

Thirty-six Valentines
Julia Quinn

Prologue

In May, Susannah Ballister met the man of her dreams...

There is so much to report from Lady Trowbridge's ball in Hampstead that This Author scarcely knows how to contain it all in one column. Perhaps the most astonishing—and some would say romantic—moment of the evening, however, was when the Hon. Clive Mann-Formsby, brother to the ever-enigmatic Earl of Renminster, asked Miss Susannah Ballister to dance.

Miss Ballister, with her dark hair and eyes, is recognized as one of the more exotic beauties of the ton, but still, she was never considered to be among the ranks of the Incomparables until Mr. Mann-Formsby partnered her in a waltz—and then didn't leave her side for the rest of the evening.

While Miss Ballister has had her share of suitors, none was quite as handsome or eligible as Mr. Mann-Formsby, who routinely leaves a trail of sighs, swoons, and broken hearts in his wake.

Lady Whistledown's Society Papers, 17 May 1813

In June, her life was as perfect as can be.

Mr. Mann-Formsby and Miss Ballister continued their reign as society's golden couple at the Shelbourne ball late last week—or at least as golden as one can imagine, given that Miss Ballister's locks are a rather dark brown. Still, Mr. Mann-Formsby's golden hair more than compensates, and in all honesty, although This Author is not given to sentimental ramblings, it is true that the world seems a touch more exciting in their presence. The lights seem brighter, the music more lovely, and the air positively shimmers.

And with that, This Author must end this column. Such romanticism rouses the need to go outside and let the rain restore one's normally grumpy disposition.

Lady Whistledown's Society Papers, 16 June 1813

In July, Susannah was beginning to picture a ring on her finger...

Mr. Mann-Formsby was seen entering Mayfair's most exclusive jewelry establishment Thursday last. Can wedding bells be far behind, and can anyone truly say they don't know who the prospective bride will be?

Lady Whistledown's Society Papers, 26 July 1813

And then came August.

The foibles and affairs of society are usually mind-numbingly easy to predict, but every now and then something occurs that confounds and startles even one such as This Author.

Mr. Clive Mann-Formsby has proposed marriage.

But not to Miss Susannah Ballister.

After an entire season of rather public courting of Miss Ballister, Mr. Mann-Formsby has instead asked Miss Harriet Snowe to be his bride, and, judging by the recent announcement in the London Times, she has accepted.

Miss Ballister's reaction to this development is unknown.

Lady Whistledown's Society Papers, 18 August 1813

Which led, rather painfully, into September.

Word has reached This Author that Miss Susannah Ballister has quit town and retired for the remainder of the year to her family's country home in Sussex.

This Author can hardly blame her.

Lady Whistledown's Society Papers, 3 September 1813

Chapter 1

It has come to This Authors attention that the Hon. Clive Mann-Formsby and Miss Harriet Snowe were married last month at the ancestral seat of Mr. Mann-Formsbys elder brother, the Earl of Renminster.

The newly wedded couple has returned to London to enjoy the winter festivities, as has Miss Susannah Ballister, who, as anyone who even stepped foot in London last Season will know, was courted rather assiduously by Mr. Mann-Formsby, right up until the moment he proposed to Miss Snowe.

This Author imagines that hostesses across town are now checking their guest lists. Surely it cannot do to invite the Mann-Formsbys and the Ballisters to the same events. It is frosty enough outside; an intersection of Clive and Harriet and Susannah will assuredly turn the air quite glacial.

Lady Whistledown's Society Papers, 21 January 1814

According to Lord Middlethorpe, who had just consulted his pocket watch, it was precisely six minutes after eleven in the evening, and Susannah Ballister knew quite well that the day was Thursday and the date was January the twenty-seventh, the year eighteen hundred and fourteen. And at precisely that moment—at precisely 11:06 on Thursday, 27 January 1814, Susannah Ballister made three wishes, none of which came true.

The first wish was an impossibility. She wished that somehow, perhaps through some sort of mysterious and benevolent magic, she might disappear from the ballroom in which she was presently standing and find herself snuggled warmly in her bed in her family's terrace house on Portman Square, just north of Mayfair. No, even better, she'd be snuggled warmly in bed at her family's country home in Sussex, which was far, far from London and more importantly, far from all the inhabitants of London.

Susannah even went so far as to close her eyes while she pondered the lovely possibility that she might open them and find herself somewhere else, but not surprisingly, she remained right where she was, tucked away in a slightly darkened corner in Lady Worth's ballroom, holding a glass of tepid tea that she had absolutely no intention of drinking.

Once it became apparent that she wasn't going anywhere, either through supernatural or even quite ordinary means (Susannah couldn't leave the ball until her parents were prepared to do so, and from the looks of them, at least three hours would pass before they would be willing to retire for the evening), she then wished that Clive Mann-Formsby and his new wife, Harriet, who were holding court by a table of chocolate cakes, would disappear instead.

This seemed quite possible. The two of them were able-bodied; they could simply lift their feet and walk away. Which would greatly enrich the quality of Susannah's life, because then she would be able to attempt to enjoy her evening without having to stare at the face of the man who had so publicly humiliated her.

Plus, she could get herself a piece of chocolate cake.

But Clive and Harriet appeared to be having a wonderful time. As wonderful, in fact, as Susannah's parents, which meant that they would all be here for hours to come.

Agony. Pure agony.

But there were three wishes, weren't there? Didn't the heroines of fancy tales always receive three wishes? If Susannah was going to be stuck in a darkened corner, making foolish wishes because she had little else to do, she was going to use her full allotment.

"I wish," she said through gritted teeth, "that it wasn't so blasted cold."

"Amen," said the elderly Lord Middlethorpe, whom Susannah had quite forgotten was standing next to her. She offered him a smile, but he was busy drinking some sort of alcoholic drink that was forbidden to unmarried ladies, so they went back to the task of politely ignoring each other.

She looked down at her tea. Any moment now it would surely sprout an ice cube. Her hostess had substituted hot tea for the traditional lemonade and champagne, citing the frigid weather, but the tea hadn't remained hot for very long, and when one was skulking in the corner of a ballroom, as Susannah was, footmen never came to retrieve unwanted glasses or cups.

Susannah shivered. She couldn't remember a colder winter; no one could. It was, in a perverse sort of way, the reason for her early return to town. All the *ton* had flocked to London in the decidedly unfashionable month of January, eager to enjoy the skating and sledding and upcoming Frost Fair.

Susannah rather thought that bitter cold and icy winds and messy snow and ice was a deuced foolish reason for social congregation, but it wasn't up to her, and now she was stuck here, facing all the people who had so enjoyed witnessing her social defeat the summer before. She hadn't wanted to come to

London, but her family had insisted, saying that she and her sister Letitia couldn't afford to miss the unexpected winter social season.

She'd thought she'd have at least until spring before having to return and face them all. She hadn't had nearly enough time to practice holding her chin up while she said, "Well, of course Mr. Mann-Formsby and I realized that we wouldn't suit."

Because she needed to be a very fine actress indeed to carry that off, when everyone knew that Clive had dropped her like a hot potato when Harriet Snowe's moneyed relatives had come sniffing about.

Not that Clive should have even needed the money. His older brother was the Earl of Renminster, for heaven's sake, and everyone knew he was as rich as Croesus.

But Clive had chosen Harriet, and Susannah had been publicly humiliated, and even now, nearly six months after the fact, people were still talking about it. Even Lady Whistledown had seen fit to mention it in her column.

Susannah sighed and sagged against the wall, hoping that no one noticed her poor posture. She supposed she couldn't really blame Lady Whistledown. The mysterious gossip columnist was merely repeating what everyone else was saying. Just this week, Susannah had received fourteen afternoon callers, and not a one of them had been polite enough to refrain from mentioning Clive and Harriet.

Did they really think she wanted to hear about Clive and Harriet's appearance at the recent Smythe-Smith musicale? As if she wanted to know what Harriet had worn, or that Clive had been whispering in her ear throughout the recital.

That meant nothing. Clive had always had abominable manners during musicales. Susannah couldn't remember even one in which he'd had the fortitude to keep his mouth shut throughout the performance.

But the gossips weren't even the worst of her afternoon callers. That title was reserved for the well-meaning souls who couldn't seem to look at her with any expression other than one of pity. These were usually the same women who had a widowed nephew from Shropshire or Somerset or some other faraway county who was looking for a wife, and would Susannah like to meet him, but not this week because he was busy escorting six of his eight sons to Eton.

Susannah fought an unexpected rush of tears. She was only twenty-one years old. And barely that, even. She wasn't desperate.

And she didn't want to be pitied.

Suddenly it became imperative that she leave the ballroom. She didn't want to be here, didn't want to watch Clive and Harriet like some pathetic voyeur. Her family wasn't ready to go home, but surely she could find some quiet room where she might retire for a few minutes. If she was going to hide, she might as well do it right. Standing in the corner was appalling. Already she'd seen three people point in her direction, then say something behind their hands.

She'd never thought herself a coward, but she'd also never thought herself a fool, and truly, only a fool would willingly subject herself to this sort of misery.

She set her teacup down on a windowsill and made her regrets to Lord Middlethorpe, not that they'd exchanged more than six words, despite having stood next to each other for nearly three-quarters of an hour. She skirted along the edge of the ballroom, looking for the French doors that led to the hall. She'd been here once before, back when she'd been the most popular young lady in town, thanks to her association with Clive, and she remembered that there was a retiring room for the ladies at the far end of the hall.

But just when she reached her destination, she stumbled, and she found herself face to face with—oh blast, what was her name? Brown hair, slightly pudgy ... oh yes. Penelope. Penelope Somebody. A girl with whom she'd never shared more than a dozen words. They'd come out the same year, but they might have resided in different worlds, so infrequently had their paths crossed. Susannah had been the toast of the town, once Clive had singled her out, and Penelope had been . . . well, Susannah wasn't really certain what Penelope had been. A wallflower, she supposed.

"Don't go there," Penelope said softly, not quite looking her in the eye in the way that only the shyest of people do.

Susannah's lips parted in surprise, and she knew her eyes were filled with question.

"There are a dozen young ladies in the retiring room," Penelope said.

It was explanation enough. The only place Susannah wanted to be less than the ballroom was in a room full of twittering, gossiping ladies, all of whom would surely assume she had fled there to escape Clive and Harriet.

Which was true, but that didn't mean Susannah wanted anyone to know it.

"Thank you," Susannah whispered, stunned by Penelope's small kindness. She'd never spared so much as a thought for Penelope last summer, and the younger girl had repaid her by saving her from certain embarrassment and pain. Impulsively, she took Penelope's hand and squeezed it once. "Thank you."

And she suddenly wished she'd paid more attention to the girls like Penelope when she'd been considered a leader of the *ton*. She knew what it was like to stand on the edges of the ballroom now, and it wasn't fun.

But before she could say something more, Penelope murmured her shy farewells and slipped away, leaving Susannah to her own devices.

She was standing in the busiest section of the ballroom, which was not where she wanted to be, so she started walking. She wasn't really certain where she intended to go, but she kept moving, because she felt it made her look purposeful.

She subscribed to the notion that a person ought to look as if she knew what she was doing, even if she didn't. Clive had taught her that, actually. It was one of the few good things she'd gained from the courtship.

But in all her determined glory, she wasn't truly watching her surroundings, and that must have been why she was so taken by surprise when she heard *his* voice.

"Miss Ballister."

No, not Clive. Even worse. Clive's older brother, the Earl of Renminster. In all his dark-haired, green-eyed glory.

He had never liked her. Oh, he had always been polite, but then again, he was polite to everyone. But she had always felt his disdain, his obvious conviction that she was not good enough for his brother.

She supposed he was happy now. Clive was safely married off to Harriet, and Susannah Ballister would never taint the hallowed Mann-Formsby family tree.

"My lord," she said, trying to keep her voice as even and polite as his. She couldn't imagine what he could possibly want with her. There was no reason for him to have called out her name; he could easily have let her walk right by him without acknowledging her presence. It wouldn't even have seemed rude on his part. Susannah had been walking as briskly as was possible in the crowded ballroom, clearly on her way to somewhere else.

He smiled at her, if one could call it that—the sentiment never reached his eyes. "Miss Ballister," he said, "how have you been?"

For a moment she could do nothing but stare at him. He wasn't the sort to ask a question unless he truly wanted the answer, and there was no reason to believe he had any interest in her welfare.

"Miss Ballister?" he murmured, looking vaguely amused.

Finally, she managed to say, "Quite well, thank you," even though they both knew that was far from the truth.

For the longest while he merely gazed at her, almost as if he were studying her, looking for something she couldn't even begin to imagine.

"My lord?" she queried, because the moment seemed to need something to break the silence.

His head snapped to attention, as if her voice had brought him out of a slight daze. "I beg your pardon," he apologized smoothly. "Would you care to dance?"

Susannah found herself struck mute. "Dance?" she finally echoed, rather annoyed with her inability to come up with anything more articulate.

"Indeed," he murmured.

She accepted his proffered hand—there was little else she could do with so many people watching—and allowed him to lead her onto the dance floor. He was tall, even taller than Clive, who had stood a good head above her, and he possessed an oddly reserved air—almost too controlled, if such a thing were possible. Watching him as he moved through the crowds, she was struck by the odd thought that surely one day his famous control would snap.

And it would be only then that the true Earl of Renminster would be revealed.

* * *

David Mann-Formsby hadn't thought about Susannah Ballister for months, not since his brother had elected to marry Harriet Snowe instead of the dark beauty currently waltzing in his arms. A tiny shred of guilt over this started to niggle at him, however, because as soon as he'd seen her, moving through the ballroom as if she had somewhere to go, when anyone who took the time to look at her for more than a second would have seen the strained expression on her face, the pain lurking behind her eyes, he'd been reminded of Susannah's shabby treatment at the hands of *thet on* after Clive had decided to marry Harriet.

And truly, none of it had been her fault.

Susannah's family, while perfectly respectable, was not titled, nor were they particularly wealthy. And when Clive had dropped her in favor of Harriet, whose name was as old as her dowry was large, society had sniggered behind her back—and, he supposed, probably to her face as well. She had been called grasping, above herself, overly ambitious. More than one society matron—the sort who had daughters not nearly as arresting and attractive as Susannah Ballister—had commented that the little upstart had been put in her place, and how dare she even think that she might win a proposal of marriage from the brother of an earl?

David had found the entire episode rather distasteful, but what could he have done? Clive had made his choice, and in David's opinion, he had made the right one. Harriet would, in the end, make a much better wife for his brother.

Still, Susannah had been an innocent bystander in the scandal; she hadn't known that Clive was being courted by Harriet's father, or that Clive thought that petite, blue-eyed Harriet would make a very fine wife indeed. Clive should have said something to Susannah before putting the announcement in the paper, and even if he was too much of a coward to warn her in person, he certainly should have been smart enough not to make a grand announcement at the Mottram ball even before the notice appeared in the *Times*. When Clive had stood in front of the small orchestra, champagne glass in hand as he made his joyful speech, no one had looked at Harriet, who was standing by his side.

Susannah had been the main attraction, Susannah with her surprised mouth and stricken eyes. Susannah, who had tried so hard to hold herself strong and proud before she finally fled the scene.

Her anguished face had been an image that David had carried around in his mind for many weeks, months even, until slowly she slipped away, forgotten amid his daily activities and chores.

Until now.

Until he'd spied her standing in the corner, pretending she didn't care that Clive and Harriet were surrounded by a bevy of well-wishers. She was a proud woman, he could tell, but pride could carry a person only so far until one simply wanted to escape and be alone.

He wasn't surprised when she finally began to make her way to the door.

At first he'd thought to let her pass, perhaps even to step back so that she would not be forced to see him witnessing her departure. But then some strange, irresistible impulse had pushed his feet forward. It didn't bother him so much that she'd been turned into a wallflower; there would always be wallflowers among *thet on*, and there was little one man could do to rectify the situation.

But David was a Mann-Formsby to the very tips of his toes, and if there was one thing he could not

abide, it was knowing that his family had wronged someone. And his brother had most certainly wronged this young woman. David would not go so far as to say her life had been ruined, but she had clearly been subject to a great deal of undeserved misery.

As the Earl of Renminster—no, as a Mann-Formsby—it was his duty to make amends.

And so he asked her to dance. A dance would be noticed. A dance would be remarked upon. And although it was not in David's nature to flatter himself, he knew that a simple invitation to dance on his part would do wonders to restore Susannah's popularity.

She'd appeared rather startled by his request, but she'd accepted; after all, what else could she do with so many people watching?

He led her to the center of the floor, his eyes never leaving her face. David had never had trouble understanding why Clive had been attracted to her. Susannah possessed a quiet, dark beauty that he found far more arresting than the current blond, blue-eyed ideal that was so popular among society. Her skin was pale porcelain, with perfectly winged brows and lips of a raspberry pink. He'd heard there were Welsh ancestors in her family, and he could easily see their influence.

"A waltz," she said dryly, once the string quintet began to play. "How fortuitous."

He chuckled at her sarcasm. She'd never been outgoing, but she had always been direct, and he admired the trait, especially when it was combined with intelligence. They began to dance, and then, just when he'd decided to make some inane comment about the weather—just so they would be observed conversing like reasonable adults—she beat him to the punch, and asked:

"Why did you invite me to dance?"

For a moment he was speechless. Direct, indeed. "Does a gentleman need a reason?" he countered.

Her lips tightened slightly at the corners. "You never struck me as the sort of gentleman who does anything without a reason."

He shrugged. "You seemed rather alone in the corner."

"I was with Lord Middlethorpe," she said haughtily.

