the clock at one end of the room. It was a little after eight in the morning. Waiting so long seemed a waste, but he supposed not the biggest inconvenience.

‘Then when you arrive at the house you must present a calling card to the butler, who will enquire as to whether the young lady is at home.’

‘Of course she’ll be home. She said she would,’ Sam growled, finding the whole thing a little ridiculous. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Crawford suppressing a laugh and shot him a warning glare.

‘Oh, she’ll probably be at home, but she might not want to

receive you. If that's the case, the butler will inform you that Lady Georgina is not at home to visitors.'

'She'll snub me?'

'She might have had chance to consider the merits of your acquaintance,' Aunt Tabitha said, patting him on the hand. 'If she does accept your call, you will be shown into the drawing room, or another such receiving room where Lady Georgina will be accompanied by her mother. Twenty minutes of idle chit-chat later and you will be expected to depart.'

'Sounds like a thrilling afternoon,' Crawford said, slapping him on the back.

'And her father?' Sam asked.

'Ah, yes, the Earl. You probably won't see him, although if you are an honoured guest he might make a brief appearance.'

He was going to go through all of the palaver of trying to secure an audience with Lady Georgina and might not even catch a glimpse of the Earl for his efforts. Taking a deep breath, he calmed himself. Today was only the beginning of their second week in London, he had to remind himself, and already he'd made the acquaintance of Lord Westchester's daughter. He had time to nurture the relationship, time to orchestrate a meeting with the Earl, time to initiate the first step in his plans for revenge. If he was going to get close to the Earl the first thing Sam needed to do was check the older man did not remember him. Sam knew he'd transformed from gangly child into a well-built man since the Earl last laid eyes on him, but some people

surprised you with their memories. Once he was sure the Earl did not know his true identity he could start on the next step of his plan.

‘Why exactly are you so interested in Lord Westchester?’ Lady Winston asked, her face shrewd and her eyes narrowed.

‘It’s probably best you don’t know,’ Sam said, trying to make light of the situation with a grin.

‘You’re probably right,’ Lady Winston said with a sigh. ‘If you’re up to no good, the fewer people know about it the better.’

He *was* up to no good, but with good reason. Eighteen years ago Sam’s mother had been an assistant cook in the Earl’s household and on occasion took Sam to work with her to help with the odd jobs around the place. He had been accused of stealing Lady Westchester’s emeralds, and although there was no real evidence against him the Earl had used his influence to ensure Sam was convicted and sentenced to be transported to Australia. Soon after he’d started his sentence in one of the filthy hulk ships his mother and sisters had been struck down with a winter fever, meaning Sam not only lost his childhood and life in England, but also the chance to ever see his family again.

The Earl had become the focus of his anger over the years, especially as Sam was convinced he’d been framed by the older man, even though he wasn’t entirely sure why. Now he was back in England with the express purpose of exacting revenge and enacting a plan he’d been building for the past eighteen years.

‘If I have three hours before I may call on Lady Georgina, I

think I will go out for a ride.'

Being newly arrived from Australia, none of the men had access to a horse and Lady Winston only kept enough to pull her ornate carriage. However, when she'd received word of their imminent arrival she'd arranged for them to hire a horse each for the couple of months they were planning on spending in London, declaring, '*No gentleman should be without a horse.*' And no doubt cackling at her loose use of the word *gentleman*.

'Don't forget to change into your finest riding garb,' Lady Winston called after him as he left the dining room.

Grumbling at the ridiculous way the English seemed to have a different outfit for each activity within the space of the day, he none the less changed into a pair of buckskin breeches, a long jacket and a pair of high riding boots. Although he had the strong urge to not conform with society, he didn't want to stand out too much before he'd achieved his aim and got close to the Earl.

As he began to climb the stairs to his grand bedroom he found himself thinking of Lady Georgina. She should be nothing more than a necessary step in his plan for revenge, a way to get close to the Earl, but numerous times in the past twelve hours he'd found his thoughts slipping to the curve of her smile, the way her eyes had glimmered in the half-light on the terrace and the beautiful curves of her body. It would be no hardship to spend more time with her, but he had to keep reminding himself to focus. Eighteen years he'd waited for this moment—he couldn't allow himself to be distracted by a woman, even if she was the first woman to

hold his interest for a very long time.

