

An Old Maids' Club Novel

Wallflower



CATHERINE GAYLE



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Catherine Gayle

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

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For more information: catherinegayle.author@gmail.com

Dedication

To Mom, for teaching me to read, and to Dad, for telling me so many stories—over and over and over again.

Prologue

Summer, 1798

Ainsworth Court, Cotehill, Cumberland

“Aunt Rosaline is smoking a cheroot,” Bethanne said from her perch by the window, carefully hidden from outside view by the draperies. From a few feet away, Tabitha saw her cousin as plain as any day, as could anyone walking past them in the corridor. Bethanne’s big, green eyes—eyes almost too large for her face—somehow widened further than normal as she rounded on her two cousins. “Cheroot!”

“Aunt Rosaline smoking a cheroot hardly signifies as newsworthy, Bethie,” Jo scoffed, sending her blonde curls flying. She always shortened everyone’s name, whether they wanted their name shortened or not. It was a long ingrained habit—one Tabitha doubted Jo would ever be broken on. “I’ve caught her doing far worse than that on more occasions than I can count.”

Tabitha had to laugh at Jo’s assessment. Then she laughed again at Bethanne’s dejected huff of defeat, though she at least took care to conceal her snicker behind a hand. Bethanne would never appreciate the humor of the situation, particularly since it came at her expense.

The youngest of the three cousins at the ancient age of eleven, Bethanne Shelton never quite managed to win at anything against the much longer in the tooth, much wiser, much more indomitable thirteen-year-old Josephine Faulkner. Jo’s father, Viscount Hazelwood, might occasionally choose to describe his daughter as determined, or perhaps as merely stubborn-to-a-fault if he felt generous on the particular day one asked. Tabitha knew better: Jo was as obstinate as a mule. This was one of the reasons Tabitha loved her so.

Jo could always best Tabitha too, particularly if a talent such as playing the pianoforte were involved or anything else requiring one to take center stage. At twelve years old and precisely in the middle of her two dearest cousins, Lady Tabitha Shelton despised having a room full of people staring at her for any reason at all. It always made her think they were disgusted by her, that they were staring down their haughty, aristocratic noses upon her because she had never managed to lose the chubbiness generally acceptable at infancy, yet perpetually frowned upon once a child no longer wore nappies. Already at this early age, her hips had begun to widen and her bosom had started to round itself out, and she tended to attract far more attention than she should ever have liked.

Quite perplexing, that. If she did not already believe herself destined for a lifetime spent alone, the sheer girth of her frame would convince her of it in the infinitesimal span of a moment. What gentleman, after all, would be attracted to a girl who appeared more like a rounded, pink pig than an elegant and refined lady?

“Such as?” Bethanne demanded, startling Tabitha out of her ruminations. The youngest girl plopped down onto the sofa in the front parlor, sending a whoosh of air over Tabitha. “What on earth could she possibly have done that is worse than smoking cheroots?”

“Well, perhaps *worse* is not strictly the correct term,” Jo mused. “Certainly more *scandalous* though.”

Tabitha merely raised an eyebrow in question. Jo could not possibly think to hold back on the matter now. Not after raising their mutual curiosity in such a manner.

Indeed, their elder cousin did not keep them in suspense for longer than a trifling moment. “Well, to start, I saw her riding over the hill the other day. *Astride.*”

“No!” Bethanne responded. “But her skirts would be all bunched about her legs. She couldn’t possibly have done that. I don’t believe it for one second.”

Tabitha held her tongue. Jo had left something out as surely as the sky was blue—a rather important something, it would seem. Tabitha wanted every detail before forming her own assessment.

“Yes, she did,” Jo said. “But her skirts were hardly a concern, seeing as how she wasn’t wearing any. Aunt Rosaline wore breeches.”

And there was the rub.

“Josephine Faulkner, if your father knew you were telling such a fudge...” Bethanne’s scolding trailed off as a herd of their brothers and the boys’ friends tromped past them down the corridor. She followed them with her eyes before returning to her diatribe. “He’d banish you to the outer bailey for a year.”

Jo’s family lived in King Water Castle, an old fortress everyone thought to be haunted that was situated only a few miles from Tabitha’s ancestral home of Ainsworth Court. The outer bailey seemed to have more spirits than the rest of the castle combined, at least as far as the imaginations of the three girls were concerned.

“He would not, because it isn’t a story. It’s the truth.” Jo readjusted on the mauve settee, settling her skirts about her legs again, and then looked over her shoulder to the hallway before continuing in a conspiratorial tone. “Do you want to know something else that’s the truth? The next day, I caught her kissing a gardener behind Uncle Drake’s mews when I was on my way over for a visit. She looked at me for a moment with a rather triumphant grin, I must say, and then shooed me away, telling me to mind my own affairs and stay out of hers.”

One of *Father’s* gardeners? Surely not. Drake Shelton, the Earl of Newcastle, would never stand for such an impropriety. He had indulged his sister in many ways over the years—as had the entire family, truth be told—but he would never allow her ruin at the hands of a member of his own staff.

Tabitha simply couldn’t believe such a thing.

“How positively sinful,” sputtered Bethanne.

“I’d say more delicious than sinful,” Jo countered after a thoughtful moment. “But certainly scandalous.”

Indeed, everything about Aunt Rosaline seemed to scream out *scandal*. Perhaps in all capital letters. *SCANDAL!* With an exclamation mark. The added emphasis was a must.

Yet despite how the townspeople rushed their children along, so as to avoid the influence of ‘That Bluestocking, Lady Rosaline Shelton,’ despite the whispers in corners about her being an *O Maid* (according to Tabitha’s mother, the worst thing that could be said of a lady, save perhaps for being a lightskirt), and despite the *on-dit* Tabitha had read in the gossip rags that Jo’s older sister Lavinia, always managed to secure from London, Aunt Rosaline did not seem to care one iota.

Instead, she almost rejoiced in the negative attentions.

Be yourself, Tabitha, no matter who is watching, had become Aunt Rosaline’s nearly constant refrain in recent years. In fact, she’d even written it to her in a piece of correspondence only a few months previously. It had come as part of a birthday letter, sent after Tabitha had despaired of Father and her brothers’ continued disparaging remarks—about her unrelenting state of plumpness and how she would never find a suitable match if she did not make drastic changes, and soon. *The beauty you have on the inside is ten times more luminous than the world could handle seeing on the outside. We all be blind in an instant.*

Tabitha had merely set the letter aside. Be herself? Who else could she be? She wasn’t

altogether sure she understood what her aunt had meant. Certainly, Aunt Rosaline had not intended to encourage Tabitha to be overweight by half, nor plain and boring to boot. Yet that, as far as Tabitha could tell when she had received the letter, was the sum total of all that she was.

But now, as she slipped off the sofa and moved over to take a peek out the window for herself (and yes, Aunt Rosaline was, indeed, smoking a cheroot), perhaps she had a better understanding. Maybe Aunt Rosaline simply meant to do what was right for her, and not to worry about the consequences. Or at least not overmuch. Still, how could one do that and still have a chance at being accepted by society?

“What would it be like not to care what people thought?” Tabitha mused aloud, not truthfully expecting an answer. Indeed, her voice had been so soft she hoped perhaps no one else heard her.