He did nothing but raise his eyebrows, since they both knew that the aged Lord Middlethorpe was not generally considered a lady's first choice of escort.

"I don't need your pity," she muttered.

"Of course not," he agreed.

Her eyes flew to his. "Now you're condescending to me."

"I wouldn't dream of it," he said, quite honestly.

"Then what is this about?"

"This?" he echoed, giving his head a questioning tilt.

"Dancing with me."

He wanted to smile, but he didn't want her to think he was laughing at her, so he managed to keep his lips down to a twitch as he said, "You're rather suspicious for a lady in the midst of a waltz."

She replied, "Waltzes are precisely the time a lady ought to be most suspicious."

"Actually," he said, surprising himself with his words, "I wanted to apologize." He cleared his throat. "For what happened last summer."

"To what," she asked, her words carefully measured, "do you refer?"

He looked at her in what he hoped was a kindly manner. It wasn't an expression he was particularly accustomed to, so he wasn't quite certain he was doing it right. Still, he tried to look sympathetic as he said, "I think you know."

Her body grew rigid, even as they danced, and he would have sworn that he could see her spine turning to steel. "Perhaps," she said tightly, "but I fail to see how it is any of your concern."

"It may be that it is not," he allowed, "but nonetheless, I did not approve of the way you were treated by society after Clive's engagement."

"Do you mean the gossip," she asked, her face perfectly bland, "or the cuts direct? Or maybe the out-and-out lies?"

He swallowed, unaware that her situation had been quite so unpleasant. "All of it," he said quietly. "It was never my intention—"

"Never your intention?" she cut in, her eyes flashing with something approaching fury. "Never your intention? I was under the assumption that Clive had made his own decisions. Do you admit, then, that Harriet was your choice, not Clive's?"

"She was his choice," he said firmly.

"And yours?" she persisted.

There seemed little point—and little honor—in lying. "And mine."

She gritted her teeth, looking somewhat vindicated, but also a bit deflated, as if she'd been waiting for this moment for months, but now that it was here, it was not nearly as sweet as she'd anticipated.

"But if he had married you," David said quietly, "I would not have objected."

Her eyes flew to his face. "Please don't lie to me," she whispered.

"I'm not." He sighed. "You will make someone a very fine wife, Miss Ballister. Of that I have no doubt."

She said nothing, but her eyes seemed shiny, and for a moment he could have sworn that her lips were trembling.

Something began to tug at him. He wasn't sure what it was, and he did not want to think that he felt it anywhere near his heart, but he found he simply could not bear to see her so close to tears. But there was nothing he could do besides say, "Clive should have informed you of his plans before he announced them to society."

"Yes," she said, the word made brittle by a harsh little laugh. "He should have done."

David felt his hand tighten slightly at her waist. She wasn't making this easy on him, but then again, he had no reason to expect her to do so. In truth, he admired her pride, respected the way she carried herself straight and tall, as if she wouldn't allow society to tell her how she must judge herself.

She was, he realized with a shiver of surprise, a remarkable woman.

"He should have done," he said, unconsciously echoing her words, "but he did not, and for that I must apologize."

She cocked her head slightly, her eyes almost amused as she said, "One would imagine the apology would be better served coming from Clive, don't you think?"

David smiled humorlessly. "Indeed, but I can only deduce that he has not done so. Therefore, as a Mann-Formsby—"

She snorted under her breath, which *did not* amuse him.

"As a Mann-Formsby," he said again, raising his voice, then lowering it when several nearby dancers looked curiously in his direction. "As the head of the Mann-Formsby family," he corrected, "it is my duty to apologize when a member of my family acts in a dishonorable manner."

He'd expected a quick retort, and indeed, she opened her mouth immediately, her eyes flashing dark fire, but then, with an abruptness that took his breath away, she seemed to change her mind. And when she finally spoke, she said, "Thank you for that. I accept your apology on Clive's behalf."

There was a quiet dignity in her voice, something that made him want to pull her closer, to entwine their fingers rather than merely to hold hands.

But if he'd wanted to explore that feeling more closely—and he wasn't certain he did—his chance was lost when the orchestra brought the waltz to a close, leaving him standing in the middle of the ballroom floor, bending his body into an elegant bow as Susannah bobbed a curtsy.

She murmured a polite, "Thank you for the dance, my lord," and it was clear that their conversation was at an end.

But as he watched her leave the ballroom—presumably off to wherever it was she'd been going when he'd intercepted her—he couldn't quite shake the feeling—

He wanted more.

More of her words, more of her conversation.

More *of her*.

* * *

Later that night, two events occurred that were very odd, indeed.

The first took place in Susannah Ballister's bedroom.

She could not sleep.

This would not have seemed odd to many, but Susannah had always been the sort who fell asleep the instant her head hit the pillow. It had driven her sister batty back in the days when they had shared a room. Letitia had always wanted to stay up and whisper, and Susannah's conversational contributions never amounted to anything more than a light snore.

Even in the days following Clive's defection, she had slept like the dead. It had been her only escape from the constant pain and turmoil that was the life of a jilted debutante.

But this evening was different. Susannah lay on her back (which was odd in itself, as she much preferred to sleep on her side) and stared up at the ceiling, wondering when the crack in the plaster had come so much to resemble a rabbit.

Or rather, that was what she thought about each time she determinedly thrust the Earl of Renminster from her mind. Because the truth was that she could not sleep because she could not stop reliving their conversation, stopping to analyze each of his words, and then trying not to notice the shivery feeling she got when she recalled his faint, somewhat ironic smile.

She still could not believe how she'd stood up to him. Clive had always referred to him as "the old man," and called him, at various times, stuffy, haughty, supercilious, arrogant, and damned annoying. Susannah had been rather terrified by the earl; Clive certainly hadn't made him sound very approachable.

But she had stood her ground and kept her pride.

Now she couldn't sleep for thinking of him, but she didn't much mind—not with this giddy feeling.

It had been so long since she'd felt proud of herself. She'd forgotten what a nice sensation it was.

* * *

The second odd occurrence took place across town, in the district of Holborn, in front of the home of Anne Miniver, who lived quietly alongside all of the lawyers and barristers who worked at the nearby Inns of the Court, even though Her occupation, if one could call it that, was mistress. Mistress to the Earl of Renminster, to be precise.

But Miss Miniver was unaware that anything strange was afoot. Indeed, the only person to make note of the occasion was the earl himself, who had instructed his driver to take him directly from the Worth ball to Anne's elegant terrace house. But when he ascended the steps to her front door and lifted his

hand to the brass knocker, he found he no longer had any interest in seeing her. The urge was, quite simply, gone.

Which for the earl was quite strange indeed.

Chapter 2

Did you notice the Earl of Renminster dancing with Miss Susannah Ballister last night at the Worth ball?

If not, for shame—you were the only one. The waltz was the talk of the evening.

It cannot be said that the conversation looked to be of the amiable variety. Indeed, This Author observed flashing eyes and even what appeared to be a heated word.

The earl departed soon after the dance, but Miss Ballister remained for several hours thereafter, and was witnessed dancing with ten other gentlemen before she left in the company of her parents and sister.

Ten gentlemen. Yes, This Author counted. It would have been impossible not to draw comparisons, when her sum total of partners prior to the earl's invitation was zero.

Lady Whistledown's Society Papers, 28 January 1814

The Ballisters had never had to worry about money, but neither could they have been called wealthy. Normally this did not bother Susannah; she had never wanted for anything, and she saw no reason for three sets of ear bobs when her one pair of pearls matched all of her clothes quite nicely. Not that she would have refused another pair, mind you; she just didn't see the need to spend her days pining for jewelry that would never be hers.

But there was one thing that made her wish her family was older, wealthier, possessed a title—anything that would have given them more influence.

And that was the theater.

Susannah adored the theater, adored losing herself in someone else's story, adored everything from the smell to the lights to the tingly feeling one got in the palms of one's hands while clapping. It was

far more absorbing than a musicale, and certainly more fun than the balls and dances she found herself attending three nights out of seven.

The problem, however, was that her family did not possess a box at any of the theaters deemed appropriate for polite society, and she was not permitted to sit anywhere other than a box. Proper young ladies did not sit with the rabble, her mother insisted. Which meant that the only way Susannah ever got to see a play was when she was invited by someone who did possess a suitable box.

When a note had arrived for her from her Shelbourne cousins inviting her to accompany them that evening to see Edmund Kean perform Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, she had nearly wept with joy. Kean had made his debut in the role just four nights earlier, and already all the *ton* was abuzz about it. He had been called magnificent, daring, and unparalleled—all those wonderful words that left a theater lover like Susannah nearly shaking in her desire to see the production.

Except that she hardly expected anyone to invite her to share their box at the theater. She only received invitations to large parties because people were curious to see her reaction to Clive and Harriet's marriage. Invitations to small gatherings were not forthcoming.

Until the Worth ball on Thursday night.

She supposed she ought to thank the earl. He had danced with her, and now she was considered suitable again. She had received at least eight more invitations to dance after he had left. Oh very well, ten. She had counted. Ten men had invited her to dance, which was ten more than had in the entire three hours she'd spent at the ball before the earl had sought her out.

It was appalling, actually, how much influence one man could exert over society.

She was certain that Renminster was the reason her cousins had extended the invitation. She didn't think the Shelbournes had been consciously avoiding her—the truth was, they were distant cousins and she'd never known them very well. But when an opening had come up in their theater party and they needed another female to even the numbers, how easy it must have been for them to say, "Oh yes, what about Cousin Susannah?" when Susannah's name had been so prominently featured in Friday's *Whistledown* column.

Susannah didn't care why they had suddenly recalled her existence—she was going to see Kean in *The Merchant of Venice*!

"I shall be eternally jealous," her sister Letitia said as they waited in the drawing room for the Shelbournes to arrive. Their mother had insisted that Susannah be ready at the appropriate hour and not keep their influential relatives waiting. One was supposed to force prospective suitors to cool their heels, but not important relations who might extend coveted invitations.

"I'm sure you will find an opportunity to see the play soon," Susannah said, but she couldn't quite restrain her somewhat satisfied smile as she did so.

Letitia sighed. "Maybe they will want to go twice."

"Maybe they will lend the entire box to Mother and Father," Susannah said.

Letitia's face lit up. "An excellent notion! Be sure to suggest—"

"I shall do no such thing," Susannah cut in. "It would be beyond crass, and—"

"But if the subject comes up ..."

Susannah rolled her eyes. "Very well," she said. "If Lady Shelbourne should happen to say, 'My dear Miss Ballister, do you think your family might possibly be interested in using our box?' I shall be sure to answer in the affirmative."

Letitia shot her a decidedly unamused look.

Just then their butler appeared in the doorway. "Miss Susannah," he said, "the Shelbourne carriage is parked outside."

Susannah jumped to her feet. "Thank you. I shall be on my way."

"I will be waiting for you," Letitia said, following her into the hall. "I shall expect you to tell me everything."

"And spoil the play?" Susannah teased.

"Pish. It's not as if I haven't read *The Merchant of Venice* ten times already. *I know* the ending. I just want to hear about Kean!"

"He's not as handsome as Kemble," Susannah said, pulling on her coat and muff.

"I've seen Kemble," Letitia said impatiently. "I haven't seen Kean."

Susannah leaned forward and placed an affectionate kiss on her sister's cheek. "I shall tell you every last detail about my evening. I promise you."

And then she braved the frigid cold and walked outside to the Shelbourne carriage.

* * *

Less than an hour later, Susannah was comfortably seated in the Shelbourne box at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, avidly gazing about the newly redesigned theater. She'd happily taken the seat on the farthest edge of the box. The Shelbournes and their guests were chattering away, ignoring, as was the entire audience, the farce that the acting company was performing as a prelude to the real performance. Susannah also paid no attention; she wanted nothing more than to inspect the new theater.

It was ironic, really—the best seats in the house seemed to be down in the pit with all the rabble, as her mother liked to put it. Here she was in one of the most expensive boxes in the theater, and a large pillar partially blocked their view.

She was going to have to twist significantly in her seat, and in fact even lean on the ledge just to see the performance.

"Be careful you don't fall," murmured a low, male voice.

Susannah snapped to attention. "My lord!" she said in surprise, turning to come face to face with the Earl of Renminster, of all people. He was seated in the box directly next to that of the Shelbournes, close enough so that they could converse over the gap between the boxes.

"What a nice surprise," he said, with a pleasant and yet slightly mysterious smile. Susannah rather thought all his smiles a touch mysterious.

"I'm with my cousins," she said, motioning to the people next to her. "The Shelbournes," she added, even though that was quite obvious.

"Good evening, Lord Renminster," Lady Shelbourne said excitedly. "I didn't realize your box was next to ours."

He nodded his greeting. "I haven't had the opportunity to see very much theater recently, I'm afraid."

Lady Shelbourne's chin bobbed up and down in agreement. "It's so difficult to make time. We all have such busy schedules this year. Who would have thought so many people would find themselves back in London in January?"

"And all for a spot of snow," Susannah could not help commenting.

Lord Renminster chuckled at her quiet joke before leaning forward to address Lady Shelbourne. "I do think the play is beginning," he said. "It has been charming as always to see you."

"Indeed," Lady Shelbourne trilled. "I do hope you will be able to attend my Valentine's Day ball next month."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," he assured her.

Lady Shelbourne sat back in her seat, looking both satisfied and relieved, then resumed her conversation with her best friend, Liza Pritchard, who Susannah was now absolutely convinced was in love with Lady Shelbourne's brother, Sir Royce Pemberley, who was also sitting in the box.

Susannah rather thought he returned the sentiment, but of course neither one of them seemed to realize it, and in fact, Miss Pritchard appeared to be setting her cap for the other unmarried gentleman in attendance, Lord Durham, who was, in Susannah's opinion, a bit of a bore. But it wasn't her place to inform them of their feelings, and besides they, along with Lady Shelbourne, seemed to be conducting a rather involved conversation without her.

Which left her with Lord Renminster, who was still watching her over the gap between their respective theater boxes. "Do you enjoy Shakespeare?" she asked him conversationally. Her joy at having been invited to see Kean's Shylock was such that she could even manage a sunny smile *for him*.

"I do," he replied, "although I prefer the histories."

She nodded, deciding that she was willing to carry on a polite conversation if he could manage the same. "I thought you might. They're rather more serious."

He smiled enigmatically. "I can't decide whether to be complimented or insulted."

"In situations such as these," Susannah said, surprised she felt so comfortable talking with him, "you should always decide to be complimented. One leads a much simpler and happier life that way."

He laughed aloud before asking, "And what about you? Which of the bard's plays do you prefer?"

She sighed happily. "I adore them all."

"Really?" he asked, and she was surprised to hear true interest in his voice. "I had no idea you loved the theater so."

Susannah eyed him curiously, cocking her head to the side. "I wouldn't have thought you'd have been aware of my interest one way or another."

"That is true," he acceded, "but Clive doesn't care much for theater."

She felt her spine stiffen slightly. "Clive and I never shared *all* of our interests."

"Obviously not," he said, and she thought she might have even heard a touch of approval in his voice.

And then—and she didn't know why she said this to him, Clive's *brother*, for heaven's sake—she said, "He *talks* incessantly."

The earl appeared to choke on his tongue.

"Are you unwell?" Susannah asked, leaning forward with a concerned expression.

"Fine," the earl gasped, actually patting himself on the chest. "You merely ... ah ... startled me."

"Oh. I apologize."

"Don't," he assured her. "I've always made it a point not to attend the theater with Clive."

"It's difficult for the players to get a word in edgewise," Susannah agreed, resisting the urge to roll her eyes.

He sighed. "To this day, I don't know what happened at the end of *Romeo and Juliet*."

She gasped. "You d—oh, you're bamming me."

"They lived happily ever after, didn't they?" he asked, his eyes all innocence.

"Oh, yes," she said, smiling wickedly. "It's quite an uplifting story."

"Excellent," he said, settling back in his seat as he focused his eyes on the stage. "It's good to finally get that cleared up."

Susannah couldn't help herself. She giggled. How strange that the Earl of Renminster actually had a sense of humor. Clive had always said that his brother was the most "bloody awful serious" man in all England. Susannah had never had any reason to doubt his assessment, especially when he'd actually used the word "bloody" in front of a lady. A gentleman generally didn't unless he was quite serious about his statement.

Just then the house lights began to dim, plunging the theatergoers into darkness. "Oh!" Susannah breathed, leaning forward. "Did you see that?" she asked excitedly, turning to the earl. "How brilliant! They're only leaving the lights on the stage."

"It's one of Wyatt's new innovations," he replied, referring to the architect who had recently renovated the fire-stricken theater. "It makes it easier to see the stage, don't you think?"

"It's brilliant," Susannah said, scooting toward the edge of her seat so that she could see past the pillar that was blocking her view. "It's—"

And then the play began, and she was rendered completely speechless.

From his position in the box next to her, David found himself watching Susannah more often than the play. He'd seen *The Merchant of Venice* on several occasions, and even though he was dimly aware that Edmund Kean's Shylock was a truly remarkable performance, it couldn't quite compare with the glow in Susannah Ballister's dark eyes as she watched the stage.

He would have to come back and view the play again the following week, he decided. Because tonight he was watching Susannah.

Why was it, he wondered, that he'd been so opposed to her marrying his brother? No, that wasn't entirely accurate. He hadn't been entirely opposed to it. He'd not lied to her when he'd said that he would not have objected to their marriage if Clive had settled on her rather than Harriet.

But he hadn't wanted it. He'd seen his brother with Susannah and somehow it had seemed wrong.

Susannah was fire and intelligence and beauty, and Clive was ...