With a furtive glance over her shoulder Georgina slipped out the back door and into the yard where Richards, the young groom, was waiting for her. She shouldn't be out at such an hour, especially after such a late night, but always after a ball she found it impossible to sleep. The music was still ringing in her ears, the sips of champagne still fizzing in her blood and the lights and bright flashes of opulent fabrics filled her mind every time she closed her eyes.

Her mother would no doubt scold her later for not trying to get at least get a few hours of sleep before the first of the visitors came calling. At least she'd stopped reprimanding Richards for accompanying Georgina on her early morning rides, acknowledging the young groom couldn't do anything to stop the headstrong Georgina and was only accompanying her out of concern for her safety.

With practised ease Georgina pulled herself up into the saddle, preferring to test her own strength and agility rather than rely on a boost from the groom. It was another thing her mother scolded her for, chastising her for being unladylike, but Georgina reasoned you never knew when you would be stuck out on your own somewhere with no man to give you a boost. Being able to mount a horse alone would be a very useful skill.

Secretly she dreamed of adventures where she might go riding off into the wilderness with no groom, no entourage to accompany her. It was an impossible dream, but one she still

allowed herself to harbour none the less.

‘Where would you like to go this morning, my lady?’

‘Hyde Park, Richards. We can give the horses a little exercise that way.’

She saw the young groom suppress a groan and had to hide a smile. They would head towards Rotten Row. Normally the popular riding spot was busy with the cream of society riding out for pleasure, dressed in their finest and eager to be seen. At this time in the morning, however, there would be a few other dedicated riders, but mostly grooms exercising their masters’ horses. By mid-morning there was an unwritten rule that you travelled down Rotten Row no faster than a sedate trot, but at eight in the morning no one really cared and often a more adventurous rider would be seen streaking past at a momentous gallop.

As always she took the lead, expertly guiding her horse through the streets until they reached the entrance of the park. Only once they were inside, riding over the familiar paths, did Georgina allow herself to relax. Luckily not many of her suitors had found out about her love of early morning rides through the park. If they did, no doubt she would be inundated with *chance* meetings and another of her little pleasures would be eaten into by the men who were only pretending to be interested in what she said.

‘Please don’t go too far ahead, my lady,’ Richards called from a few feet behind her.

At the moment they were riding close together, but from experience the young groom knew it was only a matter of time before Georgina leant forward and urged Lady Penelope, her beautiful grey mare, into a gallop and left Richards faltering behind.

Nodding in greeting to the few people out and about this early in the morning, Georgina slowly loosened her grip on the reins, signalling to Lady Penelope to start picking up the pace. As they began first to trot and then to canter Georgina threw her head back and marvelled at the feeling of wind through her hair, wishing she could unfasten it and wear it streaming down her back like a medieval princess.

Rotten Row itself was only just under a mile long and to Georgina it felt like a matter of seconds before she was reining in Lady Penelope to navigate the turn at the end. Richards was a couple of hundred feet behind her and even at this distance Georgina could picture his face, screwed up with concentration and effort. Knowing she shouldn't be cruel she allowed her speed to fall to a much more sedate pace, giving the sweating groom a few minutes to catch up.

This end of Rotten Row was quieter, with some of the grooms preferring to stick to the Hyde Park Corner end, spending much of their time talking and catching up on the gossip about their masters rather than exerting the horses. However, as she turned, one lone rider was coming up past Richards.

Immediately she felt her body tense. She recognised him from

his posture, the way he held himself. Of course he would be at ease on horseback; the man seemed to do everything naturally. Trying to suppress the bubble of pleasure at the thought of meeting Mr Robertson again, she wondered if he had contrived running into her while out riding. It was unlikely, she kept these early morning rides to herself, and it wasn't as though many ladies in London kept a horse in the city, let alone made a habit of being out riding at such an early hour.

'Lady Georgina,' he said, his voice deep and warm as he slowed to match her pace. Richards was just coming up behind them and she motioned for him to keep his distance, signalling everything was all right.

'Mr Robertson, what a surprise to see you here,' she said drily. 'You think I'm following you?' he asked, a smile forming on his lips, revealing surprisingly white teeth contrasting against his bronzed skin.