“Precisely as it ought to be, Tabby,” Jo replied with a cluck of her tongue, within half a breath of the question. Her tone held an air of adamancy, as usual.

Yes, perhaps that was how things should be. Not wondering what the world thought of her excessive, unwanted curves. Not worried about whether she spoke rather more than was appropriate or quite less than was acceptable.

“Blissful,” Bethanne breathed. “I think it might be a little slice of heaven.”

Blissful. Heavenly. That it would certainly be, also.

But for Tabitha, there was something more. Something weightier. Something far more profound. “It would be freeing,” she whispered. She hurriedly dashed the tear that had escaped aside, not wanting either cousin to see her distress.

Jo came up alongside Tabitha, taking her free hand into her own with a gentle squeeze, one that brooked no bosh. If she saw the tears, she mercifully ignored them. “Then the three of us must make a pact,” she said.

Tabitha wanted to laugh. She could never be free, despite any pact, despite any desire on her cousins’ parts, despite any need on her own. No matter how desperate. She must do everything in her power to become an agreeable lady as suited her station. The only daughter of the eighth Earl of Newcastle must somehow find a gentleman who would offer for her, despite the fact that no gentleman her father found acceptable would ever think of her as beautiful—and certainly not worthy of the grotesquely large dowry he intended to settle upon her, in order to offset this rather lamentable circumstance.

Tabitha would never be considered a diamond of the first water, not in her present state. That thought was utterly ridiculous.

“A pact?” Bethanne cut in with obvious glee as she darted across to join them by the window. “What sort of pact? I do so love secrets. Might we form a secret pact?”

“Yes, I think it must be a secret,” Jo continued. “We’ll each strive to become just like Aunt Rosaline. We must do what we want, what is right for us, even if it is not what others think is right for us. We must become old maids. Together.”

Tabitha slowly but deliberately pulled her hand away. Her cousin clearly had no earthly idea of what she was suggesting. Jo ought to have a better understanding of things. Her father was a viscount—a position not all that alien from an earl, after all. Jo had the same expectations upon her shoulders as Tabitha did, aside from the fact that Jo had another sister with whom to share the burden of securing an acceptable marriage.

Jo frowned at her. “Hear me out before you refuse. Bethie has excellent connections, but her father certainly has limited funds for a dowry. That will undoubtedly make it more difficult for her to marry.”

Bethanne wrinkled her pert nose. "Very true."

~~"You have what might possibly be unlimited funds for a dowry,"~~ Jo continued, "but, as your father has made it all too clear, you have physical hindrances for finding that suitable match. And a dowry for me?" Jo returned to the sofa and landed upon it in a frustrated flop. "I think I've made it profuse clear to everyone I know that I will not be seen as beneath anyone. *Especially* not a husband."

Tabitha sighed all the way to her toes. Jo was right. "But Father—"

"But nothing," Jo interrupted. "None of our fathers will be particularly pleased, to be sure. But they will never force us to do something against our will. They'll treat us just like they treat Aunt Rosaline."

A smile threatened to overwhelm Bethanne's impish face. "They will, won't they? Oh, how wonderful. What can we call it?"

"Call what?" Tabitha asked cautiously. This whole charade might not be the best idea, but what else was she to do? After all, thinking of the type of gentleman who might actually want to offer for her someday caused her to shudder quite vehemently. They'd have to be fortune hunters or...or what exactly? She didn't know.

Bethanne's eyes shone with her excitement. "Our pact, silly. We need a name for it." She lowered her voice and glanced over to the open door of the parlor before continuing. "A secret name."

Jo made a show of examining her fingernails. "Well," she drawled, "they do tend to call Aunt Rosaline an old maid, and we will be just like her. Why not the Old Maids' Club? We can be free and blissful, and grow old together as old maids."

A nervous titter escaped Tabitha's lips at that suggestion. "What, call ourselves the very thing they will say about us?"

"Exactly," Jo said. "We can take away the power of that nonsensical phrase by choosing it for ourselves." Her blue eyes sparkled with the intensity of the midnight sky.

Take away the power? But it was only words. Just a phrase.

Just a phrase. Oh, precisely. Words held no meaning if one afforded them none. Tabitha's heartbeat roared to life. "Old Maids' Club?" she asked.

"Old Maids' Club," Bethanne said, grinning like an imbecile.

Jo came back across the room to join them, taking their hands into her own. "Old Maids' Club."

Yes. She would claim her future as whatever she wanted it to be. She would follow her aunt's advice and be herself, whatever that entailed. Tabitha took Bethanne's free hand and completed the circle.

She would be free.

Chapter One

Spring, 1815
London

“It’s obscene, really.” This came from Lady Kibblewhite, who leaned over until her near-bluish hair virtually assaulted her companion. The massive aubergine feathers adorning her headpiece finished the attack where her hair had left off. Not that she needed to lean in at all. Her wobbly voice carried halfway across Lord Scantlebury’s ballroom. One would have to exert a valiant and sincere effort in order not to hear the sprawling whine of a voice.

From Lady Tabitha Shelton’s chosen location, safely ensconced behind an array of potted plants and hidden from the view of the majority of the ballroom, she couldn’t possibly avoid the ancient society matron’s words. She was, after all, merely a few feet behind the two and several positions down the wall. Tabitha remained where she was for two reasons: first, to avoid the possibility of dancing with any gentleman whatsoever; and second, to avoid the notice of Lord Oglethorpe, the blasted fortune hunter currently attempting to pay her excessive attention of the unwanted variety.

As luck would have it, Tabitha had selected a green shade of silk for her gown that evening, one that fortuitously fell somewhere between the hues of the verdant ivies in pots before her and the somewhat softer Pomona green draped over the walls. She thought she blended in quite well, all things considered.

“Do keep your voice down. She’ll hear you.” And *this* came from said feather-assaulted companion, Lady Plumridge, as she searched about to find the obscenity in question. Lady Plumridge was younger, yes. And also much squatter.

She was no less a gossipmonger, however.

Lady Kibblewhite’s head popped up, with the feathers bashing around atop her head until they created a breeze almost strong enough to cause Tabitha to shiver. “I don’t care one whit if she does. Even *she* couldn’t deny the indecent dimensions her dowry has taken on this Season. How disgraceful that Lord Newcastle has had to resort to such measures. Pathetic, really...if one should ask me, that is.”

“And we all know that one ought to do precisely that,” Lady Plumridge said with far more gusto than Tabitha thought necessary.

The two dragons were right, of course. Tabitha harbored no disbelief that *she* was the subject of their current discussion, and she was also forced to agree with them—at least on one point. Father had, yet again, increased her preposterously large dowry to near epic proportions.

He was desperate to find her a suitable husband before she reached her thirtieth birthday—a feat his brother-in-law, Viscount Hazelwood, had not managed with Tabitha’s cousin, Jo. This was likewise a task in which he was certain to fail, however much it pained Tabitha to disappoint him with regard to any matter.

Sadly, Father refused to listen to her arguments. The way he continually increased her dowry did manage to attract a potential suitor or two from time to time. Regrettably, these gentlemen all had one commonality which Tabitha simply could not abide: a propensity for fortune hunting. They wanted her for her money, not for herself. Who *would* want her for herself, after all? Certainly not Lord Oglethorpe or any of his ilk.