Well, Clive was Clive. David loved him, but Clive's heart was ruled by a devil-may-care urgency that David had never really understood. Clive was like a brightly burning candle. People were drawn to him, like the proverbial moths to flame, but inevitably, someone came away burned.

Someone like Susannah.

Susannah would have been all wrong for Clive. And perhaps even moreso, Clive would have been wrong for her. Susannah needed someone else. Someone more mature. Someone like ...

David's thoughts were like a whisper across his soul. Susannah needed someone like *him*.

The beginnings of an idea began to form in his mind. David wasn't the sort to take rash action, but he made decisions quickly, based on both what he knew and what he felt.

And as he sat there in the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, ignoring the actors on the stage in favor of the woman seated in the box across from his, he made a rather significant decision.

He was going to marry Susannah Ballister.

Susannah Ballister—no, Susannah Mann-Formsby, Countess of Renminster. The lightness of it seemed to sing through him.

She would make an excellent countess. She was beautiful, intelligent, principled, and proud. He didn't know why he hadn't realized all of this before—probably because he'd only ever met her in the company of Clive, and Clive tended to overshadow anyone in his presence.

David had spent the last several years keeping one eye open for a potential bride. He hadn't been in a hurry to marry, but he knew that he would have to take a wife eventually, and so every unmarried woman he'd met had been mentally inventoried and assessed.

And all had come up wanting.

They'd been too silly or too dull. Too quiet or too loud. Or if they weren't too something, they were not enough something.

Not right. Not someone he could imagine himself staring at over the breakfast table for years to come.

He was a picky man, but now, as he smiled to himself in the darkness, it seemed that the wait had most definitely been worthwhile.

David stole another glance at Susannah's profile. He doubted she even noticed that he was watching her, so engrossed was she by the production. Every now and then her lips would part with a soft, involuntary "Oh," and even though he knew it was beyond fanciful, he could swear that he felt her breath travel through the air, landing lightly on his skin.

David felt his body tighten. It had never occurred to him that he might actually be lucky enough to find himself a wife he found desirable. What a boon.

Susannah's tongue darted out to wet her lips.

Extremely desirable.

He sat back, unable to stop the satisfied smile that crept across his features. He had made a decision; now all he needed to do was formulate a plan.

* * *

When the house lights rose after the third act to mark the intermission, Susannah instantly looked to the box next to her, absurdly eager to ask the earl what he thought of the play thus far.

But he was gone.

"How odd," she murmured to herself. He must have crept out quietly; she had not noticed his departure in the least. She felt herself slouch slightly in her seat, oddly disappointed that he'd disappeared. She'd been looking forward to asking his opinion of Kean's performance, which was quite unlike any Shylock she'd seen before. She'd been certain that he would have something valuable to say, something that perhaps she herself had not noticed. Clive had never wanted to do anything during intermissions other than escape to the mezzanine where he might chat with his friends.

Still, it was probably for the best that the earl was gone. Despite his friendly behavior before the performance, it was still difficult to believe that he was amiably disposed toward her.

And besides, when he was near, she felt rather . . . odd. Strange, and breathless, somehow. It was exciting, but not quite comfortable, and it left her uneasy.

So when Lady Shelbourne asked if she wanted to accompany the rest of the party to the mezzanine to enjoy the intermission, Susannah thanked her but graciously declined. It was definitely in her best interest to stay put, remaining right there in the one place the Earl of Renminster most certainly was not.

The Shelbournes filed out, along with their guests, leaving Susannah to her own company, which she didn't mind in the least. The stagehands had accidentally left the curtain slightly open, and if Susannah squinted, she could see flashes of people scurrying around. It was strangely exciting and all rather interesting, and—

She heard a sound from behind her. Someone in the Shelbourne party must have forgotten something. Affixing a smile to her face, Susannah turned around, "Good eve—"

It was the earl.

"Good evening," he said, when it became apparent that she was not going to finish the greeting herself.

"My lord," she said, her surprise evident in her voice.

He nodded graciously. "Miss Ballister. May I sit?"

"Of course," she said, rather automatically. Good heavens, why was he here?

"I thought it might be easier to converse without having to yell between the boxes," he said.

Susannah just stared at him in disbelief. They hadn't had to yell at all. The boxes were terribly close. But, she realized somewhat frantically, not nearly as close as their chairs now were. The earl's thigh was nearly pressed up next to hers.

It shouldn't have been bothersome, since Lord Durham had occupied the same chair for well over an hour, and his thigh hadn't vexed her in the least.

But it was different with Lord Renminster. Everything was different with Lord Renminster, Susannah was coming to realize.

"Are you enjoying the play?" he asked her.

"Oh indeed," she said. "Kean's performance was nothing short of remarkable, wouldn't you agree?"

He nodded and murmured his agreement.

"I would never have expected Shylock to be portrayed in such a tragic manner," Susannah continued. "I've seen *The Merchant of Venice* several times before, of course, as I'm sure you have, too, and he has always been a more comic sort, wouldn't you agree?"

"It does make for an interesting interpretation."

Susannah nodded enthusiastically. "I thought the black wig was a stroke of genius. Every other Shylock

I've seen was played with a red wig. And how could Kean expect us to view him as a tragic character with a red wig? No one takes red-haired men seriously."

The earl began to cough uncontrollably.

Susannah leaned forward, hoping she hadn't somehow insulted him. With his dark hair, she hadn't thought he could possibly take offense.

"I beg your pardon," he said, catching his breath.

"Is something amiss?"

"Nothing," he assured her. "Merely that your rather astute observation caught me off guard."

"I am not trying to say that red-haired men are less worthy than the rest of you," she said.

"Except us of the clearly superior dark-headed variety," he murmured, his lips creeping into a devilish smile.

She pursed her lips to stop herself from smiling back. It was *soodd* that he could draw her into a secret, shared moment—the sort that would develop into a private joke. "What I was trying to say," she said, attempting to get back to the matter at hand, "is that one never reads about men with red hair in novels, does one?"

"Not the novels I read," he assured her.

Susannah shot him a vaguely peeved expression. "Or if one does," she continued, "he is never the hero of the tale."

The earl leaned toward her, his green eyes sparkling with wicked promise. "And who is the hero of *your* tale, Miss Baluster?"

"I haven't a hero," she said primly. "I should think that was obvious."

He held silent for a moment, regarding her thoughtfully. "You should," he murmured.

Susannah felt her lips part, even felt her breath rushing across them as his words landed softly on her ears. "I'm sorry?" she finally asked, not entirely certain what he meant.

Or maybe she *was* certain, and she just couldn't believe it.

He smiled slightly. "A woman like you should have a hero," he said. "A champion, perhaps."

She looked at him with arched brows. "Are you saying I should be married?"

Again that smile. The knowing curve of his lips, as if he had a devilishly good secret. "What do you think?"

"I think," Susannah said, "that this conversation is veering into astonishingly personal waters."

He laughed at that, but it was a warm, amused sound, completely lacking in the malice that so

often tinged the laughter of the *ton*. "I rescind my earlier statement," he said with a broad smile. "You don't need a champion. You are clearly able to take care of yourself quite well."

Susannah narrowed her eyes.

"Yes," he said, "it was a compliment."

"With you one always has to check," she remarked.

"Oh, come now, Miss Ballister," he said. "You wound me."

Now it was her turn to laugh. "Please," she said, grinning all the while. "Your armor is quite up to the task against any verbal blow I might strike."

"I'm not so sure about that," he said, so softly that she wasn't certain she'd heard him correctly.

And then she had to ask—"Why are you being so nice to me?"

"Am I?"

"Yes," she said, not even certain why the answer was so important, "you are. And considering how opposed you were to my marrying your brother, I can't help but be suspicious."

"I wasn't—"

"I know you said you weren't opposed to the match," Susannah said, her face almost expressionless as she interrupted him. "But we both know you did not favor *it* and that you encouraged him to marry Harriet."

David held still for a long moment, considering her statement. Not a word that she had said was false, and yet it was clear that she understood nothing of what had transpired the previous summer.

Most of all, she did not understand Clive. And if she thought she could have been the wife for him, perhaps she did not understand herself, either.

"I love my brother," David said softly, "but he has his flaws, and he required a wife who would need him and depend upon him. Someone who would force him to become the man I know he can be. If Clive had married you—"

He looked at her. She was staring at him with frank eyes, waiting patiently for him to formulate his thoughts. He could tell that his answer meant everything to her, and he knew that he had to get it right.

"If Clive had married you," he finally continued, "he would have had no need to be strong. *You* would have been strong for the both of you. Clive would never have had any reason to grow."

Her lips parted with surprise.

"Put simply, Miss Ballister," he said with startling softness, "my brother wasn't worthy of a woman like you."

And then, while she was trying to comprehend the meaning behind his words, while she was trying

simply to remember how to breathe, he stood.

"It has been a pleasure, Miss Ballister" he murmured, taking her hand and gently laying a kiss on her glove. His eyes remained fixed on her face the entire while, glowing hot and green, and searing straight into her soul.

He straightened, curved his lips just far enough to make her skin tingle, and quietly said, "Good night, Miss Ballister."

Then he was gone, even before she could offer her own farewell. And he did not reappear in the box next to her.

But this feeling—this strange, breathless, swirling feeling

that he managed to stir within her with only a smile—it wrapped itself around her and didn't leave.

And for the first time in her life, Susannah wasn't able to concentrate on a Shakespearean play.

Even with her eyes open, all she could see was the earl's face.

Chapter 3

Once again, Miss Susannah Ballister is the talk of the town. After achieving the dubious distinction of being both the most popular and the most unpopular young lady of the 1813 season (thanks, in whole, to the occasionally vacuous Clive Mann-Formsby), she was enjoying a bit of obscurity until another Mann-Formsby—this one David, the Earl of Renminster—graced her with his undivided attention at Saturday night's performance of The Merchant of Venice at Drury Lane.

One can only speculate as to the earl's intentions, as Miss Ballister very nearly became a Mann-Formsby last summer, although her prefix would have been Mrs. Clive, and she would have been sister to the earl.

This Author feels safe in writing that no one who saw the way the earl was looking at Miss Ballister throughout the performance would ever mistake his interest as fraternal.

As for Miss Ballister—if the earl's intentions are noble, then This Author also feels safe in writing that everyone would agree that she has landed herself the better Mann-Formsby

Lady Whistledown's Society Papers, 31 January 1814

Once again, Susannah could not sleep. And no wonder—*My brother wasn't worthy of a woman like you!* What could he have meant by that? Why would the earl say such a thing?

Could he be courting her? The earl?

She gave her head a shake, the sort meant to knock silly ideas right from her mind. Impossible. The Earl of Renminster had never shown signs of seriously courting anyone, and Susannah rather doubted that he was going to start with her.

And besides, she had every reason to feel the utmost irritation with the man. She had lost sleep over him. Susannah never lost sleep over anyone. Not even Clive.

As if that weren't bad enough, her restless night on Saturday was repeated on Sunday, and then Monday was even worse, due to her appearance in that morning's *Whistledown* column. So by the time Tuesday morning came along, Susannah was tired and grumpy when her butler found her and Letitia breaking their fast.

"Miss Susannah," he said, inclining his head ever so slightly in her direction. "A letter has arrived for you."

"For me?" Susannah queried, taking the envelope from his hand. It was the expensive sort, sealed with dark blue wax. The crest she recognized instantly. Renminster.

"Who is it from?" Letitia asked, once she'd finished chewing the muffin she'd popped into her mouth just as the butler had entered.

"I haven't opened it yet," Susannah said testily. And if she was clever, she'd figure out how not to open it until she was out of Letitia's company.

Her sister stared at her as if she were an imbecile. "That's easily remedied," Letitia pointed out.

Susannah set the envelope down on the table beside her plate. "I will deal with it later. Right now I'm hungry."

"Right now I'm dying of curiosity," Letitia retorted. "Either you open that envelope this instant or I will do it for you."

"I am going to finish my eggs, and then—Letitia!" The name came out rather like a shriek, as Susannah lunged across the table at her sister, who had just swiped the envelope in a rather neatly done maneuver that Susannah would have been able to intercept had her reflexes not been dulled by lack of sleep.

"Letitia " Susannah said in a deadly voice, "if you do not hand that envelope back to me unopened, I will never ever forgive you." And when that didn't seem to work, she added, "For the rest of my life."

Letitia appeared to consider her words.

"I will hunt you down," Susannah continued. "There will be no place you may remain safe."

"From you?" Letitia asked dubiously.

"Give me the envelope."

"Will you open it?"

"Yes. Give it to me."

"Will you open it *now*?" Letitia amended.

"Letitia, if you do not hand that envelope back to me this instant, you will wake up one morning with all of your hair cut off."

Letitia's mouth fell open. "You're not serious?"

Susannah glared at her through narrowed eyes. "Do I look as if I'm jesting?"

Letitia gulped and held the envelope out with a shaky hand. "I do believe you're serious."

Susannah snatched the missive from her sister's hand. "I would have taken several inches off at the very least," she muttered.

"Will you open it?" Letitia said, always one to remain intractably on subject.

"Very well," Susannah said with a sigh. It wasn't as if she was going to be able to keep it a secret, anyway. She'd merely been hoping to put it off. She hadn't yet used her butter knife, so she slid it under the flap and popped the seal open.

"Who is it from?" Letitia asked, even though Susannah hadn't even yet unfolded the letter.

"Renminster," Susannah said with a weary sigh.

"And you're upset?" Letitia asked, eyes bugged out.

"I'm not upset."

"You sound upset."

"Well, I'm not," Susannah said, sliding the single sheet of paper from the envelope.

But if she wasn't upset, what *was* she? Excited, maybe, a little at least, even if she was too tired to show it. The earl was exciting, enigmatic, and certainly more intelligent than *dive* had been. But he was an earl, and he certainly wasn't going to marry her, which meant that eventually, she would be known as the girl who'd been dropped by two Mann-Formsbys.

It was more than she thought she could bear. She'd endured public humiliation once. She didn't particularly want to experience it again, and in greater measure.

Which was why, when she read his note, and its accompanying request, her answer was immediately no.

Miss Ballister—

Irequest the pleasure of your company on Thursday, at Lord and Lady Moreland's skating party, Swan Lane Pier, noon.

With your permission, I will call for you at your home thirty minutes prior.

Renminster

"What does he want?" Letitia asked breathlessly.

Susannah just handed her the note. It seemed easier than recounting its contents.

Letitia gasped, clapping a hand over her mouth.

"Oh, for goodness' sake," Susannah muttered, trying to refocus her attention on her breakfast.

"Susannah, he means to court you!"

"He does not."

"He does. Why else would he invite you to the skating party?" Letitia paused and frowned. "I hope I receive an invitation. Skating is one of the few athletic pursuits at which I do not appear a complete imbecile."

Susannah nodded, raising her brows at her sister's understatement. There was a pond near their home in Sussex that froze over every winter. Both Ballister girls had spent hours upon hours swishing across the ice. They'd even taught themselves to spin. Susannah had spent more time on her bottom than on her skates during her fourteenth winter, but by God, she could spin.

Almost as well as Letitia. It did seem a shame that she hadn't yet been invited. "You could just come along with us," Susannah said.

"Oh no, I couldn't do that," Letitia said. "Not if he's courting you. There is nothing like a third wheel to ruin a perfectly good romance."

"There is no romance," Susannah insisted, "and I don't think I'm going to accept his invitation, anyway."

"You just said you would."

Susannah stabbed her fork into a piece of sausage, thoroughly irritated with herself. She hated people who changed their minds at whim, and apparently, for today at least, she was going to have to include herself in that group. "I misspoke," she muttered.

For a moment Letitia didn't reply. She even took a bite of eggs, chewed them thoroughly, swallowed, and took a sip of tea.

Susannah didn't really think her sister was through with the conversation; Letitia's silence could never be mistaken as anything but a momentary reprieve. And sure enough, just when Susannah had relaxed sufficiently to take a sip of her tea without actually gulping it down, Letitia said:

"You're mad, you know."

Susannah brought her napkin to her lips to keep from spitting out her tea. "I know no such thing, thank you very much."

"The Earl of Renminster?" Letitia said, her entire face colored by disbelief. "Renminster? Good heavens, sister, he's rich, he's handsome, and he's *anearl*. Why on earth would you refuse his invitation?"

"Letitia," Susannah said, "he's Clive's brother."

"I'm aware of that."

"He didn't like me when I was being courted by Clive, and I don't see how he has suddenly revised that opinion now."

"Then why is he courting you?" Letitia demanded.

"He's not courting me."

"He's trying to."

"He's not try—oh, devil take it," Susannah broke off, thoroughly annoyed with the conversation by this point. "Why would you think he wanted to court me?"

Letitia took a bite of her muffin and said rather matter-of-factly, "Lady Whistledown said so."

"Hang Lady Whistledown!" Susannah exploded.

Letitia drew back in horror, gasping as if Susannah had committed a mortal sin. "I can't believe you said that."

"What has Lady Whistledown ever done to earn my undying admiration and devotion?" Susannah wanted to know.

"I adore Lady Whistledown," Letitia said with a sniff, "and I will not tolerate slander against her in my presence."

Susannah could do nothing but stare at the deranged spirit she was certain had overtaken her normally sensible sister's body.

"Lady Whistledown," Letitia continued, her eyes flashing, "treated you rather nicely throughout that entire awful episode with Clive last summer. In fact, she might have been the only Londoner to do so. For that, if for nothing else, I will never disparage her."

Susannah's lips parted, her breath going still in her throat. "Thank you, Letitia," she finally said, her low voice catching on her sister's name.