'It is rather a coincidence...' she said, even though she'd convinced herself this was nothing more than chance. Or fate. As she looked at him she tried to limit her admiration to the easy way he sat on his horse, his good posture and clearly excellent riding skills, but she found her eyes roaming over his body. It was hard not to notice the sculpted muscles under his riding garb and the tanned skin that spoke of his time under the blazing sun... Quickly she snapped her eyes back to his and tried to focus.

'I suppose I did follow you from the ballroom last night,' he said, 'but even I wouldn't dream of ambushing a young lady while

she's out riding for pleasure.'

'And you? Are you out riding for pleasure?' Georgina asked.

Even though she knew very little about Mr Robertson she did know quite a lot about how society worked. A man newly arrived in London, with few family connections, would struggle to easily find a horse to ride. To want to hire one for the Season showed either a deep love of riding or a view that all gentlemen should have access to a mount at any time. Given what she'd seen of Mr Robertson so far it seemed far more likely to be the former than the latter.

'Indeed. Back home I'm in the saddle at least five hours a day. Riding for pleasure isn't quite the same, but it is better than the alternative of not riding at all for months at a time.'

'Back home?' Georgina asked, trying to make her question sound casual.

He regarded her for a moment, and she wondered if he would once again dodge the question about his origins. 'Australia,' he said eventually. 'The Eastern Coast.'

Where they transported convicted criminals.

Telling herself not to be foolish, Georgina found her imagination running away with her. Thoughts of brutal criminals, men in chains, toiling away under a baking sun filled her mind. She'd never even seen a picture of Australia, but in her imagination it had sands the colour of amber and harsh conditions.

She felt her mouth go dry as the unbidden image of Mr

Robertson shirtless, toiling away in a chain gang, popped into her head. She'd felt the hard muscles of his chest the night before, muscles made strong by manual labour. Quickly she reached for a question, any question, to distract herself from the image.

'What's it like?' Georgina asked.

Mr Robertson laughed softly. 'Like nothing you could ever imagine.'

She didn't think he was going to say any more, but after a moment he continued.

'It's nothing like England,' he said, 'In any way whatsoever. The people are coarser, no time for these customs or manners that matter so much in London. The land is beautiful, but harsh. I've known many a man go wandering off into the wilderness never to be seen again.'

'That wouldn't happen in Surrey or Sussex,' Georgina murmured.

'But despite all the trials it throws at you there's something rather enchanting about it. I've never seen such blue sea or golden sands. Or such vast expanses of land where there's not a single sign of a settlement.' He was staring off into the distance as if remembering fondly. 'I suppose that's how you feel about your home, wherever it may be.'

'You were born there?' Georgina asked.

He looked up abruptly, his eyes narrowing slightly. 'No,' he said brusquely.

They rode in silence, side by side, for a few moments, Mr

Robertson clearly still deep in thought, reminiscing about the land he seemed to both love and fear a little.

‘You were born in Hampshire,’ he said after a few minutes.

‘You’ve been enquiring about me?’

Shrugging, a gesture not normally seen among the men of the *ton*, he grinned. ‘I’m residing with Lady Winston. She seems to know everything about everyone.’

‘That’s how it is,’ Georgina said, almost glumly. There was no mystery among the *ton*. Those whom her mother deemed to be suitable friends or companions for Georgina numbered very few and her social circle was small. The wealthiest members of society, those with the oldest family names and largest estates, only socialised with people of a similar position, meaning even if you didn’t like someone very much you ended up spending rather a lot of time with them.

‘Are you related to her?’ Georgina asked as they neared Hyde Park Corner, turning their horses for another lap of Rotten Row.

‘Not exactly...’ He paused. ‘I’m in England with two good friends, Mr Sam Crawford and Mr George Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald is Lady Winston’s nephew.’

It was a strange way of putting it, *not exactly*, but she supposed some people had friendships that were as close as family ties. It might be that he considered these two men his brothers and as an extension Lady Winston as a relative as well. In a way it was only like her considering Caroline a sister.

Georgina was about to open her mouth to ask another

question, when she heard a shout in the distance. She saw Mr Robertson turn his head and focus in on the cry, and followed the direction of his gaze to do the same.

