



*The
Perfect
Lady Worth*

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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

The Perfect Lady Worthe

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THE PERFECT LADY WORTHE

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Chapter One

England

Late March 1812

At seven-and-twenty Gareth Lambert, Lord Worthe had everything a man could possibly want. Money—thirty two thousand, six hundred fifty-seven pounds to be exact—and a vast estate: Castlemoor, which consequently was the seat of his earldom—which meant he also had a title.

Young, wealthy, and titled.

Oh, and handsome. (And perhaps a wee bit vain.) A full head of coal black hair, dark green eyes, olive complexion, high cheekbones, and a sharp, angular jaw. His physical looks were only part of his appeal. His clothes were of the height of fashion and always immaculate and pristine. Flawless.

Yes, indeed, Lord Worthe could be termed vain.

But in all fairness to himself, all men born of the aristocracy were vain and arrogant. His closest friend, Michael, Lord Holbrook, was no exception. In fact, if one were interested in a little secret about Holbrook, Gareth—and likely all of Holbrook's relations and staff—would be quick to say that Holbrook's arrogance and vanity went just a little further than Gareth's. Somehow that rascal had reached six-and-twenty without a single blemish or crease upon his face. A fact he was quite proud of—and would soon lose if he continued frowning the way he was currently.

“What has you looking as if you'd just gotten a glimpse at the hangman's noose?” Gareth asked, striding across Holbrook's study toward the comfortable red settee by the window.

“Charlotte,” Holbrook answered raggedly.

Gareth nodded slowly and then made himself comfortable on Holbrook's settee. The two had been friends for as long as Gareth could remember and had absolutely no semblance of ceremony where the other was concerned. Which was a blessed thing just now since Gareth was exhausted from a week of rising before the sun and returning home by lantern in an attempt to hunt foxes. “Is she coming out this year?” Not that he was too interested in Holbrook's family life, but it felt rude not to at least ask.

“Yes.” Holbrook sighed and mindlessly spun the empty decanter in the middle of his oak desk. “She turned eighteen this past winter and has insisted she *will* have a Season.”

“Take her to London, then,” Gareth said easily, crossing his ankles.

“It's not as easy as just packing her into the carriage and making a ride to London.” Holbrook's voice dripped with irritation, likely at Gareth's easy tone.

Gareth shrugged.

“I do hope you're blessed with the joy of a house full of daughters. Six of them at least before you get your heir.”

“As long as I get that heir.” He grinned. “Just think of all the fun I'll get to have before he comes along.”

Holbrook snarled, making Gareth chuckle.

“It was you who cursed me with such a fate—I'm just merely pointing out that it doesn't sound as awful as you might think.”

“Until they turn into young ladies who demand Seasons and talk about nothing but marriage to someone you already hate.”

“If she already has a chap in mind, I think you've already solved your own problem.”

“She doesn't.” Holbrook's face turned to stone. “At least she'd better not.” Sighing, he said, “SI

informed me last night at dinner that if I don't take her to London for a Season, she'll be forced to marry Squire Blevins."

"And what is wrong with the squire?"

"Other than that he has no less than seventy years in his dish, has been made a widower thrice—in the past twenty years alone—and has more than thirty children ranging in age from three to fifty-three—half of which he's already outlived—and the half who are still alive all live with him?"

"Yes, other than all of that."

"Nothing."

"He sounds perfect."

Holbrook's face grew dark. "This is not a time for jesting."

"What could possibly be so difficult about taking Charlotte to London for the Season?" Gareth asked as he absentmindedly knocked together the edges of his boots.

"Oh, I don't know." Holbrook's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Balls, soirees, musicales—"

"Yes, dancing, listening to music, and eating fancy meals every night sounds like a miserable fate."

Holbrook scowled. "Gowns, gloves, seamstresses—"

"Don't forget to add chaperones and suitors to your list," Gareth added helpfully.

Holbrook's knuckles turned white where his hand clutched the decanter and he nodded. "Those, too."

"Just think," Gareth said, moving to lie down on the settee. "As much as you don't like either of those types of people, they both take care of themselves. If you find the right chaperone, she'll handle the suitors and all those other things you mentioned."

Holbrook leaned back in his chair, taking the front two legs off the floor and drummed his fingers on the edge of his desk as if he were actually giving some thought to what Gareth just said. "That could work out quite well."

"Of course it will," Gareth said, stuffing a pillow behind his head.

Holbrook brought all four legs of his chair back to the floor with a sharp *snap*. "Where the devil am I going to find a chaperone?"

Gareth closed his eyes; exhaustion was catching up with him at a breakneck speed. "My cousin will do it."

"And just how do you know that?"

"Because she needs something to do."

"Oh, so she's a busybody," Holbrook mused.

"No, she's a little... precise, if you will, but not a busybody." Gareth moved to make himself more comfortable.

"Precise?"

Gareth mentally shrugged. "Particular. Exact. Specific." Jemma Fairchilde fit all of those definitions... and perhaps a few others. But she was a good lady, just a little odd.

"And just what is your relation to this precisely particular, exact, and specific female?"

"To be precise, she's my cousin's widow who is particularly uncomfortable with living off the generosity of her relations. Which is exactly why this specific lady would be willing to act as a chaperone."

Shaking his head, Holbrook said, "If she's nothing like you, she'll be perfect."

Gareth opened a single eye. "Some seem to think she is. Be careful."

~*~

Suppressing a bark of laughter that was all but forcing its way past his lips at his friend's ridiculous warning, Michael pushed to his feet and headed toward the door to go find Charlotte. For a

much as he found having four younger sisters the equivalent of a millstone tied around his neck, he did enjoy it when they laughed and smiled and lauded him their personal hero—though if anyone were to ever accuse him of such, he'd deny it to his grave.

Chapter Two

Jane Cavanaugh closed her hazel eyes as her sister Charlotte pulled the heavy silver brush through Jane's mahogany hair.

"Sixty-two," Charlotte breathed as she completed another brushstroke. "Sixty-three... sixty-four..."

Jane smiled. Charlotte had always been such a loving sister. Thea, the lady's maid they shared, could have easily combed and styled Jane's hair each day, but Charlotte had always made it well known that she would handle that task. And every day she did. Even on the days when the two weren't getting on well.

"...seventy-three... seventy-four..."

"Charlotte, I need to talk to you," came the baritone voice that belonged to their brother Michael Lord Holbrook, as he entered the drawing room Jane and Charlotte were occupying.

"It'll have to wait," Charlotte said automatically without pausing in her movements. "Seventy-five..."

Michael sighed. "Is it really so important that ladies give their hair one hundred swipes with their brush each day?"

"No," Jane said. "It's one hundred swipes *twice* each day." She tried not to laugh at the stupefied expression on his face. She'd never say such but she'd always questioned the need for exactly one hundred strokes in the morning and another hundred before bed, too. The number seemed too high. But she'd never utter a word about it as long as she lived. If that's how Charlotte wanted to spend time with Jane, she'd just bask in the love and attention.