At less than a month shy of nine-and-twenty, she had never been considered an Incomparable

Tabitha could not boast excellent skill at playing the pianoforte, or an aptitude for painting watercolors, or cleverness in embroidery or stitchery, or expertise in any other traditional feminine pursuit. Additionally, she was rather more plump than could be considered fashionable and rather more plain than pretty, with straight hair of some muddy, brownish hue and eyes of a lackluster green that turned downright stormy when she was in a temper, as Jo was frequently keen to inform her.

There was, to be blunt, nothing to recommend her save her disproportionate dowry and a superior proficiency at remaining a wallflower. Tabitha couldn't convince even herself otherwise, so how on earth could she be expected to convince the *beau monde*? It was simply one of the sad facts of who she was.

"If her mother were still alive," Lady Kibblewhite intoned, "I daresay she would have had an apoplectic fit by now for not securing a husband for her only daughter. At least *one* of Newcastle's sons has married—the heir. Heaven knows if *anyone* can ever bring the spare to heel."

Someone bring Toby to heel? Tabitha had to tamp down on a fit of missish giggles at the absurdity of the thought.

Suddenly, she felt parched—almost desperately so. But if she were to move from her spot, she would alert the Ladies Kibblewhite and Plumridge of the fact she'd been eavesdropping. Not only that, but she would also make it much easier for Lord Oglethorpe to resume his attentions. Blast. So wallflower she must remain. It ought not to be difficult—at least not overly so. She'd graced the edges of ballrooms for twelve Seasons running. Why break the streak?

Lady Plumridge nodded frantically. "Mr. Shelton has become quite the rogue. Newcastle seems to have lost his rein on the lad."

The *lad*, indeed. Tobias Shelton, Toby to those who knew him well (which admittedly one could argue would include the majority of Britain and a good half the Continent), was mere minutes younger than Tabitha—and therefore far past the age when a gentleman was expected to cease sowing his wild oats and become a respectable member of society. Toby, however, had no intention of becoming anything close to resembling respectable. He made certain to inform Tabitha of this fact on every occasion he could, just in case she had somehow forgotten.

He'd been graced with a dashing figure that set all the young, unmarried ladies' hearts aflutter. Complete with rich brown hair that glistened in the sun, laughing blue eyes that always bespoke some devilry or another, and pristine, straight teeth. He could charm the stockings off anyone he chose. (Thankfully, she had not yet heard tell of his charming the stockings off an innocent. She could only hope she wouldn't.) Essentially, Toby was quite Tabitha's opposite in every way but age.

Which only served to prove God's sense of humor. *Blast him*. Toby, not God.

Lady Kibblewhite shook her head forcefully. "He is a lost cause. No lady will tame the rascal he has become."

But then Tabitha's attention was drawn to her cousin, Jo, making her way through the throng toward her. Jo wore her blonde curls down in waves that bounced about her shoulders against a beautiful blue satin gown that highlighted the particular shade of her eyes. And, bless her, she carried two glasses in her hands.

The matrons ceased their gossiping long enough to watch Jo's progress, too. For that matter, it seemed nearly every eye in the ballroom was trained upon her. Unlike Tabitha, Jo *had* been an Incomparable. In fact, were she not already so firmly entrenched in her position upon the shelf, she might still be considered an Incomparable to this day.

For a moment, Tabitha silently cursed her cousin for drawing attention to her position of safety—in particular because Lady Plumridge and Lady Kibblewhite looked over at Tabitha with heated

disdain. Her eavesdropping had been discovered. Perfect. She feigned a smile and waved before whipping her fan out.

Tabitha's despair could only last a moment, however, because she was in dire need of whatever drink Jo was carrying. She said a silent prayer for sherry, though she doubted the Scantleburys had provided anything of the sort.

"How did you know?" Tabitha asked. She had barely strangled the words out before snatching a glass from her cousin's hand. Her voice even cracked from how dry her throat had become. She took a long sip then grimaced. "Lemonade?"

"It was all they had," Jo replied. "How did I know what? That you were thirsty, or where to find you?" She took a tiny and elegant sip from her own glass.

"Both, I suppose."

Jo smiled, a cat-that-caught-the-canary sort of grin, and raised a brow. "The answer to both is the same. You're predictable." At Tabitha's huff of indignation, Jo allowed a small laugh to break free. "Predictably reticent, Tabby. Retiring. Always hiding from the finer things in life. And it didn't hurt that Lord Oglethorpe had just sought me out while I was at the refreshment table, hoping I could direct him to where he could find you. He hopes to claim your hand for the supper dance. I assume you already knew that."

Tabitha nodded, her eyes wide. Surely Jo wouldn't have directed the fortune hunter her way. She'd strangle her cousin for that.

"I thought as much," Jo said. "So I knew you would be in hiding somewhere. When I didn't find you in the retiring room, I merely had to search the walls for a spot of brown hair amongst the plants."

Thankfully, Lord Oglethorpe did not seem to have deduced as much as Jo had. At least not yet. Tabitha stole a furtive glance around the ballroom to locate him.

"I directed him to the pond in Lord Scantlebury's park. He'll be searching for you out there for at least the next two sets. Perhaps three." Jo paused a beat, taking a sip from her lemonade. Then she winked. "You can thank me tomorrow."

A grin overtook Tabitha's face. "Have I mentioned recently that you're one of my favorite cousins?"

"One of?" Jo replied with as much haughty condescension as she could muster. "I should think you would be your *absolute* favorite by now."

"You and Bethanne are essentially in a tie, and you well know it. You wouldn't have it any other way. And besides, both of you have yet to challenge a scoundrel to a duel in order to protect the honor of someone we both love," Tabitha said. "Isaac has you bested on that score."

Jo frowned ferociously. "But only just. I would have done it if he hadn't. I'm still sore with him for not allowing me the opportunity. I'm the better shot."

Of that, Tabitha held no doubts. There was nothing she would put past Josephine Faulkner, including a duel. Jo likely would have managed it with more finesse than their mutual cousin Isaac had, too, taking a clean shot that might not have killed the lecherous bastard. But that was another matter entirely.

"Yes, only just," Tabitha murmured with a jump when a loud bark of masculine laughter caught her unaware, coming from just beyond the Ladies Kibblewhite and Plumridge. Tabitha dared a surreptitious glance in order to confirm that Lord Oglethorpe had not somehow already returned to the ballroom. Alas, the gentlemen involved in the raucous discussion were all related to her in some manner. Or as good as related to her, at least.

Her brothers, Owen and Toby were conversing rather loudly with Jo's older brother and his longest friend, the Earl of Leith—a man so close to the Faulkner family he might as well have been one of them. Owen's brother-in-law, the Marquess of Devonport, was also included in the conversation. From this distance, she could not make out the subject. However, based on Toby's level of animation, it likely had something to do with horse racing or something else upon which he might have placed a bet.

They ought to keep such discussion to their clubs. It was unseemly to deport themselves so, with innocent young misses strewn about. Not that Tabitha would include herself and Jo in the 'innocent young misses' category. Misses they may be, but young was debatable and innocent wouldn't be an appropriate description for either of them.