Hurling towards them, although a good few hundred feet away, was a riderless horse. The groom who had been exercising the spirited animal had been thrown to the ground and was now struggling to rise. The horse seemed petrified of something, nostrils flaring and head thrashing from side to side, and as they watched, it showed no signs of slowing.

‘Stay to one side,’ Mr Robertson ordered, gripping her horse’s bridle and guiding her next to the fence. Here she was in very little danger, a good few feet away from the main path, but Georgina knew better than to move at all. She had a great respect for horses, knew the damage they could do by throwing a rider, or worse stampeding.

As she watched Mr Robertson narrowed his eyes as if trying to work out something, then urged his horse forward into a canter, heading away from her and the runaway beast. At first she wondered if he was fleeing, but quickly dismissed the idea. Of the little she knew of the mysterious Australian, she could tell he wasn’t one to shy away from a little danger.

The runaway horse was gaining on him and Georgina watched as slowly he picked up the pace, so that by the time the riderless horse was level with him he was travelling more or less at the same speed. They were running out of path and if he didn’t do something soon the horse would escape into the rest of Hyde

Park where it could injure an unsuspecting person out for a morning stroll, or even worse dart onto the street, causing an accident.

Just as she thought there was no hope she saw Mr Robertson lean across and take the horse's bridle, then in one swift manoeuvre he leapt off his horse's back and onto the runaway animal's. The horse bucked, but after a few seconds seemed to settle and within half a minute was wheeling round in a gentle trot.

As Georgina watched Mr Robertson dismounted, caught his own horse and began leading both animals back up towards her and the amazed groom. She could see him muttering soothing words, all the time working to keep the animals calm.

'Thank you,' the groom said, his cheeks red with embarrassment at having to be saved in such a fashion.

'Spirited beast,' Mr Robertson said, almost admiringly, handing the reins back over.

'Where did you learn to do that?' Georgina asked when they were once again alone, although receiving curious looks from all the other grooms out exercising their master's horses.

'It's what I do,' he said with a shrug. 'I own the largest stud in Australia.' He grimaced. 'More or less the only stud in Australia.'

'You breed horses?'

'Breed them, raise them, train them and sell them.'

Not a life of crime, then. Georgina sighed—he was probably very wealthy, although she wasn't sure how the income of

Australian landowners compared with English ones. Not that it would matter to her parents. They were destined to disapprove of him immediately. He was *new money*, someone who had raised themselves up and made their fortune through hard work. Although some might think it admirable working to make their legacy, her parents certainly did not agree with that opinion. To them the only people who mattered were those who had been born into money, preferably a very long line of it.

With a glance sideways she wondered if this was why she felt an irresistible pull whenever she thought about Mr Robertson. He was handsome in a rugged way, certainly had a good physique with broad shoulders and hard muscles in all the right places, but Georgina thought it was more than a physical attraction. She knew some young women flirted with and pursued the *wrong sort* of men, exactly because their parents wouldn't approve of them. She'd never thought herself to be that rebellious, or that shallow, but here she was wondering how she could spend more time with Mr Robertson, even when she knew nothing could ever happen between them.

'I should be getting home,' Georgina said, suddenly feeling a little uncomfortable. If she had any sense she would break off their connection immediately and resolve never to see this man again.

'Would you like me to escort you?'

'No,' she said quickly, far too quickly, earning herself an amused grin from Mr Robertson. 'Thank you, but, no,' she said,

forcing the words to come out at a more normal speed.

‘But you will allow me to call on you later, as we agreed?’

She should say no. Find some excuse, but silently she nodded.

‘And you will accept my call?’

It was custom for callers to be screened before being admitted to the house and Georgina had on occasion informed their butler to tell the caller she was out. She hated doing it, though, hated to think someone had made the effort to visit and she wouldn’t deign to see them.

‘I will,’ she said.

‘Until later, Lady Georgina.’

‘Goodbye, Mr Robertson.’