"How are you feeling today, Jane?" Michael asked.

"Terrible."

Michael's dark eyebrows shot near to his hairline and his pale blue eyes widened. "What's wrong?"

Jane licked her lips and lowered her eyes. "Well, see..." She bit her lip and lowered her voice to a stage whisper. "I've been sitting in this chair so long I do believe I'm developing a sore..."

Michael swallowed so hard it sounded more like a gulp. "A sore?"

Jane nodded slowly, inwardly commanding the corners of her lips to stay still.

"D—do we need to send for a physician?" Michael raked his hand through his hair.

"Yes, immediately," Charlotte interjected before Jane could answer him, stealing all humor Jane had only a moment ago.

"No, I don't need a doctor," Jane confessed to her brother.

"Then why did you say..."

Jane sighed. "Because you always ask how I'm feeling today."

Michael blinked. "I think that's a perfectly logical question considering—"

Though he broke off, his meaning was quite clear.

After falling off a horse when she was ten, Jane had spent the next eleven years in an invalid's chair never to stand up again or dance or court and definitely not marry. Living most of her life in the country already and having been so young when she'd been handed such a fate, none of those things mattered overmuch to her. What *had* mattered was how her family had viewed her...

Her mother had been overzealous in her attempt to make her comfortable and cater to her every wish and demand.

Her youngest two sisters, Olive and Daphne, who were barely out of leading strings at the time, had grown up finding Jane a source of unabashed interest and fascination.

Her sister Charlotte, who was closest to her in age, had taken on more of an older sister role, always wanting to brush her hair and fawn over Jane's wardrobe. Truly the girl would make a splendid lady's maid if she were to take up a post for the Crown and had to be a spy disguised as a lady's maid.

Her father was the only one who treated her exactly the same as he had before: ignoring her as if she didn't exist. She was a girl, after all. To his mind, daughters served only one purpose: marital connections. But since the late Lord Holbrook already had a title and plenty of money, that wasn't necessary. And *if* for some reason that became a future need, he still had three other daughters of whom he could marry off for money or to elevate his position. Jane was just a casualty. An unimportant one.

Though she found it annoying at times the way her sisters and her now deceased mother treated her, what had always hurt the most was how Michael had changed. At five years her senior, they'd never been overly close, but had found ways to get each other into trouble or creep up and startle the other, thus giving them some sort of a relationship. But when he returned from Eton the summer following her accident he'd kept his distance almost as if he was afraid of hurting her just by standing too close. And may the Almighty have mercy on anyone who *did* get too close. Michael was a fierce protector; she'd give him that. But for as nice as it was to have a protector, sometimes all she wanted was an equal. She'd had eleven years to grow accustomed to what seemed to be his permanent treatment of her; unfortunately, it didn't make it hurt any less. Especially the fact he always greeted her with the exact same question.

Jane jerked her attention back to present. "I'm feeling fine today, Michael. Thank you for inquiring."

Michael knit his brows together. "Are you upset?"

"Perhaps at me for ruining her jest," Charlotte, ever the peacemaker, supplied for them.

Jane sighed. Charlotte meant well. "Actually, I am not upset with you, Charlotte." She narrowed her eyes on Michael. "I am a bit agitated with you, however."

Michael's open palm flew to his chest, sending a loud *smacking* sound echoing through the drawing room. "Me? Whatever for? All I did was inquire how you were feeling."

"Exactly."

The little crease between his eyebrows deepened.

"You should be careful making that face, Michael, or you'll get a wrinkle—" she pointed to the spot between her eyes— "right here."

Michael scowled at her. "Perhaps if you'd tell me what I've done to upset you so, I wouldn't have to worry about that."

"It doesn't matter."

Michael pressed his lips together. "Very well, then. I don't have time for games anyhow."

Charlotte heaved a sigh.

Michael ignored her, presumably because he either didn't know what to say or would rather not know what she was sighing about. "Charlotte, I have some good news."

"You're taking me to London for the Season," Charlotte said, with what could only be termed a pleading smile.

Michael's face fell. "How did you know?"

Jane tried not to laugh at his response. Charlotte hadn't known before, but she certainly did now.

"Oh, I didn't know," Charlotte said, throwing her arms around him in an all-consuming hug. "I assumed if I begged often enough you'd finally give in."

"Indeed." Michael gave her back three soft pats then lowered his hand back to his side.

Charlotte gave a final squeal of delight and lowered herself into the chair beside Jane. Clapping her hands together as if to give the room the impression she was not nearly as excited as she truly was, she said, "When do we leave?"

"Two weeks."

Charlotte gave out another squeal of excitement. Then a split-second later, she was up off her chair and pacing the floor. "Hmmm a fortnight doesn't give us long..." She worried the stiff pink lace that rimmed her cuff. "We'll each require at least four new ball gowns—all in different colors, of course. But still they need to complement each other. We'll need two, no three, new pair of silk gloves... fans..."

Michael and Jane exchanged looks. Jane forced a shrug and tried to block out her sister's prattling. Jane closed her eyes. She'd known the past few years it was only a matter of time before her sister left for London and married. She'd even prepared herself for it. Tried to anyway. She squeezed her eyelids tighter to hold in the hot tears that were forming. It was the way it had to be. Charlotte was young and beautiful, a skilled dancer and accomplished violinist. Her sister had much to offer any gentlemen worthy of her time.

"Er... Char, before you spend my entire fortune on fripperies, I think I need to clarify something."

Charlotte stopped pacing and stared at him. "Yes?"

"You are aware that Olive and Daphne are too young to go to any balls and won't be going into modiste as long as I have any say in the matter?"

Charlotte gave him a dubious look. "You'd better prepare yourself. They might still be in the schoolroom now, but they'll be begging for their Seasons before you know it."

Michael buried his head into his hands. "Have mercy on me," came his muffled voice.

Jane and Charlotte giggled at his theatrics.

"I'll pray for you tonight, Michael," Jane said.

He straightened. "Please do." Turning his attention back to Charlotte, he asked, "Then if you're not planning matching wardrobes for you, Olive and Daphne. Then who are you..." His eyes widened.

Charlotte's gentle hand came down on Jane's shoulder. "We'll need to be the most beautiful ladies in attendance, don't you think?"

A chorus of "ers," "ums," and even a few "uhs," made by both Michael and Jane filled the air.

"I cannot go," Jane finally said at last, fighting back her tears.

"Of course you can," Charlotte argued.

"I know you mean well to invite me, Charlotte, but it's not my place to go."

"Why not?" Charlotte's demand was none-too-gentle.

Jane implored her with her eyes. Never once had Charlotte made her feel as small and uncomfortable as she did right now. "Need I spell it out for you?" she all but spat.

Charlotte blanched. "I've never known you to be one to let your... predicament... rule you so."

Red hot anger bubbled up inside Jane. "It's not my *predicament* that is ruling me. It's a little thing known as sense."

"Poppycock."