But then Owen raised a hand and said something to the others, in particular to Toby, and the laughter died down. *Good.* Marriage to Lord Devonport's sister, Elaine, had done wonders for Owen over the last couple of years. He was much more manageable as a brother of late, and Tabitha believed beyond any doubt that Elaine's influence had played a large part in the change.

Toby could use a hefty dose of the same. Perhaps Lady Kibblewhite had been onto something earlier. Taking a wife would do Toby a world of good. And a bride could take him off Tabitha's hands, leaving her with only Father to worry about.

"What was that?" Jo asked sharply, pulling Tabitha out of her ruminations.

"What was what?" Tabitha's eye traveled deliberately from her brothers and their masculine counterparts to her terribly feminine cousin. Jo was a walking contradiction, feminine to a fault in appearance and demeanor, but any man's equal at the same time.

"You mumbled something about Toby and a bride and Lady Kibblewhite, all in the same worrisome breath. Please don't force me to explain how very, very bad such an idea would be." An almost imperceptible shudder coursed through Jo's lithe frame, visible only to Tabitha.

Waving an impatient hand through the air, Tabitha said, "I didn't think I'd said anything aloud. But honestly, I think it would solve a world of problems."

"Lady Kibblewhite is already married," Jo countered, "so I cannot imagine how her marriage to Toby would do anything but produce even more hindrances than you already have. Particularly since she is as old as Moses and as attractive as an ape. An old, scraggly ape." Jo scrunched up her nose. "With blue hair."

The lady in question turned and shot a murderous glare in their general direction. Then she returned to attacking Lady Plumridge with the plumes shooting off her head in a flurry of heated whispers, this time with far more vigor than before.

Tabitha had to curb a snicker. "Please be serious. You cannot think I meant for *her* to be Toby's bride. I simply mean that he needs one, something to the effect of which Lady Kibblewhite mentioned earlier."

"Toby? A bride? You must be feeling ill, Tabby." Jo whipped her fan to life and waved it dramatically before Tabitha's face. "Perhaps you ought to step out onto the veranda for some air. It would not do for you to have a fit of the vapors. I didn't bring my vial of hartshorn with me tonight and the clamor over such an event would surely alert Lord Oglethorpe to your whereabouts. Or have you forgotten the reason for your current position?"

Just then, Toby and the other gentlemen turned and faced Jo and Tabitha, with Toby rather uncouthly pointing straight at her. The look upon his face was almost...dare she call it gleeful? Owen seemed somber, no less than his norm. Jo's brother Christopher, Baron Claremont, had an amused quirk to his lips while Lord Leith grinned widely, his piratical grin opening to polished, white teeth.

which seemed a stark contrast to the rest of his dark features.

—But Lord Devonport...something was rather unusual in the manner in which he was looking up at her. He seemed intrigued. Interested, even. His blue eyes sparkled in the candlelight and he smiled at her, his usual cheerful smile, only somehow laced with something more knowing. Not carnal, per se. Certainly not lusty. (Tabitha had to tamp down on a laugh at the mere notion that a gentleman might someday look upon her with lust. Apart from the usual money-lust, of course.) But his look held an air of appreciation. He'd never looked at her in such a way. Not even once, in all the years they'd known each other.

Toby was up to something. Tabitha couldn't be certain *what* he was up to, but obviously he was up to something behind this change in the way Lord Devonport was observing her. Tabitha would wager her life on it. Or at least her pin money for the Season.

There was nothing else to be done for it; she would have to strike first.

Waving away the fan Jo was fluttering furiously in her face, Tabitha straightened her spine and stood as tall as she could. Which, admittedly, was not all that tall. Particularly not when standing next to Jo. "I'm perfectly all right," she said. "In fact, I'm splendid."

Jo's eyes brightened considerably. "You look devious all of a sudden. Oh, do tell me what you're planning."

Of course she would tell Jo. After all, Tabitha would need assistance to pull it off. If only Bethanne were in Town, she could be in on the plan as well. Alas, their younger cousin was busy taking care of Aunt Rosaline in Derbyshire. Tabitha and Jo would have to manage without her assistance.

Tabitha took one last look at her brother, started briefly when Lord Devonport locked his gaze with hers, and then pulled Jo closer to the wall. "I have a project for this Season. I'm going to find Toby a wife."

Jo chuckled. "You do realize that your twin is the most consummate of all the confirmed bachelors in Town, do you not?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Tabitha rushed on. "But that hardly signifies. He'll be powerless once we find the right young lady for the position." That would be the key to the plan. Finding the *right* young lady. Toby had a very particular type, so she would have to meet his requirements. Otherwise, he wouldn't come close to falling head over ears.

"But why would you even want to attempt such a thing?" Jo's expression was full of dubiousness.

Why? Had Jo gone daft? "Because he drives me to the brink of insanity at every opportunity he gets! Even now, he is over there plotting something. I can see it in his eyes." Which, at the moment, were glinting across at her with some devilry or another. "You have to help me. You know as well as I do how much better a married brother is to have around than an unmarried brother. Isn't Christoph more manageable now than either Graham or Patrick? And it's obvious to anyone with two eyes that Owen is far more biddable these days than Toby."

"And so you think to force him into something he is altogether set against?" Jo asked dryly.

"Of course." Tabitha eyed her cousin resolutely. "After we finish with him, we can move on to your younger brothers, if you want."

Lord Leith winked at Jo then—he actually *winked* at her. In front of an entire ballroom full of people. How entirely too familiar of him. Tabitha frowned across at him. "Or perhaps you would prefer to focus on Lord Leith before your brothers, since he behaves in a thoroughly inappropriate manner around you all the time."

“We’ll do no such thing,” Jo replied. “I can handle Leith. As to Graham and Patrick, why don’t we ascertain how your efforts with Toby will progress first?” She didn’t sound convinced that it would work out the way Tabitha had it all planned.

Still, waiting to deal with Jo’s brothers suited Tabitha perfectly well. After all, Toby was the biggest nuisance of all of the men in the family. Even adding up the troublesome qualities of all the other men combined wouldn’t create a sum that could rival Toby’s vexing potential. He was the greatest single source of irritation in Tabitha’s life, with his constant attempts to interfere and his reminders of her status as an overweight spinster.

Granted, her choice to remain a spinster was a purposeful one. She’d made a pact, and she wouldn’t break her word for anything. But *he* needn’t know that. And if she could somehow occupy him with focusing on his own marital prospects, then maybe, finally, she could be free of his meddling.

“Perfect,” Tabitha said. “Now, let us find our first victim.” She had to restrain herself from rubbing her hands together in glee at the prospect.

Jo chuckled despite her attempted frown.

“Fine, our first *project*,” Tabitha amended.

This Season could turn out to be rather enjoyable, as long as things went according to her plan and not according to her father’s. Or Toby’s.

Chapter Two

Noah deLancie, fifth Marquess of Devonport, had never been alone a day in his life. Yet, dash all, his earlier conversation with the Earl of Glastonbury had proven that was all about to change.

“What has you looking like someone ran down your puppy with a coach and four?” Toby Shelton asked Noah as he sidled up alongside him.

Mere moments before, Noah had arrived at the Scantlebury ball, issuing apologies to the host and hostess for his tardiness due to his interview with Glastonbury. Noah was just now making his way inside the main ballroom to scour the prospects who could help to alleviate the troublesome situation with which he'd been left.