## Chapter Four

With practised discretion Georgina stifled a yawn. The poem Mr Wilcox was reading must have been three pages long and they were still on the first page. It wasn't good and it wasn't entertaining, and really she was trying not to listen to it out of fear she might laugh. And that would be rude. Mr Wilcox was a nice enough young man, persistent in his courtship despite not receiving any signs of encouragement from Georgina, and she really didn't want to hurt his feelings, but the poem was truly terrible.

*If I could liken your skin,*

*To the creamy plaster of a fountain.*

*I would liken your lips*

*To the red rose that grows beside it.*

She wasn't even sure if fountains were made from plaster. All the ones she could think of were stone.

'Mr Robertson to see Lady Georgina,' the butler announced, directing his words towards Lady Westchester, who glanced enquiringly at Georgina.

'I made his acquaintance at the ball last night,' she said, trying not to meet her mother's eye. 'He is related to Lady Winston,' she fibbed.

'Show him in.'

Georgina studied the needlework in her hands, trying to

compose herself for the minutes ahead. Her mother would immediately disapprove of Mr Robertson, that much she was sure, even without knowing about his questionable background. He was too different to the other men they socialised with for her mother not to notice.

‘Lady Georgina,’ Mr Robertson said, bowing in her direction as he entered the room.

‘My mother, Lady Westchester.’

Another bow. ‘Lady Westchester.’

‘And I think you met Mr Wilcox last night.’

Mr Wilcox certainly remembered Mr Robertson—his eyes narrowed and his lips trembled a little in indignation. Too late Georgina remembered it was Mr Wilcox who’d lost out on the promised dance when Mr Robertson had whisked her on to the dance floor.

Once everyone was seated Lady Westchester fixed Mr Robertson with a piercing stare.

‘I do not know you, Mr Robertson. Who are your people?’

Georgina felt like burying her head in her hands. Normally her mother waited for at least a few seconds before the inquisition began.

‘My people?’

‘Your family? From where do you hail?’

‘I was born and raised in Hampshire, my lady.’

Georgina frowned, wondering why Sam hadn’t mentioned it when they had discussed her childhood before. ‘Hampshire, how

delightful, that is where our primary estate is situated. Perhaps we know your family.'

'I doubt it, Lady Westchester,' Mr Robertson said. 'My parents died when I was young and I was fortunate enough to be taken in by a kind and wealthy benefactor. I have not set foot in Hampshire for many years.'

'How unfortunate.'

'Shall I continue with my poem?' Mr Wilcox asked.

Georgina had quite forgotten he was in the room. She shot a glance at Mr Robertson, who had settled back into an armchair. If he felt at all uncomfortable or out of his depth he wasn't showing it.

'Please continue,' Georgina said, forcing a smile on her face.

*Your eyes compare to the starry sky—'*

'Lady Westchester, there is an urgent note from Lady Yaxley,' the butler interrupted.

Georgina watched as her mother weighed up the situation. She could hardly ignore an urgent note from her dearest friend, but equally she was responsible for Georgina's reputation. She held out her hand for the note, read it quickly, then stood.

'I shall be back within a few minutes,' she said, leaving the room quickly.

'I brought you a gift,' Mr Robertson said, rising immediately and moving to take up a position next to Georgina on the sofa.

'I say,' Mr Wilcox said, 'I was just reading Lady Georgina a poem.'

Mr Robertson raised an eyebrow, but to his credit his lips didn't even twitch into a smile.

'I find poetry to be a quite personal, intimate thing,' he said. 'Perhaps it is better saved for when it is just the two of you. I wouldn't want to kill the mood and ruin your poem.'

Mr Wilcox opened his mouth to protest, then seemed to consider what the other man had said.

'Well, I suppose you're right,' he mumbled.

'Perhaps you could even make a copy for Lady Georgina, something she can keep and look at in her own time.'

'That's a rather good idea,' Mr Wilcox said, looking down at his handwritten poem. 'I'll get to work on it this afternoon, Lady Georgina.'

'Thank you, Mr Wilcox.'

'It's only something small,' Mr Robertson said, reaching into his pocket and taking out a handkerchief. Georgina watched with mounting anticipation as he unfolded the square of material and reached inside. 'It's a flower from the tea-tree plant.'

Pressed and perfect, it had whitish-pink petals and a vibrant pink centre and was by far one of the most beautiful flowers she'd ever set eyes on.