Indignation fired in Jane's gut and she wanted nothing more than to quit her sister's company. Were she able to walk, this would be one of those moments where she'd sweep the room like a queen the way she'd heard ladies of the *ton* did when they were in the throes of making a grand exit. Instead she reached for the wooden rim on the outside of the wheels of her chair and began rolling herself to the door.

Michael started as if he'd been in a trance and Jane's departure had pulled him to present. He jumped off the chair he'd been occupying and reached for the back of Jane's chair.

“Don’t go. I—I didn’t mean to upset you.” The waver in Charlotte’s voice filled Jane with shame for snapping at her. Charlotte placed her hand on Jane’s arm and met her eyes. “You’re my sister, Jane. I always thought we’d go to London together for our Season.”

Jane clenched her hands into fists. Why did Charlotte insist on pretending that was even an option for Jane?

“I know there are some things we won’t be able to do,” Charlotte admitted. “But I don’t want to do any of it if you’re not there with me.”

“But I can’t do any of it.”

“Yes, you can.” Charlotte blinked away the tears that were glistening in her brown eyes. “You can still attend musicales and dinners. We’ll hold court every morning in our drawing room where a gaggle of suitors will fight over the two of us.”

“And where shall I find these suitors?” Jane asked, not unkindly, but not exactly encouragingly.

Charlotte poked out her bottom lip. “There is more to do at balls than dance, wouldn’t you know? You can play cards—” She broke off with a snort then offered Jane her best smile. “We’ll be able to sit in the far corners of the ballrooms together and gossip behind our fans without anyone thinking we’re snobs.”

“Charlotte, that all sounds so wonderful, but if you’re chatting with me at balls, you won’t be hunting down a husband.”

“Oh, that’s what you think,” Charlotte scoffed. “We’ll let everyone think we’re just gossiping, but we’ll really be strategizing about who is the best catch and how to snare him.”

The corner of Jane’s lips twitched at the thought. She shook her head. “Thank you for inviting me, but I don’t think I want to go.”

Charlotte exhaled. “Well, then, I guess we’ll both become spinsters.”

Jane wasn’t sure, but it sounded almost as if Michael sighed with relief from where he stood behind her. “Don’t do that Charlotte.”

“Do what?”

“Throw away your future happiness.”

“I’m not,” Charlotte said.

Jane’s lips thinned. “Yes, you are, and your ploy to force me to go with you isn’t going to work.”

“It’s not a ploy. If you don’t go, then I shan’t go.”

It was moments like these when Jane wished she could just stand straight up and throttle her sister. Then again, since Charlotte was bent over and her neck was just *right there*, she didn’t really need her legs anyhow. “You are very stubborn, did you know that?”

Charlotte beamed with pride. “I did. I’m also determined.” She looked up to Michael. “What do you think? Can you be brave enough to have not one, but two debutantes living in your London townhouse this Season?”

“I—I don’t know.” The hesitancy in his voice spoke volumes that only confirmed Jane’s apprehension. London was not the place for a lady such as herself.

“It’s all right,” Jane said a moment later, if for no other reason than to break the uncomfortable silence that was threatening to engulf and suffocate them all. “See, Charlotte, it’s for the best if I stay here. You go and have fun for me. I’ll be all right. This is for the best. It’s the way it should be.” She closed her mouth. She was babbling.

“No, it’s not.”

“Ye—”

“*Bath!*”

“Bath?” Jane and Michael repeated in unison.

Charlotte nodded. “Yes, Bath.” She stepped away and began wearing another hole in the rug.

“We’re only three hours from Bath. We could go to the assemblies there if London isn’t an option.”

—“Three hours in each direction is a long time to be in the carriage,” Michael pointed out. Then as if to prove his point, he added, “Your gowns would be crushed and your hair will have already started to fall.”

“Then we shall have to rent a house in Bath—” Jane cupped her hand over her mouth. What had gotten into her? She couldn’t have a true Season. No gentlemen would be interested in her and all the young ladies would treat her as an outsider besides.

“That’s an excellent idea,” Charlotte chirped. “Just think, Michael, it will only cost you what you originally thought I was trying to spend on Olive and Daphne to have proper costumes.”

“I’m not worried about the money.” Michael’s voice was a mere whisper. He moved to stand on the other side of Jane. “Are you... Do you...” He ran his hand over his face and let out a deep breath.

“If you’re afraid I’ll embarrass you—”

“No!” Michael barked. He cleared his throat. “It’s not that. I just don’t want anything to hurt you.”

Jane released a breath she hadn’t even realized she’d been holding and without thinking reached for his arm. “Nothing will. I won’t let it.”

“You say that now, but if someone is unkind—”

“Then it’s no different than how I’ve been treated around here.”

Michael’s face darkened. “Who?”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does. I won’t have my sister made into a fool.”

An uncontrollable burble of laughter passed Jane’s lips. “I haven’t been made into a fool.” She sobered. “And I won’t be.”

Michael looked unconvinced. “I just want to protect you.”

“I know.” And truth to tell, she wanted to protect herself. But she wouldn’t do that at the expense of Charlotte’s Season. The idea of going to London was daunting, but Bath was less intimidating. There would be far fewer people. Besides, a week or two in Bath and Charlotte would have a case of the doldrums like she’d never experienced before and would be easier to convince to go on to London and have a Season without Jane. “It’ll be all right.”

Michael offered her a resigned smile. “I hope so.”

And so did Jane.

~*~

Michael swallowed the hard lump that had formed in his throat at the latest change in events. Jane was different. She was delicate and needed protection. He couldn’t allow her to have a Season. *They’d eat her alive.* Sharp nails bit into his palms, alerting him to just how tightly he was now clenching his fists.

It’s only Bath. There won’t be very many people there and likely none of consequence.

That didn’t make him feel any better. There’d still be uppity gentlemen and waspish ladies. Not to mention the old harpies who thrived on gossip.

Mother had gone to great lengths to shield Jane from the cruelty of the world. Michael had vowed to her on her deathbed he’d provide the same protection. But that shield would evaporate in Bath.

“Are you... Do you...” He ran his hand over his face and let out a deep breath, unsure how to finish the rest of his sentence. He didn’t want to discourage her, and yet, he did.

“If you’re afraid I’ll embarrass you—”

“No!” Michael barked. Embarrass him? How would she possibly do that? He cleared his throat. “It’s not that. I just don’t want anything to hurt you.”

“Nothing will. I won’t let it.”

~~Michael could easily believe she’d like to think that, but it didn’t make it true. No matter what anyone else might say, words had a way of cutting to the quick. “You say that now, but if someone is unkind—”~~

“Then it’s no different than how I’ve been treated around here.”

Michael’s blood simmered in an instant. “Who?”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does. I won’t have my sister made into a fool.”

A little laugh passed his sister’s lips. “I haven’t been made into a fool. And I won’t be.”

Yes, you will. He bit back his words. They’d only serve to hurt her and that’d make him just as awful as those he wanted to protect her from. “I just want to protect you.”