Shelton passed a glass of lemonade into Noah's hands before adding almost as an afterthought, “I've enhanced that with a little something special.”

Noah had taken a sip before he heard Shelton's warning. He nearly choked from the burn of whiskey cutting a jagged path down his throat. “A little?” Whiskey and lemonade did not make for a happy marriage in his mouth, particularly since he'd never developed a taste for the foul liquor. He'd have a brandy from time to time, or the odd glass of port. On occasion he had even been known to help himself to some of his mother's sherry. But never when another gentleman might notice. He'd never hear the end of it if the gentlemen of the *ton* caught wind of such a propensity.

Shelton ignored Noah's spluttering, instead raising an eyebrow and snapping his fingers. “Oh, with it. I need something to add a little excitement to the evening. It's either pull a fascinating tale out of you or seek out a widow with whom to flirt outrageously. One who somehow isn't already aware of my penchant for roguery, in the hopes she'll take me home.” He gave an exaggerated wink and waggled a single eyebrow a few times.

“Wouldn't this supposed widow then learn of your roguish ways?” Noah asked in an effort to stall. He wasn't clear in his own mind yet how he felt about the events of the day. It was too soon to tell anyone else. Noah wasn't ready to have outsiders weigh in on his predicament.

A wide grin spread slowly across Shelton's face. “Indeed, she would. Which, incidentally, isn't such a bad thought. I'll probably do that later. But first I want to know why your breeches are bunched.”

With that Raynesford joined them, coming upon Noah from behind. “How would you know Devonport's breeches are bunched?” he asked his brother in his typically dry fashion. “Never mind. Don't answer that. I really don't want to know.”

Lovely. If one Shelton brother wasn't enough, the other simply had to show up and delight himself in Noah's problems. Usually, he enjoyed the company of the two. But tonight could hardly be considered a usual night. He wanted to sulk, to wallow in his own misery. He did *not* want to divulge private matters—things that ought to be kept between himself and his secretary—to the viscount and his brother.

Besides, Noah's mother and Glastonbury deserved to break their own news to the gathered crowd, just as each of Noah's five younger sisters and their respective intendeds (now husbands) had done in recent years. The happy couple in question had yet to make their entrance. Glastonbury's carriage was just arriving as Noah had walked past the massive window at the top of the stairs.

Shelton took his older brother's bait with a devilish smile. “What else could possibly cause such an expression on his face? He looks...squeezed? No, that's not quite right. Perhaps pinched.” A decided nod from Raynesford and the questioning eyes of Leith and Claremont (who had just joined

the ever-growing party) confirmed Shelton's word choice. "Pinched it is."

~~Just what Noah needed—more of the Shelton clan interrupting him. He ought to be finding~~ pretty young heiress and doing his best to cause her to swoon in delight over his charm and dashing good looks. He'd never have the chance if he couldn't escape these gents, no matter how enjoyable they might find their company, or how much he'd prefer remaining with them than working on the task ahead of him.

"Who is pinching whom?" asked Claremont, giving Shelton a familiar slap on the back. "I want to be involved. Unless we're pinching one of you lot, of course."

Leith laughed, which tugged his crooked nose ever so slightly to the left. "And what, pray tell, might your lovely wife have to say about you pinching anyone save herself?"

Claremont shrugged. "What Helen doesn't know won't hurt me."

"And how do you intend to keep her from finding out?" Raynesford asked dryly. "Wives know everything. What they don't already know, they learn through one of their secret channels." He sipped from the tumbler in his hand and creased his brow pensively. "They might bribe the servants. Somehow, servants always seem to know everything."

"All the more reason to avoid marriage in the first place," Shelton interrupted. His response seemed altogether too chipper. "And while I hope ever so much to remedy the situation later this evening, no one present is currently being pinched. One could hardly tell as much, though, from looking at Devonport here."

"He looks perfectly content to me," Raynesford interjected in his dour tone with hardly a glance. "At least he isn't being dragged by his wife to a musicale tomorrow afternoon in Lady Kirkaldy's salon." A severe shudder seemed to course from his head straight down to the ends of his toes.

Dash it all. Noah couldn't imagine anything Raynesford would enjoy less—nor anything Noah's sister and Raynesford's wife, Elaine, would enjoy more, apart from spending an entire day in a room full of toddlers. If he didn't believe wholeheartedly that Raynesford and Elaine were desperately in love, he'd question why they'd married in the first place, they were so terribly opposite in demeanor.

Before he could offer an apology or commiseration for Raynesford's impending afternoon of torture, Shelton interrupted the silence. "Perhaps that's the conundrum, or at least something similar—is it Devonport? Is your mother dragging you along to some insipid social event? Or maybe a lady friend?" He looked around. Shelton's eyes landed on a few young misses who were watching the group before returning to Noah.

Claremont raised his head in the direction of one young lady in particular. "Miss Tollington has been watching you rather closely since your arrival. Perhaps she expects you to ask her to dance soon."

Four heads turned as one to look in the direction Claremont had indicated. A very pretty blonde with a wisp of a thing stood on the edge of the ballroom floor, staring boldly back at them with a come-hither look in her eyes. She hadn't even bothered to try to conceal her wanton expression behind her fan.

One side of Shelton's mouth raised in a leering grin. "I'd say she wants far more than your name on her dance card. For that matter, I wouldn't mind giving her a bit of what she's looking for, myself." Shelton's hands moved about in a way that made it abundantly clear what he was thinking.

Luckily they were still standing in a close circle. Noah hoped no one else had seen Shelton's gestures.

The others broke out in a raucous chorus of laughter at Shelton's antics though, drawing a number of eyes from around the ballroom. Heat rose in Noah's face. This wasn't appropriate, not in the middle of a genteel ballroom, not in regards to an innocent young lady.

But then Raynesford raised a hand. "We ought," he said, using more force than was his wont and turning in particular to his brother, "to be more discreet in our topics of conversation." Good Lord, Raynesford could deal with his brother's insensitive behavior and leave Noah out of it. Shelton scowled, but said no more.

Noah pushed thoughts of his sister's brother-in-law aside for the moment and let them instead return to the young lady they'd been discussing. "Tollington," he murmured. "Isn't Lord Tollington already halfway to debtor's prison? That won't do."

He regretted saying it aloud as soon as the words passed his lips. By gad, he'd intended to keep his private matters to himself. Now they'd press him for more.

Sure enough, Leith leaned in closer, his eyes widening, though whether from excitement or concern, Noah couldn't distinguish. "Won't do? Why not?"

Shelton chortled indelicately. The man really had no shame.

Claremont shook his head briefly. "Seems a disgrace not to dance with a pretty thing like that just because her father is low on funds."

"You go dance with her then," Noah said.

"Afraid I can't. Helen forbade me to dance with any unmarried ladies tonight. She seems to think I'm giving them the wrong impression for some reason. Is it my fault I'm more handsome by half than the lot of you combined?" Claremont ran his fingers through the side of his rich, auburn hair. "I think she's green because of the way they look at me."