'They're everywhere in Australia,' he said. 'All different varieties and colours.'

'You brought it all the way over here?'

'By accident,' he admitted. 'So many things are undocumented in Australia. My friend, George Fairfax, is keen on cataloguing

wild plants and animals, so when I'm out and about I pick anything interesting for him to have a look at.'

'And this one found its way to England.'

'I must have left it in a pocket.'

Georgina was no stranger to gifts from her suitors. Many of the men came armed with huge bunches of flowers, or expensive delicacies, sometimes even intimate items such as a new pair of silk gloves, but most were extravagant, aimed at showing their wealth and status. This was a much more thoughtful gift, a little insight into a world Georgina would never know.

'I love it, thank you,' she said, looking up into his eyes. They were startlingly blue, a vibrant dash of colour in his tanned face. For a moment she forgot Mr Wilcox was in the room with them, so mesmerised was she by the man in front of her. She felt a hot flush take over her body as she imagined him wrapping those strong arms around her and not for the first time she felt her eyes flicker to the crisp white of his shirt, imagining once more what his body looked like underneath.

'I'm sure your mother will be back shortly,' Mr Wilcox said, with a polite little cough. He looked pointedly at the position Georgina and Mr Robertson were in on the sofa, far too close for propriety, and hurriedly Georgina moved away. She felt hot and bothered. Mr Robertson only had to look at her and she felt her pulse quicken, and Georgina didn't like not being in control of her own body.

'I hope whatever called your mother away is nothing serious,'

Mr Robertson said, not acknowledging Mr Wilcox's pointed stare. 'Is your father at home?'

It was a nonchalant enquiry, slightly too casual, and immediately it sparked Georgina's interest. Men often wanted to see her father to curry favour with one of the most influential men in England, or, on the more worrying occasions, to ask for her hand in marriage, but she hadn't expected Mr Robertson to want either of those things. Perhaps she had misjudged him, perhaps he was looking for a boost up the social ladder and was hoping an acquaintanceship with her, and by extension her family, would help him on his way.

'Father rarely comes to London these days,' Georgina said. 'He prefers to stay in the country, unless his commitments demand his presence in the city.'

She watched Mr Robertson's face intently, but could see no hint of disappointment. Either he was a talented liar, or he had only been enquiring about her father for politeness' sake.

'He remains in Hampshire?'

'Yes, for the foreseeable future at least. He will come up once the Season is properly underway I'm sure, to attend to his political commitments, but he doesn't like to arrive too prematurely.'

Lady Westchester hurried back into the room, noting Mr Robertson's new position on the sofa with a frown, but given there was a respectable distance between him and Georgina there was nothing she could say.

'What are your plans while you are in London, Mr Robertson?'

Lady Westchester asked.

Georgina nearly rolled her eyes at her mother's abruptness. She might as well have asked if Mr Robertson had come to the capital to search for a wife. No doubt her mother would soon begin hinting at the perfect pedigree they expected in any suitor for Georgina's hand.

'A little business,' Mr Robertson said, seemingly unfazed by Lady Westchester. To stay calm and collected in the face of her mother's unwelcoming demeanour was not an easy feat and Georgina felt her admiration grow for the man. 'I also wish to reconnect with some people from my past. Having been out of the country for so long I find myself eager to be reacquainted with those I have been thinking about over the years.'

'Out of the country?' Lady Westchester's tone was mild, but Georgina had to suppress a groan. It was entirely the wrong thing to say. Her mother didn't trust foreigners and she included anyone who chose to spend any time away from England in that category, unless for some necessary and noble purpose in her eyes, such as fighting in a war.

'The benefactor I mentioned lived in Australia. He passed away recently, so it seemed like the right time to return to England.'

'Australia,' her mother gasped.

'Mother,' Georgina murmured, glancing at Mr Robertson, before realising that he looked more amused than offended.

'It's a beautiful country,' he said, 'You should visit one day.'

‘Mama is not keen on foreign travel,’ Georgina said quietly. For her part she’d always dreamed about seeing the world. It was an abstract dream for a woman of her class and upbringing. If she was lucky she might find herself honeymooning around Europe, but that would be the extent of her travels. Well brought-up young ladies did not go any farther afield than Italy. Despite that Georgina had always paused on the pages of books with pictures of exotic locations, places like Egypt and India, or the wilds of Africa.