“I know.” Jane paused and studied the tops of her slippers for a moment before offering him what he took to be the worst reassuring smile he’d ever seen. “It’ll be all right.”

Michael wasn’t so sure, but if she wanted to go... He could banish her, he supposed, but then they’d both think him a monster. Sighing, he said. “I hope so.”

Doing his best to fight the turmoil raging within him, he took a step away from his two sisters who were now hugging and squealing in delight—well, at least one of them was, the other’s squeals were still yet unconvincing. He murmured his excuses and added something about needing to make arrangements.

That was true enough. He did need to make arrangements for their stay in, or rather *near*, Bath and he knew just who to ask.

“Worthe, I need another favor,” Michael said unceremoniously as he reentered his study.

His friend didn’t even open his eyes. “Hmmm?”

“Can we stay at Castlemoor for a few weeks this Season?”

“Of course. Come and stay as long as you want.”

Chapter Three

Castlemoor *Two Weeks Later*

Gareth Lambert, Lord Worthe wanted nothing more than to cut out his own tongue. Well, perhaps *that* was a little far reaching.

However, it'd do him well to give a little more thought to the repercussions of committing to things in the future, he chided himself when his gaze fell upon no less than twelve trunks in the entrance of the great hall. He scowled down at the note in his hand.

Worthe,

Please accept my apologies for such late notice. The ladies were eager to attend the Lange's annual musicale. I'll come join them shortly.

Holbrook

Gareth crumpled up the note in his hand and his mind drifted back to the day he'd gone to see his friend Holbrook a fortnight ago. He'd been tired when he'd arrived that day; he remembered that. He also remembered being flippant about Holbrook bringing his sister out for a Season. He even remembered suggesting his cousin, Mrs. Fairchilde, to be Charlotte's chaperone. What he didn't remember so well was agreeing to let them use *his* estate for their... festivities or whatever the hell it was they were doing here.

"Where shall we put Miss Cavanaugh, my lord?" Potter, his butler, asked.

Why the devil was Gareth being asked which bedchamber to assign the chit? He wasn't on the staff. He just paid them. "Wherever you want," he said with a shrug. "The drawing room, perhaps."

Potter pressed his lips together and gave a stiff nod. "Yes, my lord."

"Anything else?"

"No, my lord." Potter offered a low bow, then clasped his hands behind his back and walked over to where an anxious Mrs. Boyles, the housekeeper, stood at the foot of the grand staircase twisting a lock of her black hair around her finger. Odd.

Gareth shrugged again and walked to his study. He didn't know too much about Holbrook's sisters. He'd seen them all a time or two in passing, but they usually stayed in the drawing room at Holbrook Hall or would occasionally go to the gardens if the day was nice. Truth to tell, if he were to see any of them walking down the lane, he wouldn't recognize any of them. He didn't mean to be unobservant— Actually, yes he did mean to be. Gentlemen such as himself, the ones with only a few friends to speak of, did not get involved with his friend's sisters. Never. It wasn't done.

Sighing, he took out his account ledgers. Numbers were a safe distraction.

Well, they would be if he didn't hear a never-ending chorus of girlish giggles on the other side of the wall.

Gareth gripped his pen tighter and hummed to block out the offending noise.

It didn't work.

For more than two hours Gareth sat rooted to his chair, staring down at the numbers scribbled on parchment in front of him and unable to add or subtract a single digit. *Blasted Holbrook!* He closed his ledger with a snap. The man could have at least had the decency to come stay for a while and keep Gareth company.

He's probably enjoying the quiet, Gareth reasoned to himself as he pushed to his feet. Well, Gareth would be doing the same as soon as he could get to the stable and get his horse saddled.

"...let's add Lord Worthe to the list."

Gareth had no idea if the voice he just heard belonged to his cousin Mrs. Jemma Fairchilde or her charge, Charlotte Cavanaugh; nor what *list* was being referenced, but chills ran up his spine. Perhaps he'd better poke his head in that room and let Mrs. Fairchilde and Charlotte both know right now his name was not to be put on *any* list. Ever.

Giving a courtesy knock on the opened door of the drawing room, Gareth came to stand in the doorway. "Ladies—" he began, his eyes scanning the room.

Unlike Holbrook's sister, he'd recognize Jemma Fairchilde on the horizon line by her hairstyle alone. While most ladies of the *ton* would spend extra time making sure their hair was perfectly coiffed before a ball, it was apparent that Mrs. Fairchilde went through all that trouble every morning. Her favorite, and dare he say only, style seemed to be having her hair piled as high atop her head as was possible for her maid to do, then curled.

Seated beside her on the settee was a young lady who he supposed was Charlotte or Miss Cavanaugh as he should likely style her. She was a pretty young lady with auburn hair and brown eyes that were a perfect compliment to her olive skin.

On the other side of her, sitting in a chair he didn't recognize as one of his own was a third young lady. Her hair was the same shade as Miss Cavanaugh's, but that's where the similarity ended. Her skin was what many might term as porcelain, which was no disrespect as it fit her perfectly and her hazel eyes held a little gleam of something that he couldn't place. She must have been cold for she sat with a large lap blanket draped over her that almost reached the floor. Who was this beautiful young lady and why was she in his drawing room? Was *she* Miss Cavanaugh? His heart slammed in his chest. *No!* Perhaps she was a friend of Miss Cavanaugh's. Equal parts relief and excitement coursed through him.

He would not—*could* not—have any interest in Holbrook's sister. Her friend, however... Well, there was no reason he couldn't. Unless he found her disagreeable. And so far he had not.

She quirked a brow at him.

His face would have flushed at being caught staring so shamelessly at her if he were that sort.

Instead, he cleared his throat. "Ladies—" he moved his eyes over all three, lingering for an extra moment on the lady in the green velvet chair with the lap blanket.

"Lord Worthe?" Jemma asked.

Gareth jerked his eyes to her. "Yes?"

"Was there a reason you came in here, dear cousin?"

"Actually, yes." What it was he couldn't remember at the moment.

"I think you were right, Jane. You should add him to the list."

Jane. List. Gareth's mind spun. "Wait." He held up a single hand. "No list."

"Pardon?" Jemma asked as if she were naïve.

"My name will not be added to any list," he clarified. *Unless the lady in the chair next to the settee is making a list of her potential suitors. Then my name can be on the list.* He gritted his teeth that—was a dangerous thought.

"Too late," chirped the beauty in the green chair, who he now knew was Jane and not Charlotte. She held up a piece of parchment that had a few lines of writing. The top line read: *Potential Husbands for Charlotte.* Jane pointed to the last line. "You're already on it."

"Take me off."

"I can't," she said without a hint of remorse. "Ink doesn't erase."

"Cross it off," he ground out.

The right corner of her lips tipped up, sending a spark of desire firing straight to his groin. “No, believe it shall stay. ~~Anyone who expends this much energy protesting must be worth the catch.~~”

She had him there. “Very well. Leave my name on that list.” He crossed his arms. “But do so at your own risk. I’m not an honorable gentleman.”

