

# The First Kiss

## Julia Quinn

*For readers everywhere,  
who loved Lady W too much to let her go.*

*And also for Paul,  
even though he took it as a personal victory  
that I managed to involve Star Wars  
in the title of this book.*

## Chapter 1

*This week's most coveted invitation appears to be Lady Neeley's upcoming dinner party, to be held Tuesday evening. The guest list is not long, nor is it remarkably exclusive, but tales have spread of last year's dinner party, or, to be more specific, of the menu, and all London (and most especially those of greater girth) are eager to partake.*

*This Author was not gifted with an invitation and therefore must suffer at home with a jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and this column, but alas, do not feel pity, Dear Reader. Unlike those attending the upcoming gustatory spectacle, This Author does not have to listen to Lady Neeley!*

*LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS, 27 MAY 1816*

Tillie Howard supposed that the night could get worse, but in all truth, she couldn't imagine how.

She hadn't wanted to attend Lady Neeley's dinner party, but her parents had insisted, and so here she was, trying to ignore the fact that her hostess—the occasionally-feared, occasionally-mocked Lady Neeley—had a voice rather like fingernails on slate.

Tillie was also trying to ignore the rumblings of her stomach, which had expected nourishment at least an hour earlier. The invitation had said seven in the evening, and so Tillie and her parents, the Earl and Countess of Canby, had arrived promptly at half past the hour, with the expectation of being led into supper at eight. But here it was, almost nine, with no sign that Lady Neeley intended to forgo talking for eating anytime soon.

But what Tillie was most trying to ignore, what she in fact would have fled the room to avoid, had she been able to figure out a way to do so without causing a scene, was the man standing next to her.

"Jolly fellow, he was," boomed Robert Dunlop, with that joviality that comes from having consumed just a hair more wine than one ought. "Always ready for a spot of fun."

Tillie smiled tightly. He was speaking of her brother Harry, who had died nearly one year earlier, on the battlefield at Waterloo. When she and Mr. Dunlop had been introduced, she'd been excited to meet him. She'd loved Harry desperately and missed him with a fierceness that sometimes took her breath away. And she'd thought that it would be wonderful to hear stories of his last days from one of his comrades in arms.

Except Robert Dunlop was not telling her what she wanted to hear.

"Talked about you all the time," he continued, even though he'd already said as much ten minutes earlier. " 'Cept. .."

Tillie did nothing but blink, not wanting to encourage further elucidation. This couldn't end well.

Mr. Dunlop squinted at her. " 'Cept he always described you as all elbows and knees and with crooked braids."

Tillie gently touched her hand to her expertly coifed chignon. She couldn't help it. "When Harry left for the Continent, I *did* have crooked braids," she said, deciding that her elbows and knees needed no further discussion.

"He loved you a great deal," Mr. Dunlop said. His voice was surprisingly soft and thoughtful, enough to command Tillie's full attention. Maybe she shouldn't be so quick to judge. Robert Dunlop *meant* well. He was certainly good at heart, and rather handsome, cutting quite a dashing figure in his military uniform. Harry had always written of him with affection, and even now, Tillie was having trouble thinking of him as anything other than "Robbie." Maybe there was a little more to him. Maybe it was the wine. Maybe ...

"Spoke of you glowingly. Glowingly," Robbie repeated, presumably for extra emphasis.

Tillie just nodded. She missed Harry, even if she was coming to realize that he had informed approximately one thousand men that she was a skinny gawk.

Robbie nodded. "Said you were the best of females, if one could look beneath the freckles."

Tillie started scouting the exits, searching for an escape. Surely she could fake a torn hem, or a horrible chest cough. Robbie leaned in to look at her freckles. Or death. Her thespian demise would surely end up as the lead story in tomorrow's *Whistledown*, but Tillie was just about ready to give it a go. It had to be better than *this*.

"Told us all he despaired of you ever getting married," Robbie said, nodding in a most friendly manner. "Always reminded us that you had a bang-up dowry."