Letitia just shrugged, clearly not wanting to get into a sentimental conversation. "It's nothing," she said, her breezy voice belied by her slight snuffle. "But I think you should accept the earl's offer all the same. If for no other reason than to restore your popularity. If one dance with him can make you acceptable again, think what an entire skating party will do. We'll be mobbed by gentleman callers."

Susannah sighed, truly torn. She *had* enjoyed her conversation with the earl at the theater. But she'd grown less trusting since Clive had jilted her last summer. And she didn't want to be the subject of unpleasant gossip again, which would certainly arise the minute the earl decided to pay attention to some other young lady.

"I can't," she said to Letitia, standing up so suddenly that her chair nearly toppled over. "I just can't."

Her regrets were sent to the earl not one hour later.

* * *

Precisely sixty minutes after Susannah watched her footman depart with her note for the earl, declining his invitation, the Ballisters' butler found her in her bedchamber and informed her that the earl himself had arrived and was waiting for her downstairs.

Susannah gasped, dropping the book she'd been trying to read all morning. It landed on her toe.

"Ow!" she blurted out.

"Are you hurt, Miss Ballister?" the butler asked politely.

Susannah shook her head even though her toe was throbbing. Stupid book. She hadn't been able to read more than three paragraphs in an hour. Every time she looked down at the pages, the words swam and blurred until all she could see was the earl's face.

And now he was there.

Was he *trying* to torture her?

Yes, Susannah thought, with no small measure of melodrama, he probably was.

"Shall I inform him that you will see him in a moment?" the butler inquired.

Susannah nodded. She was certainly in no position to refuse an audience with the Earl of Renminster, especially in her own home. A quick glance in her mirror told her that her hair wasn't too terribly mussed after sitting on her bed for an hour, and so with heart pounding, she made her way downstairs.

When she walked into the sitting room, the earl was standing by the window, his posture proud and perfect as always. "Miss Ballister," he said, turning to face her, "how lovely to see you."

"Er, thank you," she said.

"I received your note."

"Yes," she said, swallowing nervously as she lowered herself into a chair, "I surmised as much."

"I was disappointed."

Her eyes flew to his. His tone was quiet, serious, and there was something in it that hinted of even deeper emotions. "I'm sorry," she said, speaking slowly, trying to measure her words before she actually said them aloud. "I never meant to hurt your feelings."

He began to walk toward her, but his movements were slow, almost predatory. "Didn't you?" he murmured.

"No." She answered quickly, for it was the truth. "Of course not."

"Then why," he asked, settling into the chair nearest to hers, "did you refuse?"

She couldn't tell him the truth—that she didn't want to be the girl who was dropped by two Mann-Formsbys. If the earl began to accompany her to skating parties and the like, the only way it would appear as if he *hadn't* dropped her would be if he actually married her. And Susannah didn't want him to think she was dangling for an offer of marriage.

Good heavens, what could be more embarrassing than that!

"No good reason, then?" the earl said, one side of his mouth tipping up as his eyes never left her face.

"I'm not a good skater," Susannah blurted out, the lie the only thing she could think of on such short notice.

"Is that all?" he asked, dismissing her protest with nothing more than a quirk of his lips. "Have no fear, I shall support you."

Susannah gulped. Did that mean hands at the waist as they slid across the ice? If so, then her lie might just turn out to be the truth, because she was not at all certain that she could remain balanced and on her feet with the earl standing so close.

"I... ah..."

"Excellent," he declared, rising to his feet. "Then it is settled. We shall be a pair at the skating party. Stand now, if you will, and I shall give you your first lesson."

He didn't offer her much choice in the matter, taking her hand and tugging her upward. Susannah glanced toward the door, which she noticed was not nearly as far open as she'd left it when she entered.

Letitia.

The sneaky little matchmaker. She was going to have to have a stern talk with her sister once Renminster finally left. Letitia might wake up with her hair all chopped off yet.

And speaking of Renminster, what was *she* about? Expert skater that she was, Susannah knew very well that there was nothing to be taught about the sport unless one was actually *on* skates. She stood anyway, half out of curiosity, half because his relentless tug at her hand left her little choice.

"The secret to skating," he said (somewhat pompously, in her opinion), "is in the knees."

She batted her lashes. She'd always thought women who batted their lashes looked a bit dim, and since she was trying to appear as if she hadn't a clue about what she was doing, she thought it might be an effective touch. "The knees, you say?" she asked.

"Indeed," he replied. "The bending of them."

"The bending of the knees," she echoed. "Imagine that."

If he caught the sarcasm under her facade of innocence, he made no indication. "Indeed," he said again, making her wonder if perhaps it weren't his favorite word. "If you try to keep your knees straight, you will never keep your balance."

"Like this?" Susannah asked, bending her knees far too deeply.

"No, no, Miss Ballister," he said, demonstrating the maneuver himself. "Rather like this."

He looked uncommonly silly pretending to skate in the middle of the drawing room, but Susannah managed to keep her smile well hidden. Truly, moments like this were not to be wasted.

"I don't understand," she said.

David's brows came together in frustration. "Come over here," he said, moving to the side of the room where there was no furniture.

Susannah followed.

"Like this," he said, trying to move across the polished wood floors as if he were on skates.

"It doesn't seem terribly . . . smooth," she said, her face the perfect picture of innocence.

David eyed her suspiciously. She looked almost too angelic standing there watching him make a fool of himself. His shoes hadn't a scuff on them, of course, and they didn't slide at all on the floor.

"Why don't you try it again?" she asked, smiling rather like the Mona Lisa.

"Why don't you try it?" he countered.

"Oh, I couldn't," she said, blushing modestly. Except—he frowned—she wasn't blushing. She was just tilting her head slightly to the side in a bashful manner that *should* have been accompanied by a blush.

"Learning by doing," he said, determined to get her skating if it killed him. "It's the only way." If he was going to make a fool of himself, heaven take it, so was she.

She cocked her head slightly, looking as if she were considering the notion, then she just smiled and said, "No, thank you."

He moved to her side. "I insist," he murmured, purposefully stepping just a little bit closer to her than was proper.

Her lips parted in surprise and awareness. Good. He wanted her to want him, even if she didn't understand what that meant.

Moving so that he was slightly behind her, he placed his hands at her waist. "Try it this way," he said softly, his lips scandalously close to her ear.

"My—my lord," she whispered. Her tone suggested that she'd tried to shriek the words, but that she lacked the energy, or perhaps the conviction.

It was, of course, completely improper, but as he planned to marry her, he didn't really see the problem.

Besides, he was rather enjoying seducing her. Even though—no, *especially because*—she didn't even realize it was happening.

"Like this," he said, his voice dropping nearly to a whisper. He exerted a bit of pressure on her waist, designed to force her to move forward as if they were skating as partners. But of course she stumbled, since her shoes didn't slide on the floor, either. And when she stumbled, he stumbled.

Much to his eternal dismay, however, they somehow managed to remain on their feet, and did not end up in a tangled pile on the floor. Which had been, of course, his intention.

Susannah expertly extricated herself from his grasp, leaving him to wonder if she'd had to practice the same maneuvers with Clive.

By the time he even realized that his jaw was clenched, he nearly had to pry it apart with his fingers.

"Is something wrong, my lord?" Susannah asked.

"Nothing at all," he ground out. "Why should you think so?"

"You look a little"—she blinked several times as she considered his face—"angry."

"Not at all," he said smoothly, forcing all thoughts of Clive and Susannah and Clive-and-Susannah from his mind. "But we should try the skating again." Perhaps this time he'd manage to orchestrate a tumble.

She stepped away, bright girl that she was. "I think it's time for tea," she said, her tone somehow sweet and resolute at the same time.

If that tone hadn't so obviously meant that he wasn't going to get what he wanted—namely, his body rather closely aligned against hers, preferably on the floor—he might have admired it. It was a talent, that—getting exactly what one wanted without ever having to remove a smile from one's face.

"Do you care for tea?" she asked.

"Of course," he lied. He detested tea, much as that had always vexed his mother, who felt it to be one's patriotic duty to drink the appalling beverage. But without tea, he'd have little excuse to linger.

But then her brows drew together, and she looked straight at him and said, "You hate tea."

"You remember," he commented, somewhat impressed.

"You lied," she pointed out.

"Perhaps I hoped to remain in your company," he said, gazing down at her rather as if she were a chocolate pastry.

He hated tea, but chocolate—now that was another story.

She stepped to the side. "Why?"

"Why, indeed," he murmured. "That's a good question."

She took another step to the side, but the sofa blocked her path.

He smiled.

Susannah smiled back, or at least she tried to. "I can have something else brought for you to drink."

He appeared to consider that for a moment, then he said, "No, I think it's time I departed."

Susannah nearly gasped at the knot of disappointment forming in her chest. When had her ire at his highhandedness turned into desire for his presence? And what was his game? First he made silly excuses to put his hands on her person, then he out-and-out lied to prolong his visit, and now, suddenly, he wanted to leave?

He was toying with her. And the worst part was—some little part of her was enjoying it.

He took a step toward the door. "I shall see you on Thursday, then?"

"Thursday?" she echoed.

"The skating party," he reminded her. "I believe I said I would come for you thirty minutes prior."

"But I never agreed to go," she blurted out.

"Didn't you?" He smiled blandly. "I could have sworn you did."

Susannah feared that she was wading into treacherous waters, but she just couldn't stop the stubborn devil that had clearly taken over her mind. "No," she said, "I didn't."

In under a second, he'd moved back to her side, and was standing close... very close. So close that the breath rushed from her body, replaced by something sweeter, something more dangerous.

Something utterly forbidden and divine.

"I think you will," he said softly, touching his fingers to her chin.

"My lord," she whispered, stunned by his nearness.

"David," he said.

"David," she repeated, too mesmerized by the green fire in his eyes to say anything else. But something about it felt right. She had never uttered his name, never even thought of him as anything but Clive's brother or Renminster, or even just *the earl*. But now, somehow, he was David, and when she looked into his eyes, so near to hers, she saw something new.

She saw the man. Not the title, not the fortune.

The man.

He took her hand, raised it to his lips. "Until Thursday, then," he murmured, his kiss brushing her skin with aching tenderness.

She nodded, because she could do nothing else.

Frozen in place, she watched mutely as he stepped away and walked toward the door.

But then, as he reached his hand toward the knob—but in that split second before he actually touched it—he stopped. He stopped, and he turned, and while she was standing there staring at him, he said, more to himself than to her, "No, no, that will never do."

He required only three long steps to reach her side. In a movement that was as startling as it was fluidly sensuous, he gathered her against him. His lips found hers, and he kissed her.

He kissed her until she thought she might faint from the desire.

He kissed her until she thought she might pass out from the lack of air.

He kissed her until she couldn't think of anything but him, could see nothing but his face in her mind, and wanted nothing but the taste of him on her lips ... forever.

And then, with the same suddenness that had brought him to her side, he stepped away.

"Thursday?" he asked softly.

She nodded, one of her hands touching her lips.

He smiled. Slowly, with hunger. "I will look forward to it," he murmured.

"As will I," she whispered, although not until he was gone. "As will I."

Good heavens, but This Author could not even begin to count the number of people sprawled most inelegantly upon the snow and ice during Lord and Lady Moreland's skating party yesterday afternoon.

It seems thetonis not quite as proficient at the art and sport of ice skating as they would like to believe.

Lady Whistledown's Society Papers, 4 February 1814

According to his pocket watch, which David knew to be perfectly accurate, it was precisely forty-six minutes past noon, and David knew quite well that the day was Thursday and the date was February the third, the year eighteen hundred and fourteen.

And at precisely that moment—at precisely 12:46 on Thursday, 3 February 1814, David Mann-Formsby, Earl of Renminster, realized three incontrovertible truths.

The first was, if one were going to be precise about it, probably closer to opinion than fact. And that was that the skating party was a disaster. Lord and Lady Moreland had instructed their poor, shivering servants to push carts about the ice with sandwiches and Madeira, which might have been a charming touch, except that none of the servants had the least bit of a clue as to how to maneuver on the ice, which, where it wasn't slippery, was treacherously bumpy due to the wind's constant sweep during the freezing process.

As a result, a flock of rather nasty-looking pigeons had congregated near the pier to gorge themselves on the sandwiches that had spilled from an overturned cart, and the poor hapless footman who'd been forced to push the cart was now sitting on the shore, pressing handkerchiefs up to his face where the pigeons had pecked him until he'd fled the scene.

The second truth that David realized was even less palatable. And that was that Lord and Lady Moreland had decided to host the party for the express purpose of finding a wife for their dimwit son Donald, and they'd decided that Susannah would do as well as any. To that end, they'd snatched her from his side and forced her into conversation with Donald for a full ten minutes before Susannah had managed an escape. (At which point they'd moved on to Lady Caroline Starling, but David decided that that simply couldn't be his problem, and Caroline would have to figure out how to extricate herself.)

The third truth made him grind his teeth, nearly into powder. And that was that Susannah Ballister, who had so sweetly claimed not to know how to skate, was a little liar.

He should have guessed it the minute she'd pulled her skates out of her bag. They didn't look anything like what everyone else had strapped to their feet. David's own skates were considered the height of

new invention, and his consisted of long blades attached to wooden platforms, which he then tied onto his boots. Susannah's blades were a bit shorter than average, but more importantly, they had been attached to her actual boots, requiring her to change her footwear.

"I've never seen skates like that," he commented, watching her with interest as she laced up her boots.

"Er, it's what we use in Sussex," she said, and he couldn't be certain if the pink on her cheeks was a blush or merely from the blustery wind. "One doesn't have to worry about one's skates coming off one's boots if they're already attached."

"Yes," he said, "I can see where that would be an advantage, especially if one was not a proficient skater."

"Er, yes," she mumbled. Then she coughed. Then she looked up at him and smiled, although it did, in all honesty, look a bit like a grimace.

She switched to her other boot, her fingers moving nimbly as they worked the laces, despite being encased in gloves. David watched silently, and then he couldn't help commenting, "And the blades are shorter."

"Are they?" she murmured, not looking up at him.

"Yes," he said, moving so that his skate lined up next to hers. "Look at that. Mine are at least three inches longer."

"Well, you're a much taller person," she replied, smiling up at him from her position on the bench.

"An interesting theory," he said, "except that mine do seem to be a standard size." He waved his hand toward the river, where countless ladies and gentlemen were swishing across the ice ... or falling on their bottoms. "Everyone's skates are rather like mine."

She shrugged as she allowed him to help her to her feet. "I don't know what to tell you," she said, "except that skates like these are quite common in Sussex."

David glanced over at the poor, hapless Donald Spence, who was presently being poked in the back by his mother, Lady Moreland. The Morelands, he was fairly certain, hailed from Sussex, and their skates didn't look a thing like Susannah's.

David and Susannah hobbled over to the edge of the ice—truly, *who* knew how to walk in skates on land?—and then he helped her onto the ice. "Mind your balance," he instructed, rather enjoying the way she was clutching his arm. "Remember, it's all in the knees."

"Thank you," she murmured. "I shall."

They moved farther out onto the ice, David steering them to a less populated area where he wouldn't have to worry so much about some buffoon crashing into them. Susannah seemed to be a natural, perfectly balanced and completely at one with the rhythm of skating.

David narrowed his eyes with suspicion. It was difficult to imagine anyone taking to skating quite so quickly, much less a wisp of a girl. "You *have* skated before," he said.

"A few times," she admitted.

Just to see what happened, he drew to a swift halt. She held her own admirably, without even a stumble. "More than a few times, perhaps?" he asked.

She caught her lower lip between her teeth.

"Maybe more than a dozen times?" he asked, crossing his arms.

"Er, maybe."

"Why did you tell me you couldn't skate?"

"Well," she said, crossing her arms in a perfect imitation of his, "it might be because I was looking for an excuse not to come."

He drew back, at first surprised by her show of honesty, but then rather impressed despite himself. There were many, many superb things about being an earl, and a rich and powerful one at that. But honesty among one's acquaintances was not one of them. David couldn't count the number of times he'd wished someone would just look him in the eye and say what they really meant. People tended to tell him what they thought he wanted to hear, which, unfortunately, was rarely the truth.

Susannah, on the other hand, was brave enough to tell him precisely what she was thinking. David was amazed at how refreshing it was, even when it meant that she was, in all truth, insulting him.

And so he just smiled. "And have you changed your mind?"

"About the skating party?"

"About me," he said softly.

Her lips parted with shock at his question. "I—" she began, and he could see that she did not know how to respond. He started to say something, to save her from an uncomfortable moment of his creation, but then she surprised him when she raised her eyes to his, and with that directness he found so enticing, said, quite simply, "I am still deciding."

He chuckled. "I suppose that means I will have to hone my powers of persuasion."

She blushed, and he knew she was thinking of their kiss.

This pleased him, as he'd been able to think of little else during the past few days. It made his torture a bit more bearable, knowing that she was enduring the same.

But this wasn't the time or place for seduction, and so he decided instead to uncover just how deeply she'd lied about her skating skills. "How well*do* you skate?" he asked, letting go of her arm and giving her a little push. "The truth, if you please."

She didn't falter for a moment, just swished a few feet away and then came to a stunningly swift halt. "I'm rather good, actually," she replied.

"How good?"

She smiled. Rather deviously. "Quite good."

He crossed his arms. "How good?"

She glanced about the ice, gauging the positions of the people around them, then took off—fast—straight in his direction.

And then, just when he was convinced she'd crash into him, toppling them both, she executed a neat little turn and circled around him, ending up right back where she'd started, in the twelve o'clock position.

"Impressive," he murmured.

She beamed.

"Especially for someone who doesn't skate."