The brave young lady didn’t even blink at his blunt statement. “Not to worry, my lord,” she said with far more calm and reserve than he’d have expected. “My sister will have a love match, or no match at all.”

“*Sister?*” He knew Holbrook was sending one, he didn’t realize there’d be two of them.

All three of the ladies exchanged confused looks.

“You did know we were coming?” Jemma’s tone was uncertain.

“Yes. Holbrook mentioned you and his sister Charlotte would be staying at my estate for a few weeks while attending assemblies in Bath.” That was true enough. Holbrook had actually asked, and Gareth had thoughtlessly agreed, but they didn’t need those details.

“I should go,” blurted Jane, jarring him from his wayward thoughts. She gathered up her lap blanket and her sister jumped to her feet and practically leapt to Jane’s side.

Jane ignored her and haphazardly threw her lap blanket toward the settee.

“Wait... No... What?” He blinked in confusion at the chaos that had just taken over his drawing room.

Charlotte and Jemma were both speaking at once. Charlotte to Jane and Jemma to Gareth. Gareth couldn’t hear what either of them said, he was too fixated on Jane’s bright red face.

“Wait,” he said again, louder this time.

Jemma quieted, but Charlotte continued to talk to her sister as if she hadn’t heard him.

Jane dropped her head and it looked like her shoulders were tensing.

What an odd young lady. Most would have just been on their feet and out the door in their attention-seeking way long before now. Surely this wasn’t her way of seeking attention: to sit and claim to be leaving but never actually get up. His mother used to do that and it infuriated him.

Gareth dropped his eyes a little lower and noticed her hands were clenched into fists wrapped around the outside of wooden wheels on the side of her chair. Realization took hold of him like a punch in the gut: she hadn’t left the room yet only because she couldn’t.

Holbrook had once mentioned that his sister had fallen off a horse on their father’s estate during their first term at Eton, thus confining her to a chair. That was it. It wasn’t that Holbrook was ashamed or embarrassed, mind you. That was just Holbrook’s way: he didn’t make chitchat and he certainly didn’t gossip.

But that didn’t solve Jane’s current situation which was that her chair, which had the back right corner pressed up against the window casing, was butted up against the end of the settee in such a way she couldn’t move forward no matter how she tried to maneuver herself. Likely it was placed that way so she could be close enough to her sister and Jemma to be part of their conversation, none of them considering this possible ending to their meeting. Neither Jemma nor Charlotte seemed too concerned with helping Jane with her efforts to leave or at the very least ring for help.

A flood of emotions overwhelmed him, the most prevalent being shock, uncertainty, and irritation for the two other females in the room. Couldn’t they see they were only making it worse for her by standing by and trying to argue?

“Enough.” Even he winced at the sharpness in his voice. Pretending not to notice either of their stares, he walked over to the settee and moved it over to allow her the room she needed to leave without causing her frustration or any more undue embarrassment.

Then he sat down, still allowing her enough room to get by, though he hoped she wouldn’t try to leave.

“Jane?”

~~She swallowed hard, but didn't say anything. He didn't blame her. He'd be uncomfortable if he~~
been thrust in her situation, too.

He didn't know what to say to her; all he knew was that he had to say something. This wasn't her fault. It was his. Holbrook had probably told him that they were both coming; he just didn't remember it. He blew out a deep breath. “You don't have to go.”

“Yes, I do.”

“No, you don't,” he corrected. “You want to. There's a difference.”

“Wouldn't you?”

He pursed his lips. “Actually, yes. I like to escape my own company as often as I can, too.”

The unmistakable sound of a suppressed giggle emanated from her throat.

“I need to warn all of you ladies that I'm not a very exciting gentleman. I like to ride horses and shoot. I play chess with myself by making one move each day.” He gestured to the half-played game of chess in the corner. “I'd prefer to take a walk through the woods than to stroll the streets of London. I'm terrible at conversations and unfortunately, I was sleeping off a week of fox hunting when Holbrook asked me about the use of my estate for your visit in Bath. I apologize.” He looked around at all of the ladies in the room. “I remember him telling me about how Charlotte had come of age now and wanted a Season and I suggested Jemma could act as her chaperone.” He met Jane's eyes and swallowed. “I'm not very attentive to conversations with your brother. And he's not always forthcoming with details. It's why we get along so well. Likely he mentioned that you'd be coming, too, and I wasn't being attentive enough to realize it. I'm sorry. You are welcome here just the same as your sister is.”

~*~

Jane stared at their host. He was far more handsome than she remembered. Then again, she'd only ever glimpsed him in darkened halls or seen his retreating back. He was her brother's friend, which he'd made clear by never extending pleasantries to her or Charlotte.

She studied his green eyes. They were filled with uncertainty and perhaps a dose of embarrassment at the whole misunderstanding. She flushed with her own embarrassment at her earlier reaction. If she'd had any chance of him treating her like he would her sister or Mrs. Fairchilde it had evaporated now. No matter. It wasn't as if she could hide it. Besides, Michael had spoken of Gareth, Lord Worthe, for as long as she could remember. Surely he already knew she was confined to a chair. And now he'd think she was spoiled and full of self-pity.

She sighed.

“I don't want to be an inconvenience.” It wasn't a lie.

Lord Worthe snorted. “Whether you want to be or not you'll be one. Just like your sister and Jemma.” He stretched his long legs out in front of him and crossed his ankles. “Since these two aren't planning to leave—” he flickered his mossy gaze to Mrs. Fairchilde and Charlotte who both wore apprehensive expressions, but shook their heads slowly in what she took as agreement with him— “you might as well stay then, too.”

“Well, with an invitation such as that, how could I possibly think to leave?” Jane muttered before she could think better of it.

“It's settled, then.” Lord Worthe flashed her a wide grin. “You're all staying.” He shoved to his feet and handed her back her lap blanket, then reached down and picked up the parchment she'd been using to compile a list of possible gentlemen for Charlotte to pursue. Before handing it to Jane, however, he skimmed the list, his left eyebrow inching higher on his forehead with each name he read.

Lord Worthe gave a low whistle. “Holbrook must be the cruelest brother in existence,” he mused, handing Jane her list.

“What is that to mean?” she asked.

~~He shrugged. “Scoundrels. Every one of them.”~~

Jane furrowed her brow. “Oh.”

“Oh?”

“Perhaps you could help us, then,” Mrs. Fairchilde suggested.

“Hel—er... no,” Lord Worthe said without hesitation. He gave his head a shake. “It’s bad enough I’ll have to be Holbrook’s second if—no, *when*—he duels with any of the names on that list. I’ll not go so far as to make any suggestions and be the one he calls out.”

His words gave Jane pause. There was something more to what he said than just him not wanting to be trapped into spending time with them, but what, she didn’t know. “Are all of these gentlemen scoundrels?”

“Yes.” The conviction in his voice sent a flood of disappointment through her. “Just where did you come up with these names, I wonder?”