That was it. Her brother had been using his time on the battlefield to beg men to marry her, using her dowry (as opposed to her looks, or heaven forbid, her heart) as the primary draw.

It was just like Harry to go and die before she could kill him for this.

"I need to go," she blurted out. Robbie looked around. "Where?" Anywhere.

"Out," Tillie said, hoping that would be explanation enough. Robbie's brow knit in a confused manner as he followed her gaze to the door. "Oh," he said. "Well, I suppose. . . ."

"There you are!"

Tillie turned around to see who had managed to pull Robbie's attention off of her. A tall gentleman wearing the same uniform as Robbie was walking toward them. Except, unlike Robbie, he looked ... Dangerous.

His hair was dark, honey blond, and his eyes were—well, she couldn't possibly tell what color they were from three yards away, but it didn't really matter because the rest of him was enough to make any young lady weak in the legs. His shoulders were broad, his posture was perfect, and his face looked as if it ought to be carved in marble.

"Thompson," Robbie said. "Dashed good to see you."

*Thompson*, Tillie thought, mentally nodding. It must be Peter Thompson, Harry's closest friend. Harry had mentioned him in almost every missive, but clearly he'd never actually *described* him, or Tillie would have been prepared for this Greek god standing before her. Of course, if Harry had described him, he would have just shrugged and said something like, "Regular-looking fellow, I suppose."

Men never paid attention to details.

"D'you know Lady Mathilda?" Robbie said to Peter.

"Tillie," he murmured, taking her proffered hand and kissing it. "Forgive me. I shouldn't be so familiar, but Harry always called you such."

"It's all right," Tillie said, giving her head the tiniest of shakes. "It's been rather difficult not to call Mr. Dunlop Robbie."

"Oh, you should," Robbie said affably. "Everybody does."

"Harry wrote of us, then?" Peter inquired.

"All the time."

"He was very fond of you," Peter said. "He spoke of you often."

Tillie winced. "Yes, so Robbie has been telling me."

"Didn't want her to think Harry hadn't been thinking of her," Robbie explained. "Oh, look, there's my mother."

Both Tillie and Peter looked at him in surprise at the sudden change of subject.

"I'd better hide," he mumbled, then took up residence behind a potted plant.

"She'll find him," Peter said, a wry smile glancing across his lips.

"Mothers always do," Tillie agreed. Silence fell across the conversation, and Tillie almost wished that Robbie would come back and fill the gap with his friendly, if slightly inane, chatter. She didn't know what to say to Peter Thompson, what to do in his presence. And she couldn't stop wondering—a pox on her brother's surely laughing soul—if he was thinking of her dowry, and the size thereof, and of the many times Harry had trotted it out as her most shining attribute.

But then he said something completely unexpected.

"I recognized you the moment I walked in."

Tillie blinked in surprise. "You did?"

His eyes, which she now realized were a mesmerizing shade of gray-blue, watched her with an intensity that made her want to squirm. "Harry described you well."

"No crooked braids," she said, unable to keep the tinge of sarcasm out of her voice.

Peter chuckled at that. "Robbie's been telling tales, I see."

"Quite a few, actually."

"Don't pay him any mind. We all talked about our sisters, and I'm quite certain we all described you as you were when you were twelve."

Tillie decided then and there that there was no reason to inform him that Harry's description had fit her to a much later age. While all her friends had been growing and changing, and requiring new, more womanly clothing, Tillie's shape had remained determinedly childish until her sixteenth year. Even now, she was boyishly slender, but she did have a few curves, and Tillie was thrilled with each and every one of them.

She was nineteen now, almost twenty, and by God she was no longer "all elbows and knees." And never would be again.

"How did you recognize me?" Tillie ask.

Peter smiled. "Can't you guess?"