She didn't stop beaming, but her eyes grew a little sheepish.

"Any other tricks?" he inquired.

She appeared undecided, so David added, "Go ahead. Be a show-off. I'm giving you permission."

She laughed. "Oh. Well, *if that's* the case ..." She skated a few steps out, then stopped and shot him a glance that was pure mischief. "I would never dream of doing this without your permission."

"Of course not," he murmured, his lips twitching.

She looked around, obviously making sure she had room for her maneuverings.

"No one is even aimed in our direction," he said. "The ice is all yours."

With a look of intense concentration, she skated a few yards until she had built up a bit of speed, and then, to his complete surprise, she spun.

Spun. He had never seen anything like it.

Her feet never left the ice, but somehow she was twirling about, once, twice, thrice . . .

Good heavens, she made five complete rotations before she stopped, her entire being lit with joy. "I did it!" she called out, laughing on the words.

"That was amazing," he said, skating to her side. "How did you do it?"

"I don't know. I've never managed five rotations before. It's always been three, maybe four if I'm lucky, and half the time I fall." Susannah was talking quickly, caught up in her own exhilaration.

"Remind me not to believe you next time you say you can't do something."

For some reason, his words made her grin. From the smile on her face right down deep to her very heart and soul, Susannah grinned. She'd spent the last few months feeling like a failure, like a

laughingstock, constantly having to remind herself of all the things she could not or should not do. Now here was this man—this wonderful, handsome, intelligent man—telling her that she could do anything.

And in the magic of the moment, she almost believed him.

Tonight she would force herself back to reality, back to remembering that David was also an earl and—even worse— a Mann-Formsby, and that she was probably going to regret her association with him. But for now, while the sun was glistening diamondlike off the snow and ice, while the cold wind felt like it was finally waking her up after a long, deep sleep, she was simply going to enjoy herself.

And she laughed. Laughed right there, right then, without a care for how she looked or sounded or even if everyone was watching her as if she were some deranged lunatic. She laughed.

"You must tell me," David said, skating over to her side. "What is so funny?"

"Nothing," she said, catching her breath. "I don't know. I'm just happy, that's all."

Something changed in his eyes then. He had gazed at her before with passion, even with lust, but now she saw something deeper. It was as if he'd suddenly found her and never wanted to tear his eyes away. And maybe it was a practiced look, and he'd used it on thousands of women before, but oh,*how* Susannah didn't want to think so.

It had been so long since she'd felt special.

"Take my arm," he said, and she did, and soon they were swishing silently across the ice, moving slowly but fluidly as they dodged the other skaters.

Then he asked her the one thing that she would never have expected. His voice was soft, and almost carefully casual, but his intensity was evident in the way his hand tightened on her arm. "What," he asked, "did you see in Clive?"

Somehow Susannah didn't stumble, and somehow she didn't slip, and somehow her voice sounded even and serene as she answered, "You almost make it sound as if you don't care for your brother."

"Nonsense," David replied. "I would give my life for Clive."

"Well, yes," Susannah said, since she'd never doubted*that* for a moment. "But do you*like* him?"

Several seconds passed, and their blades stroked the ice eight times before David finally said, "Yes. Everyone likes Clive."

Susannah looked at him sharply, intending to scold him for his evasive answer until she saw from his face that he intended to say more.

"I love my brother," David said, his words slow, as if he were making a final decision on each one mere seconds before he spoke it. "But I am not unaware of his shortcomings. I have every hope, however, that his marriage to Harriet will help him to grow into a more responsible and mature person."

A week ago Susannah would have taken his words as an insult, but now she recognized them as the simple statement of fact that they were. And it seemed only fair to answer him with the same honesty he'd

given her.

"I liked Clive," she said, feeling herself slip into memory, "because—oh, I don't know, I suppose it was because he always seemed so happy and free. It was contagious." She shrugged helplessly, even as they rounded the corner of the pier, instinctively slowing down as they grew closer to the rest of the skating party. "I don't think I was the only one who felt that way," she continued. "Everyone liked to be near Clive. Somehow . . ." She smiled wistfully, and she smiled regretfully. Memories of Clive were bittersweet.

"Somehow," she finished softly, "everyone seemed to smile near him. Especially me." She shrugged, the motion almost an apology. "It was exciting to be on his arm."

She looked to David, who was regarding her with an intense expression. But there was no anger, no recrimination. Just a palpable sense of curiosity, of a need to understand.

Susannah let out a little breath—not quite a sigh, but something close to it. It was hard to put into words something that she'd never quite forced herself to analyze. "When you're with Clive," she eventually said, "everything seems ..."

It took her several seconds to locate the right word, but David did not press.

"Brighter," she finally finished. "Does that make sense? It's almost as if he has a glow to him, and everything that comes into contact with it seems somehow better than it really is. Everyone seems more beautiful, the food tastes better, the flowers smell sweeter." She turned to David with an earnest expression. "Do you understand what I mean?"

David nodded.

"But at the same time," Susannah said, "I've come to realize that he shone so brightly—everything shone so brightly, actually—that I missed things." She felt the corners of her lips pinch into a thoughtful frown as she tried to find the words for what she was feeling. "I didn't notice things I should have done."

"What do you mean?" he asked, and when she looked into his eyes, she knew that he wasn't humoring her. He truly cared about her answer.

"At the Worth ball, for example," she said. "I was saved from what would surely have been a rather nasty episode by Penelope Featherington."

David's brow furrowed. "I'm not sure I know her."

"That's exactly my point. I never spared even so much as a thought for her last summer. Don't mistake my point," she assured him. "I was certainly never cruel to her. Just... unaware, I suppose. I didn't pay attention to anyone outside my little social circle. Clive's circle, in truth."

He nodded in understanding.

"And it turns out she's actually a very nice person." Susannah looked up at him earnestly. "Letitia and I paid a call upon her last week. She's very clever, too, but I never took the time to notice. I wish . . ." She paused, chewing on her lower lip. "I thought I was a better person than that, that's all."

"I think you are," he said softly.

She nodded, staring off into the distance as if she might find the answers she needed on the horizon. "Maybe I am. I suppose I shouldn't berate myself for my actions last summer. It was fun, and Clive was nice, and it was very exciting to be with him." She smiled wistfully. "It's difficult to refuse that—to be at the constant center of attention, to feel so loved and admired."

"By Clive?" David asked quietly.

"By everyone."

Their blades cut across the ice—once, twice—before he replied, "So it wasn't the man himself you loved, so much as the way he made you feel."

"Is there a difference?" Susannah asked.

David appeared to consider her question quite deeply before finally saying, "Yes. Yes, I think there is."

Susannah felt her lips part, almost in surprise, as his words forced her to think harder and longer about Clive than she had in some time. She thought, and then she turned, and she opened her mouth to speak, but then—

BAM!

Something slammed into her, knocking the very breath from her body, sending her skidding across the ice until she fell heavy and hard into a snowbank.

"Susannah!" David yelled, skating quickly to her side. "Are you all right?"

Susannah blinked and gasped, trying to blow the snow from her face . . . and her eyelashes, and her hair, and, well, everywhere. She'd landed on her back, almost in a reclining position, and she was very nearly buried.

She sputtered something that was probably a question— she wasn't sure whether she'd said who, what, or how, and then managed to wipe enough snow from her eyes to see a woman in a green velvet coat skating furiously away.

Susannah squinted. It was Anne Bishop, of all people, who Susannah knew quite well from the previous Season! She couldn't believe Anne would knock her down and then flee the scene.

"Why that little ..."

"Are you hurt?" David asked, interrupting her quite effectively as he crouched beside her.

"No," Susannah grumbled, "although I cannot believe that she skated away without so much as a query to my welfare."

David glanced over his shoulder. "No sign of her now, I'm afraid."

"Well, she'd better have a good excuse," Susannah muttered. "Nothing less than impending death will be acceptable."

David appeared to be fighting a grin. "Well, you don't seem to be injured, and your mental capacities are quite clearly in working order, so would you like me to help you up?"

"Please," Susannah said, gratefully accepting his hand.

Except that *David's* mental capacities must not have been in working order, because he had remained in his crouch when he offered his hand, not realizing that he hadn't the proper leverage to yank her to her feet, and after a precarious moment, in which they both seemed to be suspended halfway between the ice and an upright position, Susannah's skates flew out from under her, and they both went tumbling down, back into the snowbank.

Susannah laughed. She couldn't help herself. There was something so wonderfully incongruous about the lofty Earl of Renminster buried in snow. He looked rather fetching, actually, with flakes on his eyelashes.

"Do you dare mock me?" he pretended to boom, once he'd spat the snow from his mouth.

"Oh, never," she replied, biting her lip to stave off a giggle. "I wouldn't dream of mocking you, My Lord Snowman."

His lips pursed into one of those expressions that tried to be annoyed but was really nothing more than amused. "Don't," he warned, "call me that."

"My Lord Snowman?" she echoed, surprised by his reaction.

He paused, assessing her face with an expression of mild surprise. "You haven't heard, then?"

She shook her head as best as one could in the snow. "Heard what?"

"Harriet's relatives were rather distressed at the loss of their surname. Harriet's the last of the Snowes, you realize."

"Which means ..." Susannah's lips parted with delighted horror. "Oh don't tell me ..."

"Indeed," David replied, looking very much as if he wanted to laugh but thought he shouldn't. "My brother must now be correctly referred to as Clive Snowe-Mann-Formsby."

"Oh, I'm evil," Susannah said, laughing so hard the snowbank shook. "I am truly an evil, unkind person. But I can't... I can't help it... I..."

"Go ahead and laugh," David told her. "I assure you, I did."

"Clive must have been furious!"

"That might be painting it a trifle too harsh," David said, "but certainly rather embarrassed."

"A doubly hyphenated name would have been bad enough," Susannah said. "I shouldn't like to have to introduce myself as Susannah Ballister-Bates—" She searched for an appropriately awful third surname. "Bismark!" she finished triumphantly.

"No," he murmured dryly, "I can see why you wouldn't."

"But *this* —" Susannah finished, stepping right on top of his soft words. "This is quite beyond the... oh dear. I don't know what it's quite beyond. My comprehension, I suppose."

"He wanted to change it to Snowe-Formsby," David said, "but I told him our Mann forebears would be quite upset."

"Forgive me for pointing it out," Susannah replied, "but your Mann forebears are quite deceased. I rather think they lack the capability to be upset one way or another."

"Not if they left behind legal documents barring monetary inheritance by anyone who drops the Mann name."

"They didn't!" Susannah gasped.

David merely smiled.

"They didn't!" she said again, but this time her tone was quite different. "They did no such thing. You only said that to torture poor Clive."

"Oh, it's *poor Clive* now," he teased.

"It's poor anyone who must answer to Snowe-Mann!"

"That's Snowe-Mann-Formsby, thank you very much." He shot her a cheeky grin. "My Formsby forebears would be quite put out."

"And I suppose they also blocked inheritance by anyone who drops their name?" Susannah asked sarcastically.

"As a matter of fact, they did," David said. "Where do you think I got the idea?"

"You're incorrigible," she said, but she couldn't quite manage an appropriately horrified tone. The truth was, she rather admired his sense of humor. The fact that the joke was on Clive was merely the icing on the cake.

"I suppose I shall have to call you My Lord *Snowflake*, then," she said.

"It's hardly dignified," he said.

"Or heroic," she agreed, "but as you'll see, I'm still trapped here in the snowbank."

"As am I."

"White suits you," Susannah said.

He gave her a look.

"You should wear it more often."

"You're quite cheeky for a woman in a snowbank."

She grinned. "My courage is derived from your position, also in a snowbank."

He grimaced, then nodded self-deprecatingly. "It's actually not too uncomfortable."

"Except for the dignity," Susannah agreed.

"And the cold."

"And the cold. I can't feel my ... er ..."

"Bottom?" he supplied helpfully.

She cleared her throat, as if somehow that would clear her blush. "Yes."

His green eyes twinkled at her embarrassment, then he turned serious—or at least more serious than he had been—and said, "Well, I suppose I ought to save you, then. I rather like your—don't worry, I won't say it," he interjected upon her gasp of horror. "But I wouldn't want to see it fall off."

"David," she ground out.

"Is that what it takes to get you to use my name?" he wondered. "A slightly inappropriate but I assure you most respectful, comment?"

"Who are you?" she suddenly asked. "And what have you done with the earl?"

"Renminster, you mean?" he asked, leaning toward her until they were nearly nose to nose.

His question was so odd that she couldn't answer, save for a tiny nod.

"Perhaps you never knew him," he suggested. "Perhaps you only thought you did, but you never looked beyond the surface."

"Perhaps I didn't," she whispered.

He smiled, then took her hands in his. "Here is what we are going to do. I'm going to stand, and as I do so, I'll pull you up. Are you ready?"

"I'm not sure—"

"Here we are," he muttered, trying to heave himself up, which was no small task given that his feet were on skates, and his skates were on ice.

"David, you—"

But it was no use. He was behaving in a predictably manly fashion, which meant that he wasn't listening to reason (not when it interfered with an opportunity to make a show of his brute strength). Susannah could have told him—and in fact, she tried to—that the angle was all wrong, and his feet were going to slide out from under him, and they'd both go toppling down ...

Which is exactly what they did.

But this time David didn't behave in a typically manly fashion, which would have been to get quite angry and make excuses. Instead, he just looked her straight in the eyes and burst out laughing.

Susannah laughed with him, her body shaking with sheer, unadulterated mirth. It had never been like this with Clive. With Clive, even when she'd laughed, she'd always felt as if she were on display, as if everyone were watching her laugh, wondering what the joke was, because one couldn't truly count oneself as part of the most fashionable set unless one knew all the inside jokes.

With Clive, she'd always known the inside jokes, but she hadn't always found them funny.

But she'd laughed all the same, hoping that no one noticed the incomprehension in her eyes.

This was different. This was special. This was ...

No, she thought forcefully. This wasn't love. But maybe it was the beginnings of it. And maybe it would grow. And maybe—

"What have we here?"

Susannah looked up, but she already knew the voice.

Dread filled her belly.

Clive.

Chapter 5

Both Mann-Formsby brothers were in attendance at the Moreland skating party, although it can hardly be said that their interactions were amiable. Indeed, it was reported to This Author that the earl and his brother nearly came to blows.

Now, that, Gentle Reader, would have been a sight to see. Fisticuffs on skates! What could be next? Underwater fencing? Tennis on horseback?

Lady Whistledown's Society Papers, 4 February 1814

When Susannah placed her hand in Clive's it was as if she'd been transported back in time. It had

been half a year since she'd stood so close to the man who'd broken her heart—or at the very least her pride—and much as she wanted to feel nothing ...

She did.

Her heart missed a beat and her stomach flipped and her breath grew shaky, and oh, how she hated herself for it all.

He should mean nothing. Nothing. Less than nothing if she could manage it.

"Clive," she said, trying to keep her voice even as she tugged her hand away from his.

"Susannah," he said warmly, smiling down at her in that oh-so-confident way of his. "How have you been?"

"Fine," she answered, irritated now, since, really, how did *he think* she'd been?

Clive turned back around to offer a hand to his brother, but David had already found his feet. "David," Clive said cordially. "I didn't expect to see you here with Susannah."

"I didn't expect to see you here at all," David replied.

Clive shrugged. He wasn't wearing a hat, and a lock of his blond hair fell forward onto his forehead. "Decided only this morning to attend."

"Where is Harriet?" David asked.

"Off with her mother near the fire. She doesn't like the cold."

They stood there for a moment, an awkward triptych with nothing to say. It was strange, Susannah thought, her eyes drifting slowly from one Mann-Formsby brother to the next. In all the time she'd spent with Clive, she'd never known him to be without words or an easy smile. He was a chameleon, slipping and sliding into situations with perfect ease. But right now, he was just staring at his brother with an expression that wasn't *quite* hostile.

But it certainly wasn't friendly.

David didn't seem quite right, either. He tended to hold himself more stiffly than Clive, his posture always straight and correct. And in truth, it was a rare man who moved with the easy, fluid grace that Clive epitomized. But now David seemed almost too stiff, his jaw too tight. When they'd laughed so hard, just moments before in the snowbank, she'd seen the man and not the earl.

But now ...

The earl was most definitely back.

"Would you like to take a turn about the ice?" Clive suddenly asked.

Susannah felt her head jerk with surprise when she realized that Clive was talking to her. Not that he would have been likely to want to take a turn about the ice with his brother, but still, it didn't seem quite appropriate that he do so with her. Especially with Harriet so close by.

Susannah frowned. Especially with Harriet's mother so close to Harriet. It was one thing to put one's wife in a potentially awkward position; it was quite another to do so with one's mother-in-law.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," she hedged.

"We should clear the air," he said, his tone matter-of-fact. "Show everyone we've no hard feelings."

No hard feelings? Susannah's jaw stiffened. What the devil did he think he was talking about? *She* had hard feelings. Very hard. After last summer, her feelings for Clive were bloody well as hard as iron.

"For old times' sake," Clive cajoled, his boyish grin lighting up his face.

His face? Really, let's be honest, it lit up the entire pier. Clive's smiles always did that.

But this time, Susannah didn't feel her usual jolt of excitement. Instead she felt a little irritated. "I'm with Lord Renminster," she said stiffly. "It wouldn't be polite to abandon him."

Clive let out a little howl of laughter. "David? Don't worry about him." He turned to his brother. "You don't mind, do you, old man?"

David looked as if he minded very much, but of course he merely said, "Not at all."

Which left Susannah even more irritated with him than she was with Clive. If he minded, why didn't *hedo* something about it? Did he think *shewanted* to skate with Clive? "Fine," she announced. "Let us be off, then. If we're going to skate, we might as well do it before our toes freeze to black."