“The scandal sheets,” Charlotte supplied matter-of-factly.

“You don’t say,” Lord Worthe muttered. He shook his head ruefully. “You ladies do know those who appear in scandal sheets are mentioned for a reason.”

“Yes, because they’ve been involved in a scandal,” Jane said without hesitation.

Lord Worthe’s face lost all expression. “And you *want* that?”

“Of course,” Jane said heartily. “Lady Algen writes that reformed rakes make for the best husbands.”

“The devil they do,” Lord Worthe scoffed. “I’m not your brother, but since I don’t relish the thought of being his second, I’ll give you this advice: find a gentleman whose name has not been bandied about in the scandal sheets and you’ll live a far better existence.”

Jane’s lips spread into a smile of their own accord and she didn’t have a care to stop them. “So *was* right.”

Lord Worthe crossed his arms and gave her a pointed look. “Pray tell?”

“I don’t recall ever seeing *your* name in the scandal sheets.”

Chapter Four

Gareth felt like a salmon swimming upstream.

He hadn't been able to pinpoint what that gleam in Jane's eyes was when he first saw her, but there was no mistaking what it was after their final words in the drawing room: mischief. The lady was full of it.

And she was staying at his house.

He groaned.

Jemma, for as much as he thought she'd be a suitable chaperone, being a widow and all, was clearly not the best choice. What was she doing helping them compile a list of suitors from the scandal sheets? Wasn't that what *Debrett's* was for?

He groaned again.

Holbrook wouldn't be arriving for another day. A lot could happen in such a short time with a feisty young lady with a goose for a chaperone. Perhaps he should leave for London tonight. No, the Season there wouldn't start for at least a fortnight and there was little he hated more than being cooped up in his townhouse.

Refusing to groan again, he made his way out to the stables and saddled up Pegasus. Though not a thoroughbred, his stallion had unmatched strength and speed. Riding at a hell-for-leather speed had always helped him clear his mind.

Unfortunately, this particular ride did no such thing.

"Won't you join us for dinner tonight?" Jemma asked when he'd taken not three steps in the front door.

"Do I have a choice?"

"You always have a choice." She worried her bottom lip. She really was an attractive young lady. Just an inch or two above five feet, her features were soft and delicate right down to her light blonde hair and pale grey eyes. "Thank you for talking to Jane earlier."

Gareth stared at her. Why did his talking to Jane warrant a thank you? "For convincing her to stay?" he ventured.

"That, too," she agreed. "I think she is nervous."

Gareth snorted. "She hides it well." She had no problem holding her own with him. A smile tugged at his lips and he immediately pressed his lips together. She was Holbrook's sister for pity's sake.

"Regardless, thank you."

Muttering something of an acceptance, he offered Jemma his arm and escorted her to the dining room.

Then froze.

"Why are we all congregating at this end?" he asked without ceremony.

"So we can hear each other," Jemma said as if she were speaking to a simpleton.

His dining table could easily seat forty people, if he were so inclined to invite that many to dinner. He'd never been overly fond of the rules of polite society, but shouldn't he be at one end, Jemma at the other and the two sisters seated across from each other in the middle? Why did they need to be close enough to talk anyway?

"Stop grumbling and take your seat, my lord," Jemma said with a wink and a nudge in the direction of his seat at the end of the table.

Suddenly he felt very childish for his wish not to sit so close to the ladies. Tamping down his slight embarrassment, he took his seat. His chair just so happened to be flanked by both sisters, one on either side of him.

“Miss Cavanaugh, Miss Charlotte,” he greeted.

“Lord Worthe,” they both murmured in unison.

Gareth put his napkin on his lap. It was rare for him to have a dinner companion, or any type of companion. Having grown up as an only child without a mother and with a father who would rather be anywhere his son wasn't, hadn't afforded him much training in the art of chitchat. His first year at Eton he'd made a handful of friends, but with time the silken strings of friendship had severed and, save Holbrook, he had just as many friends and acquaintances now as he had when he'd first gone off to school.

“In deep thought down there, Worthe?” Mrs. Fairchilde's voice pulled Gareth from his fog.

“Steam spiraling out of my ears again?” Gareth teased.

“No, your face is contorted as if you're suffering from—” Jane broke off abruptly, her face flushing a fierce and fetching red.

“Do continue,” Gareth urged, pulling apart his dinner roll.

“I think it'd be best if I didn't,” she said, flushing again.

“Well, that's no fun,” he said on a sigh, reaching for his fork. He stabbed a piece of baked chicken on his plate and brought it to his mouth.

“And neither is the ailment you look as if you're suffering from,” she said oh-so-sweetly.

He released a sharp bark of laughter. “Indeed.” He ate another piece of chicken. “Have you all settled into your new rooms?”

“Yes, my lord,” Charlotte said. “Thank you again for allowing us to stay at your home. It was most kind and generous of you.”

“Please don't mention it again,” Gareth murmured. “Unlike your brother, I'm painfully shy. Particularly about praise.”

Laughter, belonging to the outspoken Jane, filled the air.

A hot coil tightened in his stomach, jarring him straight to the toes. He tightened his hold on his fork. Her laughter, he'd just realized, could be his undoing. It'd be best not to elicit such a response from her in the future. For if he did, it could only lead to his own destruction.

“While you certainly have Michael pinned, I find it hard to believe that you have such a strong aversion to praise,” Jane said.

“Do you wish to find out?”

“Are you fishing for compliments, Lord Worthe?”

That brought him up short. “No.”

“Uh huh.” She held his gaze and brought a forkful of beans to her mouth.

“I don't have to fish,” he said, holding her gaze as he took a bite of his own beans.

She swallowed what was in her mouth. “Is that because you don't know how?”

“I can catch the biggest trout in the shire with only a black fly.”

“And praise makes you uncomfortable, does it?” she asked, a triumphant smile taking her lips.

Deuce take it, she was good.

~*~

“I'm so sorry, Charlotte,” Jane blurted as soon as Mrs. Fairchilde left them alone.

“It's all right.” Charlotte's voice sounded different, but Jane couldn't place what it was.

“No, it's not.” She reached behind her to still Charlotte's hand where she was brushing Jane's hair. “I'll apologize to him first thing in the morning.” Then plead with him to allow Charlotte to stay. She'd return home, but Charlotte didn't deserve to be sent away because of her own quick tongue.

Charlotte pulled her hand from Jane's staying hold and continued in her brushing. "It might be best not to say anything."

Not saying anything was what led to a very uncomfortable dinner. After she'd accused Lord Worthe of fishing for compliments, then baited him, not another word had been spoken by anyone for the remainder of the meal. A blanket of uncomfortable silence had enveloped them all until Lord Worthe took his leave.

Surely he'd gone to his study to send for Michael to come collect them. She rubbed her temples where a headache was forming. This was her fault. She should have left well enough alone.

But he's so fun to banter with.