‘I understand,’ Mr Robertson said. ‘It isn’t for everyone.’

He glanced at her then, as if seeing whether Georgina shared her mother’s view on travel. She felt her heart beat a little harder in her chest and had to concentrate to stop her face betraying her emotions. It wouldn’t do to let her mother even glimpse the slight fascination she had for this man. Georgina knew it was just because Mr Robertson was different and perhaps because of those dazzling blue eyes and rather captivating smile, but she couldn’t help wanting to get closer to him, to learn more about him. Of course she knew that could never happen; the differences in their stations in life meant they couldn’t even easily become friends. Nevertheless she hoped she would see Mr Robertson again.

‘I must take my leave,’ he said, standing. ‘Thank you for receiving me, Lady Westchester, Lady Georgina. I do hope we see each other soon.’

He’d behaved perfectly, ensuring he did not overstay his

welcome, and despite her mother's obvious reservations about the man Georgina did not think she could complain about his behaviour, just his origins.

'You mentioned the Hamiltons' music evening,' Georgina said smoothly. 'Perhaps we shall see one another there.'

It was bold, far too bold, but she wasn't quite ready to say goodbye to Mr Robertson yet. She wanted to hear more about Australia, hear more about his background, so she'd decided to drop a hint as to where she'd be later in the week and see if he took up the invitation.

## Chapter Five

‘Drowning your sorrows?’ George Fitzgerald asked as he clapped Sam on the back, flopping down into the free seat beside him. ‘Did the beauteous Lady Georgina turn you away?’

‘Of course not.’

‘Difficult types, these daughters of the nobility.’

‘She didn’t turn me away.’

‘Why the long face then?’

‘The Earl is in Hampshire and there’s not much chance of him making an appearance any time soon.’

‘Ah. I see.’ Fitzgerald drummed his fingers on the table before motioning to one of the serving girls for two more jugs of ale. ‘I take it you’re not giving up.’

‘No.’ Giving up was the furthest thing from his mind. ‘I’ll have to go to Hampshire, that’s all.’

He’d hoped to avoid returning to his home county. There were painful memories back in his childhood home that he didn’t wish to confront. The last time he’d been there, his mother and two younger sisters had been alive. Now he had no close relatives left in Hampshire, but the memories of his childhood and all he’d lost were based there and he had planned on leaving those ghosts to sleep.

‘You’ll struggle to even catch a glimpse of the Earl if you just turn up. You need an invitation.’

‘To go to Hampshire?’

‘To infiltrate the Earl’s estate.’

Sam tapped his fingers on the table and considered for a while. For years he’d sworn one day he would return to England and make Lord Westchester pay for stealing his childhood and ripping him from his family. As a young lad his fantasies of revenge were elaborate and often involved the old Earl falling to his knees, begging Sam for forgiveness. Now, older, and more worldly wise, Sam knew it was unlikely Lord Westchester would even remember the day he carelessly wrongfully accused a young boy of stealing. But he wanted the older man to at least acknowledge the wrong he had done and perhaps suffer in some small way, too.

‘These wealthy types often have house parties at their country estates, don’t they?’ Sam asked, his mind ticking through possibilities.

‘Yes,’ Fitzgerald said slowly, ‘I believe so, but probably not in the depths of winter.’

‘Doesn’t matter. I’m in no rush.’

‘And you’d have to be invited.’

Sam grinned. It would be a challenge. Lady Georgina liked him, that much he was sure of, but in the way you liked a rather exotic animal in a menagerie: interesting to study for a few minutes, but certainly not someone you allowed close. Then there was Lady Georgina’s mother. She’d judged him within seconds of their meeting and he knew he hadn’t come out favourably. His

family were not one of the select few she approved of and as such she would regard him as unsuitable for her daughter to spend any time with.

Feeling the rush of anticipation at the idea of spending more time with Lady Georgina, he quickly tried to dampen the feelings. It didn't matter she was the first woman in a long time to pique his attention, she was not the one for him. He had to focus, not allow himself to get distracted by those soulful green eyes and the sense that there was so much more to Lady Georgina than most of her suitors gave her credit for.