Her tone couldn't have been called anything but snippy, and both Mann-Formsby brothers looked at her with curious surprise.

"I shall be over by the vat of chocolate," David said, giving her a polite bow as Clive looped his arm through hers.

"And if it's not still warm, then you'll be over by the vat of brandy?" Clive joked.

David answered with a stiff smile to his brother and skated away.

"Susannah," Clive said, giving her a warm look. "Glad he's gone, eh? It's been an age."

"Has it?"

He chuckled. "You know it has."

"How is marriage treating you?" she asked pointedly.

He winced. "You don't waste any time, do you?"

"Neither did you, apparently," she muttered, relieved when he began to skate. The sooner they made their lap around the area, the sooner they would be done.

"Are you still angry, then?" he asked. "I'd hoped you'd managed to get past that."

"I managed to get past *you*," she said. "My anger is another thing altogether."

"Susannah," he said, although in truth, his voice sounded rather like a whine to her ears. He sighed, and she looked over at him. His eyes were full of concern, and his face had assumed a wounded air.

And maybe he really did feel wounded. Maybe he truly hadn't meant to hurt her and honestly thought that she would be able to shrug off the entire unpleasant episode as if nothing had happened.

But she couldn't. She just wasn't that nice a person. Susannah had decided that some people were truly good and nice inside and some people just tried to be. And she must have been in the latter group, because she simply couldn't summon enough Christian charity to forgive Clive. Not yet, anyway.

"I have not had a pleasant few months," she said, her voice stiff and clipped.

His hand tightened around her arm. "I'm sorry," he said. "But don't you see I had no choice?"

She looked at him in disbelief. "Clive, you have more choices and opportunities than anyone I know."

"That's not true," he insisted, looking at her intently. "I had to marry Harriet. I had no choice. I—"

"Don't," Susannah warned in a low voice. "Don't tread down that avenue. It isn't fair to me and it certainly isn't fair to Harriet."

"You're right," he said, somewhat shamefaced. "But—"

"And I don't care one way or another why you married Harriet. I don't care if you marched up to the altar with her father's pistol pressed against your back!"

"Susannah!"

"No matter why or how you married her," Susannah continued hotly, "you could have told me before you announced it at the Mottram ball in front of four hundred people."

"I'm sorry," he said. "That was shabby of me."

"I'll say," she muttered, feeling rather a bit better now that she'd had a chance to rail directly at Clive, as opposed to her usual arguments in absentia. But all the same, enough was enough, and she found she didn't particularly care to remain in his company any longer. "I think you should return me to David," she said.

His eyebrows rose. "It's David now, is it?"

"Clive," she said, her voice irritated.

"I can't believe you're calling my brother by his given name."

"He gave me leave to do so, and I don't see how it is any of your concern one way or another."

"Of course it is my concern. We courted for months."

"And you married someone else," she reminded him. Good Lord, was Clive *jealous*?

"It's just...*David*" he spat out, his voice unpleasant. "Of all people, Susannah."

"What is wrong with David?" she asked. "He's your brother, Clive."

"Exactly. I know him better than anyone." His hand tightened at her waist as they rounded the pier. "And he is not the right man for you."

"I hardly think you are in any position to advise me."

"Susannah ..."

"I happen to like your brother, Clive. He's funny, and smart, and—"

Clive actually stumbled, which was a rare thing for a man of his grace. "Did you say funny?"

"I don't know, I suppose I did. I—"

"David? Funny?"

Susannah thought about their moments in the snowbank, about the sound of David's laughter and the magic of his smile. "Yes," she said with quiet reminiscence. "He makes me laugh."

"I don't know what is going on," Clive muttered, "but my brother has no sense of humor."

"That's simply not true."

"Susannah, I've known him for twenty-six years. I should think that counts for more than your acquaintance of, what—one week?"

Susannah felt her jaw set into an angry line. She had no desire to be condescended to, especially by Clive. "I would like to go back to the shore," she bit off. "Now."

"Susannah—"

"If you do not wish to accommodate me, I will skate off by myself," she warned.

"Just once more around, Susannah," he cajoled. "For old times' sake."

She looked over at him, which was a dreadful mistake. Because he was gazing at her with that same expression that had always turned her legs to butter. She didn't know how blue eyes could look so warm, but his were practically melting. He was looking at her as if she were the only woman in the world, or perhaps the last scrap of food in the face of famine, and ...

She was made of sterner stuff now, and she knew she wasn't the only woman in his world, but he did sound sincere, and for all his childish ways, Clive was not at heart an unkind person. She felt her resolve slipping away, and she sighed. "Fine," she said, her voice resigned. "Once more around. But that is all. I came here with David, and it's not fair to leave him off by himself."

And as they pushed off to take one more turn around the makeshift course that Lord and Lady

Moreland had set up for their guests, Susannah realized that she really did want to get back to David. Clive might be handsome, and Clive might be charming, but he no longer made her heart pound with a single look.

David did.

And nothing could have surprised her more.

* * *

The Moreland servants had lit a bonfire under the vat of chocolate, and so the beverage was blessedly warm, if not adequately sweetened. David had drunk three cups of the too-bitter brew before he realized that the heat he was finally beginning to feel in his fingers and toes had nothing to do with the fire to his left and everything to do with an anger that had been simmering since the moment Clive had skated up the snowbank and looked down on him and Susannah.

Damn and blast, that wasn't accurate. Clive had been looking at Susannah. He couldn't have cared less about David—his *brother*, for God's sake—and he'd gazed at Susannah in a way no man was supposed to look at a woman not his wife.

David's fingers tightened around his mug. Oh, very well, he was exaggerating. Clive hadn't been looking at Susannah in a lustful fashion (David ought to know, since he had caught himself looking at her in that exact manner), but his expression had definitely been possessive, and his eyes had fired with jealousy.

Jealousy? If Clive had wanted the right to feel jealous over Susannah, he should bloody well have married her, and not Harriet.

Jaw clamped like a vise, David watched his brother lead Susannah around the ice. Did Clive still want her? David wasn't worried; well, not really. Susannah would never disgrace herself by becoming too familiar with a married man.

But what if she still pined for him? Hell, what if she still loved him? She said she didn't, but did she really know her own heart? Men and women tended to delude themselves when it came to love.

And what if he married her—and he fully intended to marry her—and she still loved Clive? How could he bear it, knowing his wife preferred his brother?

It was an appalling prospect.

David set his mug down on a nearby table, ignoring the startled stares of his compatriots as it landed with a loud thunk, sloshing chocolate over the rim.

"Your glove, my lord," someone pointed out.

David looked down rather dispassionately at his leather glove, which was now turning dark brown where the chocolate was soaking in. It was almost certainly ruined, but David couldn't bring himself to care.

"My lord?" the nameless person queried again.

David must have turned to him with an expression approaching a snarl, because the young gentleman scurried away.

And anyone moving away from the fire on such a frigid day had to want to be somewhere else very badly indeed.

A few moments later, Clive and Susannah reappeared, still skating in perfectly matched steps. Clive was staring at her with that amazingly warm expression he had perfected at the age of four (Clive had never been punished for anything; one repentant look from those huge blue eyes tended to get him out of any scrape), and Susannah was staring back at him with an expression of...

Well, if truth be told, David wasn't exactly sure what sort of expression was on her face, but it wasn't what he'd wanted to see, which was full-fledged hatred.

Or fury would have been acceptable. Or maybe complete lack of interest. Yes, complete lack of interest would have been best.

But instead she was looking at him with something almost approaching weary affection, and David didn't know what to make of that one way or another.

"Here she is," Clive said, once they'd skated close. "Returned to your side. Safe and sound as promised."

David thought Clive was laying it on a bit too thick, but he had no wish to prolong the encounter, so instead all he said was, "Thank you."

"We had a lovely time, didn't we, Susannah?" Clive said.

"What? Oh yes, of course we did," she replied. "It was good to catch up."

"Don't you need to get back to Harriet?" David asked pointedly.

Clive just grinned back at him, his smile almost a dare. "Harriet is fine by herself for a few minutes. Besides, I told you she was with her mother."

"Nonetheless" David said, getting downright irritated now, "Susannah came with me."

"What has that to do with Harriet?" Clive challenged.

David's chin jutted out. "Nothing, except that you're married to her."

Clive planted his hands on his hips. "Unlike you, who is married to no one."

Susannah's eyes bobbed back and forth from brother to brother.

"What the devil is that supposed to mean?" David demanded.

"Nothing, except that you should get your own affairs in order before messing with mine."

"Yours!" David nearly exploded. "Since when has Susannah become your affair?"

Susannah's mouth dropped open.

"When has she been yours?" Clive volleyed back.

"I fail to see how that is any of your business."

"Well, it's more my business than—"

"Gentlemen!" Susannah finally interceded, quite unable to believe the scene unfolding in front of her. David and Clive were squabbling like a pair of six-year-olds unable to share a favorite toy.

And *she* appeared to be the toy in question, a metaphor she found she didn't much like.

But they didn't hear her, or if they did, they didn't care, because they continued to bicker until she physically placed herself between them and said, "David! Clive! That is enough."

"Step aside, Susannah," David said, nearly growling. "This isn't about you."

"It isn't?" she asked.

"No," David said, his voice hard, "it's not. It's about Clive. It's always about Clive."

"Now see here," Clive said angrily, poking David in the chest.

Susannah gasped. They were going to come to blows! She looked around, but thankfully, no one seemed to have noticed the impending violence, not even Harriet, who was sitting some distance away, chatting with her mother.

"You married someone else," David practically hissed. "You forfeited any rights to Susannah when—"

"I'm leaving," she announced.

"—you married Harriet. And you should have considered—"

"I said I'm leaving!" she repeated, wondering why she even cared whether they heard her. David had said quite plainly that this wasn't about her.

And it wasn't. That was becoming abundantly clear. She was simply some silly prize to be won. Clive wanted her because he thought David had her. David wanted her for much the same reason. Neither actually cared about her; all they cared about was beating each other in some silly lifelong competition.

Who was better? Who was stronger? Who had the most toys?

It was stupid, and Susannah was sick of it.

And it hurt. It hurt deep down in her heart. For one magical moment, she and David had laughed and joked, and she'd allowed herself to dream that something special was growing between them. He certainly didn't act like any of the men of her acquaintance. He actually listened to her, which was a novel experience. And when he laughed, the sound had been warm and rich and true. Susannah had always thought that you could tell a lot about a person from his laugh, but maybe that was just another

lost dream.

"I'm leaving," she said for the third time, not even certain why she'd bothered. Maybe it was some kind of sick fascination with the situation at hand, a morbid curiosity to see what they would do when she actually started to walk away.

"No, you're not," David said, grabbing her wrist the moment she moved.

Susannah blinked in surprise. *He had* been listening.

"I will escort you," he said stiffly.

"You are obviously quite occupied here," she said, with a sarcastic glance toward Clive. "I'm sure I can find a friend to take me home."

"You came with me. You will leave with me."

"It's not—"

"It's necessary," he said, and Susannah suddenly understood why he was so feared among the *ton*. His tone could have frozen the Thames.

She glanced over at the iced-over river and almost laughed.

"You, I'll speak to later," David snapped at Clive.

"Pfff." Susannah clapped a hand over her mouth.

David and Clive both turned to stare at her with irritated expressions. Susannah fought another extremely ill-timed giggle. She'd never thought they resembled each other until now. They looked *exactly* the same when they were annoyed.

"What are you laughing at?" Clive demanded.

She gritted her teeth together to keep from smiling. "Nothing."

"It's obviously not nothing," David said.

"It's not about you," she replied, shaking with barely contained laughter. What fun it was to throw his words right back at him.

"You're laughing," he accused.

"I'm not laughing."

"She is," Clive said to David, and in that moment they ceased to be arguing with each other.

Of course they weren't arguing anymore; they were united against *her*.

Susannah looked at David, then she looked at Clive. Then she looked back at David, who was glowering so fiercely that she ought to have been frightened right out of her specially made ice

skates, but instead she just burst out laughing.

"What?" David and Clive demanded in unison.

Susannah just shook her head, trying to say, "It's nothing," but not really succeeding in anything other than making herself look like a deranged lunatic.

"I'm taking her home," David said to Clive.

"Be my guest," Clive replied. "She clearly can't remain here." *Among civilized society*, was the implied end of his sentence.

David took her elbow. "Are you ready to leave?" he asked, even though she'd announced that very intention no fewer than three times.

She nodded, then made her farewells to Clive before she allowed David to lead her away.

"What was that all about?" he asked her, once they were settled in his carriage.

She shook her head helplessly. "You looked so much like Clive."

"Like Clive?" he echoed, his voice tinged with disbelief. "I don't look a thing like Clive."

"Well, maybe not in features," she said, plucking aimlessly at the fibers of the blanket tucked over her lap. "But your expressions were identical, and you were certainly acting like him."

David's expression turned to stone. "I never act like Clive," he bit off.

She shrugged in reply.

"Susannah!"

She looked at him with arched brows.

"I don't act like Clive," he repeated.

"Not normally, no."

"Not today," he ground out.

"Yes, today, I'm afraid. You did."

"I—" But he didn't finish his sentence. Instead, he clamped his mouth shut, opening it only to say, "You'll be home soon."

Which wasn't even true. It was a good forty minutes' ride back to Portman Square. Susannah felt every single one of those minutes in excruciating detail, as neither of them spoke again until they reached her home.

Silence, she realized, was quite deafening.

Chapter 6

Most amusing, Lady Eugenia Snowe was spied dragging her new son-in-law across the ice by his ear.

Perhaps she spied him taking a turn about the ice with the lovely Susannah Ballister?

And doesn't the younger Mann-Formsby wish now that he'd worn a hat?

Lady Whistledown's Society Papers, 4 February 1814

Just like Clive?!!!

David grabbed the newspaper he'd been attempting to peruse and viciously crumpled it between his hands. Then for good measure, he hurled it across the room. It was a wholly unsatisfactory display of petulance, however, since the newspaper was nearly weightless and ended up floating in a soft lob before settling gently on the carpet.

Hitting something would have been much more satisfying, especially if he'd managed to peen the family portrait that hung over the mantel, right in Clive's perpetually smiling face.

Clive? How could she possibly think he was just like Clive?

He'd spent his entire life hauling his brother out of scrapes and accidents and potential disasters. The most important word there being "potential," since David had always managed to intercede before Clive's "situations" turned calamitous.

David growled as he scooped the crumpled newspaper off the floor and tossed it into the raging fire. Perhaps he'd been too protective of Clive over the years. With his older brother around to solve all of his problems, why should Clive have learned responsibility and rectitude? Maybe the next time Clive found himself in hot water, David ought to just let him boil for a little while. But all the same ...

How could Susannah say the two of them were alike?

Groaning her name, David slumped into the chair nearest to the fire. When he saw her in his mind—and he'd done so approximately three times per minute since he'd left her at her home six hours earlier—it was always with cheeks flushed from cold, with snowflakes bobbing precariously from her eyelashes, mouth wide and laughing with delight.

He pictured her in the snowbank, at that moment when he'd come to the most amazing, breathtaking realization. He had decided to pursue her because she'd make an excellent countess, that was true. But in that moment, as he'd gazed at her lovely face and had to use every ounce of his restraint not to kiss her right there in front of the entire *ton*, he'd realized that she'd be more than an excellent countess.

She would be a wonderful wife.

His heart had leaped with delight. And dread.

He still wasn't quite sure what he felt for her, but it was becoming increasingly apparent that those feelings resided rather stubbornly in and around his heart.

If she still loved Clive, if she still pined for his brother, then she was lost to him. It didn't matter if she said yes to his proposal of marriage. If she still wanted Clive, then he, David, would never truly have her.

Which meant the big question was—could he bear it? Which would be worse—to be her husband, knowing she loved someone else, or not to have her in his life at all?

He didn't know.

For the first time in his life, David Mann-Formsby, Earl of Renminster, didn't know his own mind. He simply didn't know what to do.

It was an awful, aching, unsettling sensation.

He eyed his glass of whiskey, sitting just out of arm's reach on the table by the fire. Damn, and he'd really wanted to get drunk. But now he was tired, and drained, and much as it disgusted him, he was feeling far too lazy even to get out of the chair.

Although the whiskey did look rather appealing.

He could almost smell it from there.

He wondered how much energy he'd have to expend to rise to his feet. How many steps to the whiskey? Two? Three? That wasn't so very many. But it *seemed* really far, and—

"Graves told me I'd find you in here."

David groaned without even looking to the door. Clive.

Not the person he wanted to see right now.

The last person, in fact.

He should have instructed his butler to tell his brother that he wasn't in. Never mind that David had never in his entire life been "not at home" for his brother. Family had always been David's first priority in life. Clive was his only sibling, but there were cousins and aunts and uncles, and David was responsible for the well-being of every last one of them.

Not that he'd had much choice in the matter. He had become the head of the Mann-Formsby family

at the age of eighteen, and not a day had gone by since the moment of his father's death that he had had the luxury of thinking only of himself.

Not until Susannah.

He wanted her. *Her*. Just because of who she was, not because she'd make an excellent addition to the family.

He wanted her for himself. Not for them.

"Have you been drinking?" Clive asked.

David stared longingly at his glass. "Sadly, no."

Clive picked the glass off the table and handed it to him.

David thanked him with a nod and took a long sip. "Why are you here?" he asked, not caring if he sounded blunt and rude.

Clive didn't answer for several moments. "I don't know," he finally said.

For some reason, this didn't surprise David.