That was true enough. It was fun to banter with him. He was the only one it seemed who had no reservation about exchanging retorts with her. But she had taken it too far this time. Even being cooped up and kept away from people for so much of her life she knew better than to prick a man's pride. Which is exactly what she'd done and ruined her sister's chance for a Season at the same time.

"I'm sorry," she said again.

"Don't be." Charlotte set the brush down. "I rather think he likes it."

"You what?"

Charlotte walked over to a red velvet bell pull and gave it two quick tugs, then retrieved Jane a clean shift from her trunk. "I think you heard me."

"Surely not correctly."

Charlotte unfolded Jane's shift and aired it out. "Yes, you did." She sat down on the settee and looked around the room that earlier today had been only the drawing room, but would have to be treated as Jane's bedchamber at night due to there not being any downstairs bedchambers. She bit her lip. "I can't explain it, but I don't think he was as offended as you think he was."

Jane doubted that, but wasn't given a chance to argue when one of Lord Worthe's servants opened the door.

Charlotte quickly explained that they'd need Thea sent in to help Jane get ready for bed.

The maid looked a bit confused, but didn't argue.

"Would you like for me to stay with you?" Charlotte offered.

"No, I'll be all right." When Father had died three years ago, Michael had a special chair commissioned for Jane with green velvet cushions and a reclining back. It wasn't the most comfortable thing to rest on, but it suited well enough for short naps. It might take a little getting used to, but with the back reclined and an ottoman for her feet, it should be all right.

Thea came in then and wordlessly, she and Charlotte began helping Jane change for bed. As usual, Thea knelt on the floor and removed Jane's slippers and stockings while Jane leaned forward so Charlotte could unbutton the back of her gown. When Thea finished, she came up to help Charlotte untie as much of Jane's corset as they could reach with her still in the chair.

"Ready?"

Jane gripped the side of her chair and scooted her bottom to the end. "Yes." She hated this part. Her legs were so withered and weak that the few minutes she had to stand to dress and undress were almost unbearable at times.

"The bookshelf looks sturdy," Charlotte said, gripping Jane just above the elbow.

Thea took her stance and on the count of three, the three of them worked together to get Jane to standing position.

Jane immediately reached out her right hand to the edge of the bookcase for support and rested the other one on Thea's shoulder.

Both of the other women worked as quickly as they could to loosen the remaining fastenings on Jane's gown.

Charlotte's arm slipped around her just under her shoulders and Thea began pulling off her left sleeve. ~~Once she'd freed her arm, Jane reached her unsteady left arm across to hold the bookcase with that hand so Thea could remove her other sleeve.~~

Thea slid her gown, corset, and shift down and Jane's hand tightened its clammy grip on the edge of the bookcase to steady her trembling body. *Almost done*, she reassured herself when Thea untied her petticoat. Really, there was no reason for her to wear them other than her desire to be seen—and treated—like everyone else as much as possible. Pride was such a damnable thing sometimes.

"Ready to sit?" Thea asked.

Jane was more than ready. Maintaining her hold on the edge of the bookcase, she reached back with her right hand to find the armrest of her chair, then slowly lowered herself into it before taking her fresh shift from Charlotte while Thea went to the floor to gather the pile of discarded clothes that were pooled around Jane's feet.

Quickly, she pulled her shift over her head then shimmied it down as far as it would go in her sitting position. Over the years, they'd tried a combination of ways to help her change and this was the easiest way they'd found. She might get her pride in wearing petticoats, but she'd sacrificed some by having to wait to sit before pulling on a new shift and waiting again until she was lying down to pull all the way down. But every attempt she'd made at trying to pull it on while still standing had led to a painful fall. Pride only went so far.

"Shall we move a little closer to the fire?" Thea suggested when she returned to Jane's side.

Jane nodded once then allowed Charlotte and Thea to push her chair closer to the fire. She'd always known Charlotte did a lot for her, but just then an overwhelming sensation of gratitude for her sister flooded her. Thea couldn't help her dress or move Jane's chair on her own. When Charlotte married and moved away, Thea would need help. Michael would hire another maid, she supposed, but it wouldn't be the same.

Instinctively, she reached for Charlotte's hand and gave it a squeeze. "Thank you."

"I didn't push it by myself."

Jane smiled and reached for Thea's hand, too. "Thank you both. I don't know where I'd be without the two of you."

Neither said anything in response. There was nothing to say. Nobody could ever offer her the great care these two did and they all knew it.

Thea squeezed her hand in return then dashed off to retrieve the ottoman. She placed it by Jane's feet and waited while Charlotte helped Jane lift her legs, then slid the ottoman into position.

"Are you ready to lean back?" Charlotte asked.

Jane nodded and reached for the hem of her shift. The best time to pull it down would be when Thea leaned her chair back.

Thea pulled a lever underneath the back part of her chair then slowly she and Charlotte guided the chair back down until Jane was lying flat.

"Thank you both." Jane wiggled her shoulders to get comfortable.

"You're welcome, dear," Charlotte said, covering her with a blanket while Thea stoked the fire. It had seemed odd to Jane the first time she saw Thea bend down and stoke a fire but it only took once to learn this Scottish woman could build a fire better than any footman in Michael's employ.

When the two were done seeing to Jane's comfort, they bade her goodnight, snuffed all the candles except the two in the sconce closest to the door, and let themselves out—leaving Jane in a very large, unfamiliar room with nothing but her blanket and thoughts. It would be a long night, to be sure.

Chapter Five

Gareth threw aside his sheet and blanket and rolled himself to a sitting position at the end of his bed. Scrubbing his face with his hands, he groaned. Insomnia was worse than the plague. It had to be. At least with the plague one either got well or died. He'd been suffering from occasional stretches of insomnia for as long as his seven-and-twenty-year-old memory could think back. Even at Eton and Cambridge he'd been restless at night during weeks of exams or other planned interruptions.

He lowered both of his bare feet to the cold stone floor beneath him and grimaced.

Unfortunately, even the cold couldn't keep him in his bed and under the warm blankets.

He stood and threw on his dressing robe.

Plucking a candle from the nearest sconce, Gareth wandered into the hall, then down the stairs.

Chess, he thought with a *snap* of his fingers.

With the ladies occupying his drawing room for the majority of the day he hadn't made his move in the afternoon. Perhaps he'd just play out a whole game while he was there—

All thoughts of chess ended and his frown deepened when the door to the drawing room came into view. There was a low light illuminating the inch-wide space between the bottom of the door and the floor. Had one of the servants forgotten to put out the fire? Or had the candles been left burning? Or was someone in there? The questions and possibilities mounted with each step he took toward the door.

Grasping the doorknob, he paused. Should he go in there? What if Jemma or one of Holbrook's sisters were in there? The hair on the back of his neck stood on end.

He bit off a curse. This was his house, devil take it. He'd go in any room he wanted, thank you very much.

Without a second's hesitation, Gareth pulled open the door.

He blinked, taking in the room.