'They might not even host a house party,' Fitzgerald said, but nothing could dampen Sam's enthusiasm.

'I'm sure I can persuade the fair Lady Georgina it would be a splendid idea,' Sam said.

Rolling his eyes, Fitzgerald clapped Sam on the back. 'One thing you've never suffered from is a lack of self-confidence.'

'No point going through this world not believing in yourself. Not many other people will.'

Sam didn't quite believe that sentiment, despite voicing it. He'd been lucky enough to have someone believe there was more to him than his convicted criminal status. George's father, Henry Fitzgerald, had taken both him and Crawford in to his family and given them a chance to build good lives for themselves in Australia. If it wasn't for the older man they would probably both be travelling from farm to farm, selling their services as farmhands like hundreds of other ex-convicts, with no real base,

no real purpose. Sam would be eternally grateful his life had taken a different turn.

‘Drink up,’ Fitzgerald said. ‘You don’t want to be spotted in such an insalubrious establishment if you want to be accepted by Lady Georgina’s crowd.’

He thought it unlikely anyone even acquainted with Lady Georgina would wander into the tavern, but drained the rest of his ale all the same. It looked like he was going to be in London for the foreseeable future and he had a lot to plan if he was going to secure invitations to all the events the Earl’s daughter would be attending. A little bribery of Lady Georgina’s household staff might smooth the way. At least that way he would know which events the Earl’s daughter would be attending.

\* \* \*

Giving in, Georgina crossed to the window and peeked out from behind the curtains. Her bedroom looked out over the gardens of Grosvenor Square and often she would stand watching the exhausted nannies and nursemaids chasing their energetic charges along the perfectly kept paths. Today, however, she’d fancied she had seen Mr Robertson out there.

She looked for thirty seconds, peering from her hidden position, before feeling rather stupid and stepping out from behind the curtains.

Of course there was no sign of the enigmatic Mr Robertson. There was absolutely no reason for him to be in her street, especially five hours after he’d paid his call.

‘Silly girl,’ she murmured to herself. She refused to behave like a lovesick fool.

Forcing herself away from the window, she had just turned when the door opened and Caroline came flouncing into the room.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked suspiciously.

‘Nothing.’ Georgina felt her cheeks begin to colour at the lie.

‘Then why are you blushing?’

‘I was looking out the window,’ Georgina said.

‘For?’

‘For no one. Just looking.’

For once she wished her friend was a little less astute. It was clear Caroline didn’t believe her and Georgina watched as she crossed to the window and spent thirty seconds peering out.

‘There’s no one there,’ she said eventually.

‘I know. I told you, I was just looking.’

‘Hmm.’

‘You looked like you had news,’ Georgina said, deftly changing the subject.

‘I do. I’ve been asking around, very discreetly of course, and your Mr Robertson *is* from Australia,’ Caroline said triumphantly.

‘I know.’ Georgina didn’t correct her friend and inform her that Mr Robertson might have recently sailed from Australia, but was actually originally from Hampshire.

‘How do you know? Hardly anyone knows anything about

him.'

'He told me himself.'

'You've seen him again? Already?'

'Don't look so pleased,' Georgina groaned. 'He called on me today, that is all.'

She left out their meeting in Hyde Park, knowing Caroline would be utterly fascinated and demand every last detail.

'Anyway, he's not my Mr Robertson.'

Waving a dismissive hand, Caroline flopped down on the bed. 'Tell me everything,' she said dramatically.

'There's nothing to tell. He came to call, Mother was here, as was Mr Wilcox. We sat and talked for a few minutes, then he left.'

Georgina didn't add that she'd found it hard to banish Mr Robertson from her mind ever since his visit, ever since their encounter the previous night.

'Will you see him again?' Caroline asked.

'I'm sure our paths might cross at some event or another. He is staying with Lady Winston.'

'A relative?'

'No, he's a friend of her nephew.'

'How wonderful,' Caroline said dreamily, throwing herself back on to the bed and staring up at the canopy above.

'He is just another acquaintance.'

'So why were you looking for him out your window?'

'I-I wasn't,' Georgina protested, but knew her stutter gave her

away.

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