"I don't like the way you're treating Susannah," Clive blurted out.

David stared at him in disbelief. Clive was standing in front of him, his posture stiff and angry, his hands fisted at his sides. "*You* don't like the way I'm treating Susannah?" David asked. "*You* don't like it? What right, may I ask, do you have to offer an opinion? And when, pray tell, did I decide that I should care?"

"You shouldn't toy with her," Clive ground out.

"What, so that *you* can?"

"I'm not toying with anyone." Clive's expression turned angry and petulant. "I'm married."

David slammed his empty glass down on a table. "A fact you'd do well to remember."

"I care about Susannah."

"You should stop caring," David bit out.

"You have no right—"

David shot to his feet. "What is this really about, Clive? Because you know it's not about your looking out for Susannah's welfare."

Clive said nothing, just stood there glaring at his older brother as his skin grew mottled with fury.

"Oh dear God," David said, his voice dripping with disdain. "Are you jealous? Are you? Because let me tell you, you lost any right to feel jealousy over Susannah when you publicly humiliated her

last summer."

Clive actually paled. "I never meant to embarrass her."

"Of course you didn't," David snapped. "You never *mean* to do anything."

Clive's jaw was set in a very tight line, and David could see by his shaking fists that he very much wanted to hit him. "I don't have to remain here and listen to this," Clive said, his voice low and furious.

"Leave, then. Be my guest. You're the one who came here unannounced and uninvited."

But Clive didn't move, just stood there shaking with anger.

And David had had enough. He didn't feel like being charitable, and he didn't feel like being the mature older brother. All he wanted was to be left alone. "Go!" he said harshly. "Didn't you say you were leaving?" He waved his arm toward the door. "Go!"

Clive's eyes narrowed with venom . . . and pain. "What kind of brother are you?" he whispered.

"What the—what do you mean?" David felt his lips part with shock. "How dare you question my devotion? I have spent my entire life cleaning up your messes, including, I might add, Susannah Ballister. You destroyed her reputation last summer—"

"I didn't destroy it," Clive quickly interjected.

"Very well, you didn't render her unmarriageable, you just made her a laughingstock. How do you think *that* felt?"

"I didn't—"

"No, you didn't think," David snapped. "You didn't think for a moment about anyone other than yourself."

"That wasn't what I was going to say!"

David turned away in disgust, walking over to the window and leaning heavily on the sill. "Why are you here, Clive?" he asked wearily. "I'm far too tired for a brotherly spat this evening."

There was a long pause, and then Clive asked, "Is that how you view Susannah?"

David knew he ought to turn around, but he just didn't feel like seeing his brother's face. He waited for further explanation from Clive, but when none came, he asked, "Is *what* how I view her?"

"As a mess to be cleaned up."

David didn't speak for a long moment. "No," he finally said, his voice low.

"Then how?" Clive persisted.

Sweat broke out on David's brow. "I—"

"How?"

"Clive ..." David said in a warning voice.

But Clive was relentless. "How?" he demanded, his voice growing loud and uncharacteristically demanding.

"I love her!" David finally yelled, whirling around to face his brother with blazing eyes. "I love her. There. Are you satisfied? I love her, and I swear to God I will kill you if you ever make another false move against her."

"Oh my God," Clive breathed. His eyes widened with shock, and his lips parted into a small, surprised oval.

David grabbed his brother by the lapels and hauled him up against a wall. "If you ever, and I mean ever, approach her in a manner that might even hint at flirtation, I swear that I will tear you from limb to limb."

"Good God," Clive said. "I actually believe you."

David looked down, caught sight of his knuckles, turned white by the force of his grip, and was horrified by his reaction. He let go of Clive abruptly and walked away. "I'm sorry," he muttered.

"You really love her?" Clive asked.

David nodded grimly.

"I can't believe it."

"You just said you did," David said.

"No, I said I believed you would tear me from limb to limb," Clive said, "and *that* I still believe, I assure you. But *you* ... in love . . ." He shrugged.

"Why the hell couldn't I be in love?"

Clive shook his head helplessly. "Because ... You ... It's *you*, David."

"Meaning?" David asked irritably.

Clive fought for words. "I didn't think *you could* love," he finally said.

David nearly reeled with shock. "You didn't think I could love?" he whispered. "My whole adult life, I've done nothing but—"

"Don't start about how you've devoted your life to your family," Clive interrupted. "Believe me, I know it's all true. You certainly throw it in my face often enough."

"I don—"

"*You do*," Clive said forcefully.

David opened his mouth to protest once more, but then he silenced himself. Clive was right. He did remind him of his shortcomings too often. And maybe Clive was—whether any of them realized it or not—living *down* to David's expectations.

"It's all about duty to you," Clive continued. "Duty to family. Duty to the Mann-Formsby name."

"It's been about more than that," David whispered.

The corners of Clive's lips tightened. "That may be true, but if so, you haven't shown it very well."

"I'm sorry, then," David said. His shoulders slumped as he let out a long, tired exhale. How ironic to discover that he had failed at the one pursuit around which he'd built his entire life. Every decision he had made, everything he had done—it had always been about family, and now it appeared they didn't even realize it. His love for them had been perceived as a burden—a burden of expectation.

"Do you really love her?" Clive quietly asked.

David nodded. He wasn't sure how it had happened, or even exactly when during the brief time since they'd renewed their acquaintance, but he loved her. He loved Susannah Ballister, and somehow Clive's visit had jolted his feelings into startling clarity.

"I don't, you know," Clive said.

"You don't what?" David asked, his voice betraying his weary impatience.

"Love her."

David let out a harsh little laugh. "God, I hope not."

"Don't mock me," Clive warned. "I'm only telling you this because my behavior today might have led you to think that I ... ah ... Well, forget about all that. The point is, I care about you enough to tell you ... well, you are my brother, you know."

David actually smiled. He hadn't thought himself capable of such an expression at that moment, but somehow he couldn't help it.

"I don't love her," Clive said again. "I only sought her out today because I was jealous."

"Of me?"

"I don't know," Clive admitted. "I suppose so. I never thought Susannah would set her cap for you."

"She didn't. I pursued her."

"Well, regardless, I suppose I assumed she'd be sitting at home pining for me." Clive winced. "That sounds terrible."

"Yes," David agreed.

"I didn't quite mean it that way," Clive explained, letting out a frustrated breath. "I didn't want her to spend her life pining away for me, but I suppose I thought she would anyway. And then when I saw

her with *you* . . ." He sat down in the chair David had vacated a few minutes earlier and let his head rest in his hands. After a few moments of silence, he looked back up and said, "You shouldn't let her get away."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You shouldn't let Susannah get away."

"It had occurred to me," David said, "that that might be an advisable course of action."

Clive scowled at his brother's sarcasm. "She's a good woman, David. Not the right one for someone like me, but much as it wouldn't have occurred to me if you hadn't fallen in love with her, I think she might be exactly the right sort for you."

"How romantically put," David muttered.

"Pardon me for having trouble seeing you in the guise of a romantic hero," Clive said with a slight roll of his eyes. "I'm still finding it difficult to believe you've fallen in love at all."

"Heart of stone and all that," David quipped.

"Don't try to brush this off," Clive said. "This is serious."

"Oh, I'm aware of that."

"Earlier this afternoon," Clive said slowly, "when we were skating, Susannah said things ..."

David jumped on his words. "What things?"

"*Things*" Clive said, giving his brother a stop-interrupting-me sort of glare. "Things that led me to believe she might not be unamenable to your suit."

"Will you speak English?" David snapped.

"I think she might love you back."

David sank down and found himself seated on an end table. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm not sure. I just said *I think* she might love you back."

"What a marvelous vote of confidence."

"I doubt she even knows her own mind yet," Clive said, ignoring David's words, "but she clearly cares for you."

"What do you mean?" David asked, desperately trying to find something definite to latch on to in Clive's words. Good God, the man could talk around an issue for hours without actually coming to the point of it.

Clive rolled his eyes. "All I'm saying is that I think that if you pursued her—really pursued her—she would say yes."

"*You think.*"

"I think," Clive said impatiently. "Good God, when did I tell you I was a seer?"

David pursed his lips in thought. "What did you mean," he asked slowly, "when you said *really* pursue her?"

Clive blinked. "I meant you should really pursue her."

"Clive," David growled.

"A grand gesture," Clive said quickly. "Something huge and romantic and entirely out of character."

"Any type of grand gesture would be out of character," David grumbled.

"Exactly," Clive said, and when David looked up, he saw that his brother was grinning.

"What should I do?" David asked, hating that he was the one asking advice, but desperate enough to do it, anyway.

Clive stood and cleared his throat. "Now, what would be the fun in my telling you what to do?"

"I'd find great fun in it," David ground out.

"You'll think of something," Clive said, entirely unhelpfully. "A grand gesture. Every man can come up with at least one grand gesture in his lifetime."

"Clive," David said with a groan, "you know that grand gestures aren't in my style."

Clive chuckled. "Then I imagine you'll have to make them your style. At least for right now." His brow furrowed, and then he began to sputter with only slightly controlled laughter. "At least for Valentine's Day," he added, doing nothing now to contain his mirth, "which I believe is ... ah ... only eleven days away."

David's belly lurched. He had a feeling it was his heart dropping into his stomach. Valentine's Day. Dear God, *Valentine's Day*. The bane of any sane and reasonable man. If ever a grand gesture was expected, it was on Valentine's Day.

He staggered into his chair. "Valentine's Day," he groaned.

"You can't avoid it," Clive said brightly.

David threw him a killing glare.

"I can see that it's time I took my leave," Clive murmured.

David didn't even bother to acknowledge his brother as he left.

Valentine's Day. It should have struck him as perfect timing. Tailor-made for declaring one's love.

Ha. Tailor-made if one was the loquacious, romantic, poetic sort, which David most assuredly was not.

Valentine's Day.

What the devil was he going to do?

* * *

The following morning, Susannah woke up feeling not well-rested, not happy, hale, and hearty, and most definitely not refreshed.

She hadn't slept.

Well, of course she'd *slept*, if one wanted to be annoy-ingly precise about it. She hadn't lain awake the *entire* night. But she knew she'd seen her clock when it read half-one. And she had distinct recollections of half-two, half-four, a quarter past five, and six. Not to mention that she'd gone to bed at midnight.

So if she'd slept, it had only been in bits and snatches.

And she felt *awful*.

The worst part of it was—it wasn't just that she was tired. It wasn't even just that she was cranky.

Her heart ached.

Ached.

It ached like nothing she'd ever felt, the pain of it almost physical. Something had happened between her and David the day before. It had begun earlier, maybe at the theater, and it had been growing, but it had *happened* in the snowbank.

They had laughed, and she had looked into his eyes. And for the first time, she had really seen him.

And she loved him.

It was the worst possible thing she could ever have done. Nothing could have set her up for heartbreak with greater precision. At least she hadn't loved Clive. She'd thought she had, but in truth, she'd spent more of that summer wondering *whether* she loved him than declaring that she did. And in truth, when he had jilted her, it had been her pride that he'd battered, not her heart.

But with David it was different.

And she didn't know what to do.

As she'd lain awake the night before, she'd reckoned that she was caught in the midst of one of three scenarios. The first one was ideal: David loved her, and all she had to do was tell him she felt the same, and they would live happily ever after.

She frowned. Maybe she ought to wait for him to declare his love first. After all, if he *did* love her, he'd want to be romantic about it and make a formal declaration.

She closed her eyes in agony. The truth was, she didn't know how he felt one way or another, and in fact, the truth could be closer to the second scenario, which was that he had only been pursuing her to irritate Clive. If that was indeed the case, she had no idea what to do with herself. Avoid him like the plague, she supposed, and pray that broken hearts healed quickly.

The third scenario was, in her opinion, probably the most likely: David liked her well enough but didn't love her, and had only asked her to the skating party as a diversion. That seemed logical enough; men of the *ton* behaved that way all the time.

She flopped back on her bed, letting out a loud groan of frustration. It didn't really matter which scenario was the truth—none of the three had a clear-cut solution.

"Susannah?"

Susannah looked up to see her sister poking her head through the slim opening between the door and the doorframe.

"Your door was open," Letitia said.

"No, it wasn't."

"Very well, it wasn't," Letitia said, entering, "but I heard you making strange sounds and thought I should check as to your welfare."

"No," Susannah said, returning her gaze to the ceiling, "you heard me making strange sounds and wanted to know what I was doing."

"Well, that, too," Letitia admitted. Then, when Susannah made no reply, she added, "What were you doing?"

Susannah smirked at the ceiling. "Making strange sounds."

"Susannah!"

"Very well," Susannah said, since it was near impossible to keep a secret from Letitia, "I'm nursing a broken heart, and if you tell a single soul, I will—"

"Cut off my hair?"

"Cut off your *legs*."

Letitia smiled as she closed the door behind her. "My lips are sealed," she assured her, crossing the room to the bed and sitting down. "Is it the earl?"

Susannah nodded.

"Oh, good."

Curiosity sparked, Susannah sat up. "Why is it good?"

"Because I like the earl."

"You don't even know the earl."

Letitia shrugged. "It's easy to discern his character."

Susannah thought about that. She wasn't so certain that Letitia was correct. After all, she'd spent the better part of a year thinking that David was haughty, cold, and unfeeling. Of course, her opinion had been mostly based on what she'd been told by Clive.

No, maybe Letitia was right. Because once Susannah had spent time with David herself, without Clive . . . well, it hadn't taken long for her to fall in love with him.

"What should I do?" Susannah whispered.

Letitia was entirely unhelpful. "I don't know."

Susannah shook her head. "Nor do I."

"Does he know how you feel?"

"No. At least, I don't think he does."

"Do you know how *he* feels?"

"No."

Letitia made an impatient sound. "Do you think *he might* care for you?"

Susannah's lips stretched into an uncertain grimace. "I think he might."

"Then you should tell him how you feel."

"Letitia, I could make an utter fool of myself."

"Or you could end up blissfully happy."

"Or a fool," Susannah reminded her.

Letitia leaned forward. "This is going to sound dreadfully unkind, but really, Susannah, would it be so very terrible if you embarrassed yourself? After all, how could you possibly endure any greater mortification than you did last summer?"

"This would be worse," Susannah whispered.

"But no one would know."

"David would know."

"He's only one person, Susannah."

"He's the only person who matters."

"Oh," Letitia said, sounding a little bit surprised and quite a lot excited. "If that is how you feel, then you *must* tell him." When Susannah did nothing but groan, she added, "What is the worst that could happen?"

Susannah shot her a heavy look. "I don't even want to speculate."

"You *must* tell him how you feel."

"Why, so that you may vicariously live through my mortification?"

"Through your happiness," Letitia said pointedly. "He will love you in return, I'm sure of it. He probably already does."

"Letitia, you haven't the least bit of facts upon which to base such a supposition."

But Letitia wasn't paying attention. "You must go tonight," she said quite suddenly.

"Tonight?" Susannah echoed. "Where? I don't even think we've any invitations. Mama was planning for us to remain at home."

"Exactly. Tonight is the only night this week that you will be able to sneak out and visit him at home."

"At home?" Susannah very nearly shrieked.

"What you need to tell him must be said in private. And you will never find a moment's privacy at a London ball."

"I can't go to his home," Susannah protested. "I'd be ruined."

Letitia shrugged. "Not if no one found out."

Susannah grew thoughtful. David would never tell anyone, of that she was certain. Even if he rejected her, he wouldn't do anything that would place her reputation at risk. He would simply bundle her up, find a carriage without his crest on it, and send her discreetly home.

In a way, she had nothing to lose except her pride.

And, of course, her heart.

"Susannah?" Letitia whispered, "are you going to do it?" Susannah lifted her chin, looked her sister straight in the eye, and nodded.

Her heart, after all, was already lost.

Chapter 7

*And amid all this cold and snow and ice and frigid wind and... well, amid this abominable weather,
if one is going to state it quite honestly, may This Author remind you, Gentle Reader, that
Valentines
Day is fast approaching?*

*Time to get thee out to the stationers' shop for valentine notes and perhaps, for good measure,
the confectioner and the florist.*

*Gentlemen of theton,now is the time to atone for all of your sins and transgressions. Or at least to
try.*

Lady Whistledown's Society Papers,4 February 1814

David's study was ordinarily spotless, with every book in its proper place on the shelf; papers and documents organized into neat piles, or better yet, tucked away in appropriate files and drawers; and nothing, absolutely nothing, on the floor save for the carpet and the furniture.

Tonight, however, the room was littered with paper. Crumpled-up paper. Cmmpled-up valentines, to be precise.

David wasn't much of a romantic, or at least he didn't mink he was, but even he knew that one was supposed to buy one's valentines at H. Dobbs & Co. And so, that morning, he'd driven out to New Bridge Street, clear across town by St. Paul's Cathedral, and bought himself a box of their best.

All of his attempts at flowery script and romantic poetry were disasters, however, and so at noon he found himself once again in the quiet confines of H. Dobbs & Co., purchasing another box of their best valentines, this time a package of twelve instead of the half dozen he'd bought earlier that day.

The entire affair had been embarrassing, but not nearly as embarrassing as when he dashed into the store that evening, precisely five minutes before they were due to close, after having raced his curriple across town at speeds that could only have been termed reckless (although *stupid* and *insane* had also come to mind). The proprietor was clearly a professional through and through, because he didn't even crack a smile as he handed David their largest box of valentines (eighteen in all), and then suggested that he also purchase a slim book called *Valentine Writers*, which purported to offer instructions on

how to write a valentine for any type of recipient.