Raynesford chuckled, which startled them all. Noah couldn't remember ever hearing such a sound of mirth from the man, not in the many years they'd known each other. "They won't still be ogling you in a few more months. Your marriage is new. The novelty will wear off before a year's out and then you'll be as nondescript to them as I am."

"You're all off the point," Shelton interrupted, crossing his arms over his chest in an almost menacing fashion. "Devonport, why won't Miss Tollington do? Why does it matter if her father's in debt? You're the bloody Marquess of Devonport. You've got more properties than you know what to do with."

Apparently, none of the Shelton men had any intention of backing down from their line of questioning until they got the answer they were searching for. For once in his life, Noah wished he had a foul mouth. Cursing seemed entirely appropriate here.

He closed his eyes for a moment. "If I could sell my properties, I would. Lord knows I've sold all that weren't under entail."

Shelton started to interrupt with some random, incoherent spluttering, before Raynesford cut him off with a single glance.

"When my father inherited the marquessate, it was already deeply in debt. The previous marquess, Father's uncle, had a penchant for gambling above his means. Even with selling everything I could and cutting down to only the essential staff to keep my estates running, I'm barely holding my creditors at bay."

"Then why on earth," cut in Raynesford, his voice low and unruffled, "did you offer such a substantial sum for Elaine's dowry? And her sisters, as well? Good Lord, Devonport, you have five sisters. That's a significant fortune you gave away. Wouldn't that money have been put to better use digging the marquessate out from the rubble?"

"But they are my sisters," Noah responded. What other reason did there need to be?

The other four Shelton men stood staring at him, some with their jaws hanging agape, others with their eyes bulging. Leith shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

Shelton's eyes narrowed in consternation. "Surely they could have married with small dowries, though." His voice made it sound as though they could have married well with almost nonexistent dowries, or maybe with no dowries at all. Not likely, with his contemporaries.

Noah couldn't believe that these men—all but one of whom had sisters of their own—were being so thick they couldn't understand his obligation to his own. "I had to see to their futures."

"What of your future? I would have had Elaine, dowry or not," Raynesford said quietly. "I love her. I believe I am not overstepping my position in saying the same for the gentlemen who married her sisters."

Raynesford might very well be right about that. But still, Noah had done what he thought best for his family at the time. Family had to come first. "What's done is done. The point is that now I've got to marry, and soon—and I have to marry for money, however distasteful I find the idea. I need a heiress or a lady with a massive dowry settled upon her if I'm going to somehow avoid debtor's prison myself. Miss Tollington won't do. Any brilliant ideas on where I should start looking?"

Claremont cocked his head slightly to the side with an introspective frown. "Well, I believe the Lady Hannah Bullfinch has a dowry of ten thousand. It would seem her father recognizes that she looks rather like a bull's backside and therefore will be difficult to place, barring the incentive of some decent coin."

"Her personality matches her face though," Leith said with his brow puckering. "I wouldn't wish her on my worst enemy. Devonport is far from anyone's enemy."

"What about Miss Jennings?" asked Raynesford. "She has no siblings, so she'll inherit a vast portion."

Noah's brow puckered. "Miss Jennings? I'm not sure I know her."

Raynesford pointed inconspicuously. "Over by the punch bowl. The brunette in white."

She was certainly pretty, but terribly young. "Has she just come out? What on earth can I talk about with a girl who is hardly out of the schoolroom?" But he really couldn't afford to be overselective. So far, she seemed like his best option.

"Probably," Claremont said. "But as young as she is, she'll be eager to please. You won't need to talk to her too much. Just get to business and secure the line."

Eager to please? Was that what he wanted in a wife? For some reason, he had allowed himself to entertain the idea of having a companion, someone whose company he would enjoy. Someone with whom he could share his life with, not someone who would try to do exactly what he wanted. He didn't even know for sure *what* he wanted, so it would vex him to no end to have a wife trying to give him that elusive *something* to him. Noah knew, without a doubt, he wanted a wife he could do more with than simply 'secure the line.' But what option did he have? The longer it took to find a suitable bride, the more ominous his situation seemed.

"Right," Noah said. He straightened his back and schooled his features into compliance. Which characteristics should he try to assume? Charming. Amicable. Reputable. Time to make himself look like the perfect gentleman so that her chaperone would grant him an introduction. "I suppose I'd better be off to sign her dance card then."

He hadn't taken two steps when Shelton's voice carried over the din of the crush. "Have you actually taken leave of your senses? What about Tabitha?"

Noah's feet froze in place, one of them in mid-stride. Tabitha? Lady Tabitha Shelton, Raynesford and Shelton's *sister*?

Surely, Shelton had to be joking. He'd never offer his sister up to a fortune hunter. No gentleman could do something like that to his sister, or for that matter to anyone he loved, and still

call himself a gentleman. Good Lord, she was his twin! Slowly, painstakingly, Noah turned to face the group only moments before he'd been departing.

Shelton didn't appear to be joking. In fact, he looked as serious as an apoplectic fit. "Father just raised her dowry again," he drawled. "How much do you still owe, Devonport?"

Noah told them the amount beneath his breath, hoping they wouldn't think less of him for it. It wasn't his fault he was in this situation, after all. Not entirely, at least. No matter what, there wasn't a lady in all of England who could have a dowry so great as that.

"Perfect!" Shelton said. "Tabitha's dowry will clear you of that, even with the amount Father will insist on having placed in trust for her. I'd wager she'll be a damn sight more interesting to talk for the rest of your life than Miss Jennings."

There was a lot of truth in that statement. Noah couldn't pretend otherwise. He'd known Lady Tabitha for more than five years, since Raynesford had first started courting Elaine. For that matter, they'd always gotten on rather well.

But no. He couldn't. He couldn't possibly use her in such a way. She deserved to be married because the gentleman offering for her loved her, because he wanted to marry her and spend his life with her, not because she had a dowry so large Croesus would be blue in the face from envy and the fact that the so-called *gentleman* needed funds.

Raynesford narrowed his eyes, looking broodingly between Noah and where Lady Tabitha stood against the wall just across the way. "You would suit her," he said in his typical matter-of-fact tone.

Noah held his hands up before him. "I couldn't possibly—"

"You two already get on like a couple of magpies in a shade tree," Claremont interjected. "She likes you. She talks to you. Tabitha wouldn't be nearly as engaging with you if she wasn't comfortable with you."

"But I can't—"

"She seems to suit you too," Leith tossed in, "based on the way you look at her when you think no one's watching." Leith eyed him knowingly. "You watch her the way I..." His voice trailed off, but his eyes flickered briefly over to Lady Tabitha's cousin, Miss Faulkner.

Noah felt like he was drowning in the sea of their reasons. "But I don't look at her—"

Raynesford cut him off. "You do."

"And *she* is the solution to your problem," Shelton said, pointing definitively across the ballroom. He had a triumphant smile plastered across his face. "She's not a debutante—not by a mile. She'll bring a heftier settlement into the marriage than any other lady you could find. She has more than three thoughts in her head, though I can't for the life of me imagine why you care about that." Shelton's expression said that Noah was addled beyond redemption. "And clearly you already find her at least passably attractive. What are you waiting for? Go ask her to dance."