The wall sconce mounted by the door had both beeswax candles burning. The curtains along the north window were partially open and there appeared to be a small layer of embers in the hearth, evidence of a fire that died not so long ago. *How odd.*

It appeared as if his guests had stayed in the drawing room late into the evening and the servant hadn't come to take care of it for the evening. How convenient. He could drag the chess table over toward the fire and—

A faint, but distinct *clicking* sound floated to his ears. Freezing in place, he strained to listen. It sounded like it was coming from the hearth—which would make sense since the fire was dying. He padded closer and furrowed his brow. This didn't sound like fire. It sounded—

"Damn!" he said when his bare toe collided with something hard and decidedly sturdy— followed almost immediately by his knee colliding with the same thing.

"Th—that's what y-y-you get f-f-for sn-sneaking up on a b-b-body," chattered a feminine voice.

Gareth lowered his candle to see who was cloaked in shadows and talking to him. *Jane.*

"What are you doing here?" He cleared his throat. He hadn't meant for his voice to come out so rough.

"S-s-sleeping." She offered him a weak smile through her chattering teeth. "T-trying to anyway."

"In here?"

She nodded her trembling chin in response.

Gareth didn't pretend to know why and stoked the embers until they sparked, then threw another

log on top of them. “Do you always sleep in the drawing room?”

—“No, only when there are no bedchambers offered.” A resounding *clop* echoed throughout the room when she cut herself off by clapping a hand over her own mouth. “Mmmhmmm mm mmm mmmm,” she said through her hand.

Despite himself and the situation, he grinned like a simpleton, then reached down and wrapped his fingers around her delicate wrist. Lifting it ever so slightly from her pink lips, he said, “Pardon? Can you repeat that?”

“Which part?” Her eyes flared wide and she moved to bring her hand over her mouth again, but he wouldn’t let her. He rather enjoyed her brass and he had no idea why.

“The last part. I heard the first quite clear.”

She tried to pull her hand from his, but he didn’t loosen his grip. He would in a moment, but not yet. “I asked you to forgive me, my lord.”

He narrowed his eyes on her. “I’m not so sure I believe that.”

“But it’s the truth,” she burst out as if he’d just charged her with some heinous crime.

“Oh, and you’d *only* speak the truth, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Mmmhmm.” He ran the pad of his thumb over the side of her delicate wrist, noting just how cold her skin was. “What was that you said about not being offered a bedchamber?”

She covered her eyes and forehead with her free hand. “Please forget I said that. I didn’t mean —”

Gareth cut off her words by placing a single finger over her lips. “Your penchant is for always telling the truth—no matter what. My greatest talent in this life is for having an incredible memory —”

“Except when it comes to remembering how many house guests you’ll be hosting,” she said against his finger.

Gareth chuckled at the way she squeezed her eyes shut, presumably due to the embarrassment of speaking so plainly to him yet again. “I admit that was a rare lapse,” he allowed with a smile. “But, truth as I might I shan’t forget anything you’ve said.”

As soon as he said it, he wished he hadn’t. He might find her beautiful to look at and he might even be intrigued more than he ought to be by her quick tongue, but that was as far as it went. The last thing he wanted to do was encourage her to think he’d be good husband material—for either Charlotte... or her. She was Holbrook’s sister, he reminded himself once again.

Releasing her hand as if it suddenly had burned him, he straightened to his full height. “I’m sorry my staff were negligent in assigning you a proper bedchamber. I’ll ring for one near your sister to be made ready immediately.” Why that hadn’t happened when she arrived he hadn’t an inclination, but he’d address it with Potter and Mrs. Boyles immediately.

“Please don’t.” Her words were so soft he almost didn’t hear them through his own thoughts.

“Pardon?”

Jane clenched her blanket against her chest. “I don’t like being carried upstairs.”

All the blood in Gareth’s body drained straight to his toes. How could he have been so obtuse? It all made sense now why Potter had asked where he wanted Miss Cavanaugh put. Not understanding the situation fully, he’d been flippant in his answer.

“I’m sorry,” he choked. “I didn’t realize...” Heat crept up his face. “I’ll be right back.”

Without giving her a chance to question him, he ran to the door and tugged the bell pull.

“When Potter comes I’ll have him order the footmen to have a proper bedchamber made ready for you downstairs,” he assured her, bending down to add more logs to fire. It would take a while before she could be moved to her new room and there was no reason for her to be cold while she

waited.

“There’s no need.”

Gareth set down the fire poker and took a seat on the floor by her side. “Oh, yes, there is a need. This room is not suitable for a young lady’s bedchamber.”

Panic and something he couldn’t place flickered in her eyes. “It’s quite adequate, I assure you.”

He snorted. “Says the young lady whose teeth were chattering so hard they woke her host.”

“They were not.”

He pinned her with a look. “I do not embellish.”

A little peel of unbridled laughter escaped her lips. “Just send for my maid and have her stoke the fire.”

Gareth snorted again. “I’ll do no such thing. You’ll be moving rooms.” He racked his brain to think of a room that’d be smaller and easier to convert into a bedchamber for the duration of her stay. “The library will be far more comfortable.”

“As grand as it sounds to be afforded so many choices to amuse myself when insomnia sets in, I’d rather stay here.”

“You have insomnia?”

Jane twisted her lips. “Sometimes.”

“How do you cure it?” She’d only said when it “sets in,” giving him hope there was a cure.

“Study the ceiling.”

A fist clenched in his gut. Was it possible for him to be anymore oblivious to her needs? “I’m sorry,” he breathed.

“Don’t be.” The sharpness in her tone could cut steel.

“No, I need to be. I was being thoughtless. Please forgive me.”

Jane tapped her finger against her chin. “Only if you let me stay here.”

“Why do you want to stay here so blasted badly?” he burst out.

Jane swallowed audibly. “I don’t want to be moved.”

“The library is downstairs.” He hoped that’d ease her fears and she’d stop fighting it.

“It’s not that.” She closed her eyes and sighed.

“Then what is it?”

“Nothing. I’ll go,” she said without bothering to open her eyes.

He blew out a breath. What a maddening lady she was! “I don’t do well with games and theatrics, Jane,” he said with a calm he didn’t feel.

“Says the man who would have me believe my chattering teeth stole him from his slumber,” she murmured, still not bothering to look at him.

Just then, Potter with his nightcap askew peeked his head into the room.

Gareth ran over to him and gave him instructions to ready the library to be used as Jane’s bedchamber post haste. And yes, that did include bringing down a bed from the attics. He chanced a glance at her. While it was nice that her chair reclined he doubted that could be comfortable for an entire night.

When he was finished with his instructions, he walked back over to where Jane lay.

“All right, I confess I was already awake,” he said, sitting on the floor again. “But when I first walked into this room I heard the little *clink, clink, clink*, of your teeth hitting together.” Abandoning all good sense, Gareth reached his index finger to her face and ran his knuckle over the smooth skin of her cheek. “Now that I’ve made my confession, can you make yours about why you don’t want to leave this room?”

“It’s unimportant.”

“Unimportant?” he said on a chuckle. “A minute ago you were acting as if it was imperative that

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