David was appalled that he, who had taken a first in literature at Oxford, was reduced to using a guidebook just to write a bloody valentine, but he'd accepted it without a word, and in fact, without a reaction save for the burning sensation on his face.

Good God, a blush. When was the last time he'd blushed? Clearly, the day could not possibly descend any further into hell.

And so at ten in the evening, there he was, sitting in his study with a single valentine on his desk, thirty-five others strewn about the room, in various states of crumpled disaster.

One valentine. One last chance to get this bloody endeavor right. He suspected that H. Dobbs might not be open on Saturday, and he knew they weren't open on Sunday, so if he didn't do a good job on this one, he was probably stuck until Monday with this awful task hanging over his head.

He let his head fall back and groaned. It was just a valentine. A valentine. It shouldn't be so difficult. It couldn't even qualify as a grand gesture.

But what did one say to a woman one wanted to love for the rest of one's life? The stupid little *Valentine Writers* book had offered no advice on that quarter, at least none that would apply when one feared that one might have angered the lady in question the day before with one's stupid behavior, quarreling with one's brother.

He stared down at the blank card. And stared. And stared.

His eyes started to water. He forced himself to blink.

"My lord?"

David looked up. Never had an interruption from his butler been so welcome.

"My lord, there is a lady here to see you."

David let out a tired sigh. He couldn't imagine who it was; maybe Anne Miniver, who probably thought she was still his mistress since he hadn't quite gotten around to telling her that he was through with mistresses.

"Show her in," he said to his butler. He supposed he might as well be thankful that Anne had saved him the trouble of going all the way out to Holborn.

He let out an irritated little snort. He could have easily stopped by her home in Holborn any one of the six times he'd nearly passed right by it today on his way to and from the stationers' shop.

Life was just full of delightful little ironies, wasn't it?

David stood, because it really wouldn't be polite to be sitting when Anne arrived. She might have been born on the wrong side of the blanket, and she certainly lived her life on the wrong side of propriety, but she was still, in her own way, a lady, and she deserved no less than his best behavior under the circumstances. He walked over to the window as he awaited her arrival, pulling the heavy drapes back to stare out into the inky night.

"My lord," he heard his butler say, followed by, "David?"

He whirled around. It wasn't Anne's voice.

"Susannah!" he said in disbelief, nodding curtly to dismiss his butler. "What are you doing here?"

She answered him with a nervous smile as she glanced around his study.

David groaned inwardly. The crumpled valentines were everywhere. He prayed she'd be too polite to mention it. "Susannah?" he asked again, growing worried. He couldn't imagine a circumstance that would compel her to visit him, an unmarried gentleman, in his home. In the dead of night, no less.

"I—I'm sorry to bother you," she said, looking over her shoulder even though the butler had closed the door when he'd left.

"It's no trouble at all," he replied, restraining the urge to rush to her side. Something must be amiss; there could be no other reason she would be here. And yet he didn't trust himself to stand next to her, didn't know how he could do so without taking her into his arms.

"No one saw me," she assured him, catching her lower lip between her teeth. "I—I made sure of it, and—"

"Susannah, what is the problem?" he said intently, giving up on his vow to remain at least three paces away from her. He moved quickly to her side, and when she did not answer, took her hand in his. "What is wrong? Why are you here?"

But it was as if she hadn't heard him. She stared over his shoulder, clenching and unclenching her jaw before finally saying, "You won't be trapped into marriage with me, if that's your worry."

His grip on her hand slackened. It hadn't been his worry. It had been his greatest desire.

"I just—" She swallowed nervously and finally brought her eyes to his. The force of it nearly buckled his knees. Her eyes, so dark and luminous, were glistening, not with unshed tears, but with something else. Emotion, perhaps. And her lips—dear God, did she have *to lick* them? He was going to be sainted for not kissing her that very minute.

"I had to tell you something," she said, her voice dropping to a near-whisper.

"Tonight?"

She nodded. "Tonight."

He waited, but she didn't say anything, just looked away and swallowed again, as if trying to work up her nerve.

"Susannah," he whispered, touching her cheek, "you can tell me anything."

Without quite looking at him, she said, "I have been thinking about you ... and I... I..." She looked up. "This is very difficult."

He smiled gently. "I promise... Whatever you say, it will remain between the two of us."

She let out a little laugh at that, but it was a desperate sound. "Oh, David," she said, "it's not that sort of secret. It's just..." She closed her eyes, slowly shaking her head. "It's not that I've been thinking about you," she said, reopening her eyes but glancing to her side to avoid looking at him directly. "It's more that I can't *stop* thinking about you, and I—I—"

His heart leaped. What was she trying to say?

"I was just wondering," she said, her words tumbling out in a rush of breath and speech. "I need to know . . ." She swallowed, closed her eyes yet again, but this time she almost seemed to be in pain. "Do you think you might care for me? Even a little?"

For a moment he didn't know how to respond. And then, without speaking, without even thinking, he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her.

He kissed her with every pent-up emotion that had coursed through his body for the past few days. He kissed her until he had no choice but to pull back, if only to take a breath.

"I care," he said, and kissed her again.

Susannah melted in his arms, overcome by the intensity of his passion. His lips traveled from her mouth to her ear, trailing a white-hot path of need along her skin. "I care," he whispered, before unbuttoning her coat and allowing it to fall to the floor. "I care."

His hands moved down the length of her back until they cupped her bottom. Susannah gasped at the intimacy of his touch. She could feel the hard, hot length of him through their clothes, could sense his passion in every beat of his heart, every rough catch of his breath.

And then he said the words she'd been dreaming of. He pulled himself away, just far enough so that she could gaze deeply into his eyes, and said, "I love you, Susannah. I love your strength, and I love your beauty. I love your kind heart, and I love your wicked wit. I love your courage, and—" His voice broke, and Susannah gasped when she realized there were tears in his eyes. "I love you," he whispered. "That is all there really is to say."

"Oh, David," she said, gulping back her emotions, "I love you, too. I don't think I even understood what it meant to love until I met you."

He touched her face, tenderly, reverently, and she thought she might say more about how much she loved him, but then she saw the oddest thing . . .

"David," she asked, "why is there paper all over your study?"

He pulled back, then actually began to scurry around the room, attempting to gather up every piece. "It's nothing," he muttered, snatching up the dustbin and shoving the paper inside.

"It's not nothing," she said, grinning at the sight of him. She'd never thought a man of his size and bearing could scurry.

"I was just ... I was ... ah ..." He leaned down and scooped up another crumpled-up piece of paper. "It's nothing."

Susannah spied one that he'd missed, slightly underneath his desk, and she bent down and grabbed it.

"I'll take that," David said swiftly, reaching out to grab it from her.

"No," she said, smiling as she twisted away so that he couldn't reach it. "I'm curious."

"It's nothing interesting," he mumbled, making one last attempt to retrieve it.

But Susannah had already smoothed it out. *There are so many things I'd like to say, it read. Like how your eyes ...*

And that was all.

"What is this?" she asked.

"A valentine," he muttered.

"For me?" she asked, trying to keep the note of hopefulness out of her voice.

He nodded.

"Why didn't you finish it?"

"Why didn't I finish any of them?" he countered, waving his arm toward the room, where dozens of other unfinished valentines had been strewn about. "Because I couldn't figure out what I wanted to say. Or perhaps I knew that, just not how I wanted to say it."

"What did you want to say?" she whispered.

He stepped forward, took both her hands in his. "Will you marry me?" he asked.

For a moment she was struck dumb. The emotion in his eyes held her mesmerized, filled her own with tears. And then finally, choking on the words, she replied, "Yes. Oh, David, yes."

He lifted her hand to his lips. "I should take you home," he murmured, but he didn't sound like he meant it.

She didn't say anything, because she didn't want to go. Not yet, at least. This was a moment to be savored.

"It would be the right thing to do," he said, but his other hand was stealing around her waist, drawing her closer.

"I don't want to go," she whispered.

His eyes flared. "If you stay," he said, his voice soft, "you won't leave here an innocent. I can't—" He stopped and swallowed, as if trying to keep himself under control. "I'm not strong enough, Susannah. I'm only a man."

She took his hand and pressed it to her heart. "I can't go,"

she said. "Now that I'm here, now that I'm finally with you, I can't go. Not yet."

Wordlessly, his hands found the buttons at the back of her dress, nimbly slipping each one free. Susannah gasped as she felt the cool rush of air hit her skin, followed by the startling warmth of David's hands. His fingers slid up and down her back, feather-light in their caress.

"Are you certain?" he whispered harshly in her ear.

Susannah closed her eyes, touched by his final show of concern. She nodded, then made herself say the words. "I want to be with you," she whispered. It had to be said—for him, for her.

For them.

He groaned, then picked her up and carried across the room, kicking open a door leading to ...

Susannah looked around. It was his bedroom. It had to be. Lush and dark and intensely masculine, with rich burgundy drapes and bedcoverings. When he laid her down on the massive bed, she felt feminine and deliciously sinful, womanly and beloved. She felt naked and exposed, even with her dress still loosely hanging from her shoulders. He seemed to understand her fears, and he moved to remove his clothing before returning to hers. He stepped back, his eyes never leaving her face as he undid the buttons at his cuffs.

"I have never seen anything so beautiful," he whispered.

Nor had she. As she watched him undress in the candlelight, she was struck by the pure masculine beauty of him. She had never seen a bare male chest before, but she couldn't imagine that there was another to compare with David's as he let his shirt fall to the floor.

He slid onto the bed beside her, his body matching the length of hers, his lips finding hers in a hungry kiss. He touched her reverently, gently tugging her dress down until it was nothing but a memory. Susannah caught her breath at the sensation of his skin against her breasts, but somehow there wasn't time or space to feel embarrassment as he rolled her onto her back, pressing his body against hers, moaning hoarsely as he settled his still-clad hips between her legs.

"I have dreamed of this," he whispered, lifting himself up just far enough to look at her face. His eyes were hot, and even though the dim light didn't allow her to see the color, somehow she felt them, burning a fierce, bright green as they swept across her.

"I've been dreaming of you," she said shyly.

His lips curved into a dangerously masculine smile. "Tell me," he gently ordered.

She blushed, feeling the heat of it sweep across her entire body, but still she whispered, "I dreamed you were kissing me."

"Like this?" he murmured, kissing her on the nose.

Smiling, she shook her head.

"Like this?" he asked, brushing his lips against hers.

"A bit like that," she admitted.

"Or maybe," he mused, his eyes taking on a devilish gleam, "like this." His lips trailed down the length of her throat, moving over the swell of her breast until they closed over her nipple.

Susannah let out a little shriek of surprise . . . which quickly melted into a low moan of pleasure. She'd never dreamed that such things were possible, or that such sensations existed. He had a wicked mouth and a naughty tongue, and he was making her feel like a fallen, depraved woman.

And she loved every moment of it.

"Was that it?" he asked, his torture unceasing, even as he murmured the words.

"No," she said, with shaky voice, "I could never have dreamed that."

He lifted his head to gaze hungrily at her face. "There's so much more, my love."

He rolled off her and quickly stripped off his breeches, leaving him amazingly, startlingly naked. Susannah actually gasped at the sight of him, causing him to chuckle.

"Not what you expected?" he asked as he resumed his place at her side.

"I don't know what I expected," she admitted.

His eyes grew serious as he stroked her hair. "There is nothing to fear, I promise you."

She looked up at his face, barely able to contain her love for this man. He was so good, so honest, so true. And he cared for her—not as a possession or a convenience, but for *her*, the person inside. She'd been out in society long enough to have heard whispers of what transpired on wedding nights, and she knew that not all men behaved with such consideration.

"I love you," he whispered. "Never forget that."

"Never," she promised.

And then words ceased. His hands and lips brought her to a fever pitch of excitement, to the edge of something daring and unknown. He kissed her and caressed her and loved her until she was straining and quivering with need. Then, just when she was certain she couldn't possibly bear it a moment longer, his face was once again opposite hers, and his manhood was pressing against her, urging her legs further open.

"You're ready for me," he told her, the muscles in his face pinched with restraint.

She nodded. She didn't know what else to do. She had no idea if she was ready for him, wasn't even sure what it was she was supposed to be ready for. But she wanted something more, of that she was certain.

He moved forward, just a touch, but enough so that she gasped with the shock of his entry.

"David!" she gasped, clutching at his shoulders.

His teeth were gritted together, and he looked almost as if he were in pain.

"David?"

He pushed forward again, slowly, allowing her time to accommodate him.

Her breath caught again, but then she had to ask, "Are you all right?"

He let out a rough chuckle. "Fine," he said, touching her face. "Just a little ... I love you so much, it's hard to hold back."

"Don't," she said softly.

He closed his eyes for a moment, then kissed her once, gently, on the lips. "You don't understand," he whispered.

"Make me understand."

He pushed forward.

Susannah let out a little "oh" of surprise.

"If I go too quickly, I will hurt you," he explained, "and I couldn't bear that." He inched forward, groaning as he did so. "But if I go slowly ..."

Susannah didn't think he was particularly enjoying going slowly, and truth be told, she wasn't so much, either. There was nothing *wrong* with it, and the fullness of the feeling was rather intriguing, but she'd lost the sense of urgency she'd felt just moments earlier.

"It may hurt," he said, pressing further within her, "but only for a moment, I promise."

She looked up at him, cradling his face in her hands. "I'm not worried," she said quietly.

And she wasn't. That was the most amazing thing. She trusted this man completely. With her body, with her mind, with her heart. She was ready to join with him in every way, to connect her life with his for eternity.

The thought of it gave her so much joy she feared she might explode.

And then suddenly he was fully within her, and there wasn't any pain, just the slightest twinge of discomfort. He held still for a moment, his breath coming in short, harsh rushes, and then, after whispering her name, he began to move.

At first Susannah didn't even realize what was happening. He moved slowly, with a steady rhythm that mesmerized her. And that excitement she'd been feeling, that desperate need for fulfillment, began to grow again. It started small, like a tiny seed of desire, and then grew until it wrapped itself around every inch of her body.

Then he lost his rhythm, and his movements grew frenzied. She met him with every thrust, unable to

contain her need to move, to writhe beneath him, to touch him wherever her hands could reach. And just when she didn't think she could possibly bear it any longer, that she would surely die if she continued on this course, her world exploded.

David's entire body changed at that moment, as if he suddenly let go of the last thread of his control, and he let out a triumphant shout before he collapsed atop her, unable to do anything but breathe.

The weight of him was stunning, but there was something so ... comforting about having him there. Susannah never wanted him to leave.

"I love you," he said, once he was able to speak. "I love you so much."

She kissed him. "I love you, too."

"Will you marry me?"

"I already said I would."

He grinned wickedly. "I know, but will you marry me tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" she gasped, squirming out from under him.

"Very well," he grumbled, "next week. It'll probably take me at least a few days for a special license."

"Are you certain?" she asked. Much as she wanted to shout in delight at his hurry to make her his own, she knew that his position in society was important to him. Mann-Formsbys did not marry in hastily arranged ceremonies. "There will be talk," she added.

He shrugged boyishly. "I don't care. Do you?"

She shook her head, her smile spreading across her face.

"Good," he growled, pulling her back into his arms. "But perhaps we need to seal the deal more firmly."

"More firmly?" she squeaked. He seemed to be holding her quite firmly indeed.

"Oh yes," he murmured, taking her earlobe between his teeth and nibbling until she shivered with delight. "Just in case you weren't quite convinced that you belong to me."

"Oh, I'm"—she gasped when his hand closed around her breast—"quite convinced, I assure you."

He smiled devilishly. "I need more assurance."

"More?"

"More," he said, quite definitely. "Much more."

Much, *much* more ...

Epilogue

*Happy Valentines Day, Gentle Readers, and did you hear the news? The Earl of Renminster has married
Miss Susannah Ballister!*

If you are grumbling because you did not receive an invitation, you may take solace in the fact that no one received invitations, save, perhaps for her family and his, including Mr. and Mrs. Snowe-Mann-Formsby.

(Ah, how This Author loves to write that name. Brings a smile to the face, does it not?)

*By all accounts, the couple is blissfully happy, and Lady Shelbourne has reported, quite delightedly,
and quite to everyone who will listen, that they have agreed to attend her ball this evening.*

Lady Whistledown's Society Papers, 14 February 1814

They're here," murmured the Earl of Renminster to his new wife.

Susannah just sighed. "Do we have to go?"

He raised his brows. "I thought you wanted to attend."

"I thought *you* wanted to attend."

"Are you jesting? I'd rather be home, stripping you naked."

Susannah blushed.

"Aha. I see you agree with me."

"We are expected," she said, but without conviction.

He shrugged. "I don't care. Do you?"

"Not if you don't care."

He kissed her, softly, slowly, nibbling at her lips. "May I begin the process of stripping you naked now?"

She lurched back. "Of course not!" But he looked so crestfallen she had to add, "We're in a carriage!"

His glum face didn't perk up.

"And it's cold outside."

He burst out laughing, then rapped on the carriage wall and directed the driver to return home. "Oh," he said, "before I forget. I have a valentine for you."

"You do?" She smiled delightedly. "I thought you'd given up on those."

"Well, I have. And it's a good thing you're already well and truly married to me for eternity, because you shouldn't expect flowery words and fancy valentines in the future. This attempt nearly killed me."

Curiously, she took the paper from his hands. It was tri-folded, and sealed with a festive red bit of sealing wax. Susannah knew that he usually sealed his correspondence with a serious dark blue, and she was touched that he'd gone to the extra effort with the red.

With careful fingers, she eased the missive open and smoothed it out on her lap.

There were only three words.

"It was really all I meant to say," he said.

"Oh, David," she whispered, her eyes filling with tears. "I love you, too."

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