Noah looked to Raynesford, hoping for commiseration, but a grim expression of resignation and determination was set in his brother-in-law's eyes and the clench of his jaw. Claremont and Leith were both grinning, and Claremont even nodded in Lady Tabitha's direction. By gad, they were all in there together, the four of them. For all he knew, they might have even planned to ambush him like this.

But how could they have known he was financially strapped? They couldn't have. Noah brushed the thought away. Whether it was planned ahead of time or not, they were conspiring against him now.

Noah shook his head then turned to join the others in staring at Lady Tabitha. She gave a tiny jump before staring back at him across the ballroom floor. A sleek, soft green gown hugged her curves in ways that sent blood straight to his loins. It wasn't overly revealing, not like most ladies tended to wear these days—indeed, it was quite the opposite of the current fashions. The bodice covered her

rounded bosom, leaving his imagination to conjure the luscious mounds of flesh that strained against the fabric. When she moved, the silk tugged against curvaceous hips that flared out from her waist before falling gracefully back into place.

What he wouldn't give to place his hands on those hips and draw her near.

"*That* look," Leith said, jerking Noah back to the conversation. "That's the look I've been talking about. Like you want to find a private little alcove somewhere and—"

"That's my sister you're talking about, Leith," Raynesford said. "Watch it."

Noah forced his eyes up to Lady Tabitha's face and was startled to discover her silvery grey eyes staring back at him with a question burning at their core. He had to admit to himself, he could happily stare into her eyes for hours. However, it didn't seem altogether prudent to admit as much to Raynesford at the moment.

"And that's my sister you're devouring with your eyes, Devonport."

"Yes," Noah replied. His voice cracked. His mouth felt dry. Try as he might, he couldn't seem to form any more of a response.

Raynesford just looked at him appraisingly.

"Perhaps he ought to go ask her to dance," Shelton said. "Since we are all in agreement that he enjoys looking at her. He could look at her more closely that way."

"Yes," Raynesford said. "I think Devonport ought to do just that. And quickly." He clapped his hand on Noah's shoulder and gave a little push. Noah walked blindly across the ballroom toward Lady Tabitha—the only person that existed in his line of sight anymore.

"But don't let her know you need money," Shelton said conspiratorially as Noah bemusedly walked away. "She loathes fortune hunters. There's nothing she abhors more. Except, perhaps, for me."

Well, there was a cheerful thought.

Chapter Three

Tabitha turned to scour the ballroom. “Some flighty young thing,” she said to Jo. “Pretty. She’s got to have to be pretty. Probably a blonde, but he might go for a brunette. Clear complexion. And none too bright. Toby wouldn’t have any idea what to do with a lady who can think for herself.”

“Aren’t you being a *little* bit harsh on him?” Jo said on a laugh. “He is your brother, after all.”

“Precisely. He’s my brother. My *twin* brother, in case you’ve forgotten. I rather think I know him better than just about anyone else in all of England.”

Tabitha raised herself up on her tiptoes to get a better look at the sea of silly, young things and their pastel confections. “Oh, damn and blast. I can’t see well enough from here. I think I might have to venture out a bit.” She took a tentative step around the potted plant directly before her and moved closer to the fringes of the dance floor. “Stand in front of me and block me from Oglethorpe’s view. Will you?”

“Absolutely not. If you want to be meddlesome, you’re going to have to deal with the consequences.” Jo stood beside Tabitha, digging her heels in when Tabitha tried physically to move her. “I do heartily approve of the meddling, but you know how I feel about the hiding.”

“You’re being utterly foul. You do realize that, don’t you?” Tabitha couldn’t prevent the scowl from overtaking her features.

Jo clucked her tongue. “Of course I do. But aren’t we supposed to be looking for an attractive imbecile with whom to thwart your brother?”

“It won’t work.” The smooth, rich voice of Lord Devonport reverberated at Tabitha’s other side, and she jumped. “He fully intends not to be foiled by you, Lady Tabitha.”

She pinched her eyes closed. Blast, how had she not noticed Lord Devonport coming her way? She’d as soon die of mortification as allow him to hear her plans for Toby. But it was too late for that. Still, maybe the gentleman would prove himself useful.

“And what, pray tell, is he planning, Lord Devonport?” Steeling herself, Tabitha turned to face him. The laughter in his eyes never ceased to captivate her. Someone ought to find a way to bottle that joy so everyone could experience it. “Surely you know, since you’ve been over there with him this last half hour. What does he intend to do to me this time?”

“Alas, I cannot tell. I’ve been sworn to secrecy.”

“Would it not be more gallant to warn a lady of a plot against her, my lord? Surely you must recognize the difficulty of my position.”

The smile moved down to his lips. They looked soft, like velvet. Tabitha had a sudden, irresistible urge to kiss them, just to find out for sure. But that was a ridiculous notion.

“Ah, but you do not seem to recognize the inherent problems of mine.”

The way Lord Devonport stared at her was more than just a little unnerving. Tabitha realized she was toying with her necklace and forced herself to stop, allowing her arms to fall straight at her side.

“And neither of you recognize the adversity of mine,” Jo said. Her voice seemed much louder than either of theirs had been, though surely no one else could hear her. “If you’ll excuse me, I must go and visit with Lady Crestridge. That shade of evening primrose makes her complexion look downright ghastly.”

Jo strolled away, and as usual, a series of eyes followed her path across the ballroom, Tabitha included. When she turned back to Lord Devonport, however, his eyes had not left Tabitha’s person. Oh, *why* had Jo decided to abandon her? She’d been Tabitha’s one source of protection.

against...against what, precisely? Surely she didn't need protection from Lord Devonport, a perfect agreeable gentleman—one who was essentially family.

So why did she feel like she needed fortification? Why, all of a sudden, did his gaze make her skin tingle? The prickles of goose flesh that had popped up along her arms were perplexing. Tabitha wasn't cold—rather she was exceedingly warm—and she was experiencing the joint, warring desire to leave Lord Devonport's presence without looking back and to draw closer to him.

Tabitha had been attracted to men before. More than attracted, actually. She'd thought herself in love with one of her father's footmen once upon a time. But James Marshall had never made her feel quite like this—nervous and flighty, and somehow even a little bit attractive. On second thought maybe Jo had been right. Maybe she was feeling ill. No gentleman in possession of his faculties would ever find her attractive. She brushed the notion away and faced Lord Devonport again.

"The inherent problems of your position?" she asked, wishing her words had not come out sounding strangled. Good Lord, it sounded like she was attempting to swallow an entire flock of geese. "And what might those be?"

"Surely you can work that out on your own, my lady."

He leaned closer to her and the heat of his body wafted a trail of his cologne over her. It was musky and spicy and manly; it tingled against her nose and tantalized her to draw closer to him.

"If I am to maintain my reputation as a gentleman in your eyes," he said, his voice hardly more than a whisper, "I must divulge secrets that are not mine to tell. However, if I am to maintain the same in the eyes of your family, I may do nothing of the sort."

His eyes bored into hers. Tabitha felt as though he could see straight into her mind, directly into her heart. Her pulse beat a frantic pace against her neck. She wished he would touch her right there, just below the lobe of her ear, to calm the pulsing, heated flow.

"Indeed," she said. "That is quite a predicament."

"Perhaps you would do me the honor of dancing with me. It might gain us a bit of time so we can decide what must be done about the situation."

Sure enough, the ballroom floor before them was once again beginning to fill with couples taking their positions for the next set. She ought to refuse. Dancing always made her feel like everyone was watching her.

Tabitha didn't want anyone to watch her. She wanted to disappear into the background where no one would stare at her plumpness and think horrid things of her. Granting a dance to Lord Devonport would surely catch the attention of Lord Oglethorpe, thereby forcing her to redouble her efforts to disappear after the set was over.

But then he placed her hand in the crook of his arm, and the intoxicating heat of him traveled the entire length of her side. She was enveloped in his scent as he led her to the middle of the ballroom and took her into his arms. One hand gently gripped hers and the other settled at her back.

Oh, blast. It was to be a waltz. Why could it not be a reel or a quadrille, something where she could regain her senses and rediscover her ability to converse? Something where he wouldn't be touching her. Something where he wouldn't feel all the valleys and crevices of her body beneath his gown. This, more than anything else, was precisely why she tended to avoid dancing, in general.

When the music began, he nudged her into motion and Tabitha looked up at him. Lord Devonport still had not stopped smiling down at her with those bedeviling blue eyes. It ought to be illegal for a man to have such beautiful eyes, particularly when God had seen fit to grant her such lackluster and uninspiring eyes.

"What are you thinking?" he asked congenially. "I doubt I've ever seen you so perplexed."

Well, maybe he couldn't *quite* read every thought in her head. There was one small favor. "What have you asked me to dance?"

Lord Devonport laughed. It was a rich sound. Full. One she had heard countless times before. One which she could never grow tired of hearing. "Not fair, answering a question with a question."

"At least I was honest," Tabitha retorted, even while acknowledging to herself that it wasn't full honesty. "I was wondering why you'd asked me to dance. So why have you?" And why was he tightening his hold at her back, drawing her closer to him, instead of attempting to put more distance between them? Her heart took up an irregular rhythm in her chest, and her breathing soon matched it.

He twirled her around in his arms, gracefully guiding her through the other couples. In his arms, waltzing felt like the most natural thing she could be doing. He made her feel light on her feet and elegant. Yet the eyes of the *ton* trailed over them, prickling at Tabitha's skin. Staring at them. Wondering why he would be paying her any attention.

"I asked you to dance because I wanted to dance with you," Lord Devonport said.

So he wouldn't play fair. "Very well. So if I promise not to let on that you've told me, will you tell me what devilry Toby is up to?"

Lord Devonport regarded her for just a moment longer than necessary. "No." The monosyllable was almost inaudible, but firm.

"Why not?"

"Why should I trust you won't think me to be involved in his plans?"

"Stop answering my questions with questions."

A practiced, naturally charming smile worked its way into every corner of his features. A smile meant to melt a lady into submission. "I believe you started us on this course, if I'm not mistaken."

Tabitha would not be melted into submission, not by Lord Devonport or any man. She pierced him with her frostiest glare. "You are in on it. You're here, dancing with me, because Toby sent you." Lord Devonport did not deny her accusation. He just looked at her with those same blazing, blue eyes, but they were now filled with something she could not quite decipher. What an utter fool she'd been to allow herself to think for even a moment that any man would admire her. "I am not feeling well. Excuse me." She removed herself from his grasp, turned on her heel, and fled from the ballroom, not stopping until she reached the ladies' retiring room.

She silently cursed Toby for being Toby, cursed Owen for not stopping Toby from being Toby, cursed Jo for deserting her when she needed her most, cursed Lord Oglethorpe for having her in a state to begin with, cursed Lord Devonport for the prickles still running over her entire body, and cursed herself for being an absolute ninny.

And blast it all, she hadn't found an unsuspecting debutante to toss into Toby's path yet.

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Noah watched the backside of Lady Tabitha—a bit more thoroughly than he ought to have done—as she scurried out of his presence. What on earth had just happened? It was crazy enough that he had gone along with Shelton's suggestion to pursue her. After all, something had to be afoot, something he was unaware of, if both brothers were encouraging him in this manner, particularly when they knew she would despise it. But for her to respond favorably to his attentions at first, and then become as warm as a colossal block of ice? What had he missed in that conversation? What oughtn't he to have done?

The sudden change in her deportment hadn't been some figment of his imagination, either.

had happened as surely as she had feigned illness in order to escape. Noah had been surrounded by women his entire life. He would never be so brash or foolish as to claim to completely understand them, but he came a lot closer to doing so than the vast majority of his contemporaries.

Noah wasn't certain how long he stood alone in the middle of the ballroom floor, but he suddenly realized the other dancers were clearing off and turning to face the dais, with a few of the men left staring at him. What a dolt he must look, having been abandoned by his partner in the midst of the waltz.

Claremont and Leith stood off to the side of the ballroom, gesturing frantically to him. As he made his way across the floor to stand beside them, Noah became vaguely aware that his mother and Glastonbury were standing with Lord Scantlebury on the platform, looking fit to burst with their news. In all that had happened since his arrival this evening, he'd nearly forgotten their intention to announce their betrothal tonight.

Scantlebury held up his hands and started to speak, and the hubbub dulled to the level of a kitten's mewl. Noah couldn't hear what their host was saying, however, due to Claremont's insistent chatter in his ear.

"What in God's name just happened out there? Did you insult my cousin?"

"Of course I didn't." At least he didn't think he had. Dash it all, what if he had somehow inadvertently affronted her? Raynesford would never let him hear the end of it. Shelton would likely do something far more impetuous, not to mention far more injurious to Noah's person.

"Then why did Lady Tabitha leave you out there?" Leith pressed him.

"You've done something to upset her as sure as I'm standing here," Claremont said. "She looked close to tears."

Close to tears? He'd made her cry. He was a cad, through and through. He should be horsewhipped. Gentlemen who left ladies in tears were no gentlemen at all. Still, now was not the time for this discussion. "Do keep your voices down. I'm trying to hear what they're saying. We'll discuss this later."

Leith gave a halfhearted chuckle. "You know good and well what they're saying. They're just announcing the betrothal. You're her son, for Christ's sake. Surely you already knew that."

Of course he already knew, but listening to their declaration would at least buy Noah some time to figure out what had gone wrong when he danced with Lady Tabitha. "How did you two know? They're only revealing it now."

Claremont's ambiguous expression greeted him. "Glastonbury has been chasing after your mother for nearly a year, and she hasn't exactly been discouraging his attentions, now has she? I doubt more than a dozen people present aren't already fully aware that they intend to marry. Stop avoiding the issue at hand. What did you do to Tabitha?"

By Jove, these Shelton men were next to impossible to put off the hunt when they smelled blood. By this point, Glastonbury's announcement had been made and the crowd had burst into clamorous cheers. There was no more point in attempting to listen. No more point in attempting to avoid Claremont and Leith's questions.

Noah dragged a hand through his hair, more than likely mussing it beyond repair. "I don't know. I don't have any idea what happened. She was smiling and enjoying herself with me one minute, talking and laughing and the like, and then the next she wasn't. Then she left. You two seem to know more about what happened after she left me than I do. I only know she walked away." Crying. Good God, he ought to be hanged.

"You have to fix it," Claremont insisted. "Whatever you did, you need to undo. I hope for you

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