The hair. The wretched Howard hair. It didn't matter if her crooked braids had made way for a sleek chignon. She and Harry and their elder brother William all possessed the infamous red Howard hair. It wasn't strawberry blond, and it wasn't titian. It was red, or orange, really, a bright copper that Tillie was quite sure had caused more than one person to squint and look away in the sunlight. Somehow their father had escaped the curse, but it had returned with a vengeance on his children.

"It's more than that," Peter said, not even needing her to say the words to know what she was thinking. "You look a great deal like him. Your mouth, I think. The shape of your face."

And he said it with such quiet intensity, with such a controlled swell of emotion, that Tillie knew that he had loved Harry, too, that he missed him almost as much as she did. And it made her want to cry.

"I—" But she couldn't get it out. Her voice broke, and to her horror, she felt herself snuffle and gasp. It wasn't ladylike, and it wasn't delicate; it was a desperate attempt to keep from sobbing in public.

Peter saw it, too. He took her elbow and expertly maneuvered her so that her back was to the crowd, and then he pulled out his handkerchief and handed it to her.

"Thank you," she said, dabbing at her eyes. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

Grief, he thought, but he didn't say it. No need to state the obvious. They both missed Harry. Everyone did.

"What brings you to Lady Neeley's?" Peter asked, deciding that a change of subject was in order.

She flashed him a grateful look. "My parents insisted upon it. My father says her chef is the best in London, and he wouldn't allow us to decline. And you?"

"My father knows her," he said. "I suppose she took pity on me, so newly returned to town."

There were a lot of soldiers receiving the same sort of pity, Peter thought wryly. A lot of young men, done with the army, or about to be, at loose ends, wondering what it was they were supposed to do now that they weren't holding rifles and galloping into battle.

Some of his friends had decided to remain in the army. It was a respectable occupation for a man such as him, the younger son of a minor aristocrat. But Peter had had enough of military life, enough of the killing, enough death. His parents were encouraging him to enter the clergy, which was, in truth, the only other acceptable avenue for a gentleman of little means. His brother would inherit the small manor that went with the barony; there was nothing left over for Peter.

But the clergy seemed somehow wrong. Some of his friends had emerged from the battlefield with renewed faith; for Peter it had been the opposite, and he felt supremely unqualified to lead any flock upon the path of righteousness.

What he really wanted, when he allowed himself to dream of it, was to live quietly in the country. A gentleman farmer.

It sounded so ... peaceful. So completely unlike everything his life had represented during the past few years.

But such a life required land, and land required money, which was something Peter had in short supply. He'd have a small sum once he sold his commission and officially retired from the army, but it wouldn't be enough.

Which explained his recent arrival in London. He needed a wife. One with a dowry. Nothing extravagant—no heiress would be allowed to marry the likes of him, anyway. No, he just needed a girl with a modest sum of money. Or better yet, a tract of land. He'd be willing to settle almost anywhere in England as long as it meant independence and peace.

It didn't seem an unattainable goal. There were plenty of men who'd be happy to marry their daughters to the son of a baron, and a decorated soldier to boot. The fathers of the real heiresses, of the girls with *Lady* or *the Honorable* in front of their names, would hold out for something better, but for the rest, he'd be considered quite a decent catch indeed.

He looked over at Tillie Howard—Lady Mathilda, he reminded himself. She was exactly the sort he wouldn't be marrying. Wealthy beyond imagination, the only daughter of an earl. He probably shouldn't even be talking to her. People would call him a fortune hunter, and even though that's exactly what he was, he didn't want the label.

But she was Harry's sister, and he'd made a promise to Harry. And besides, standing there with Tillie... it was strange. It should have made him miss Harry more, since she looked so damned like him, right down to the leafy green eyes and the funny little angle at which they held their heads when they were listening.

But instead, he just felt good. Relaxed, even, as if this was where he ought to be, if not with Harry, then with this girl.

He smiled at her, and she smiled back, and something tightened within him, something odd and good and ...

"Here he is!" shrilled Lady Neeley.

Peter turned around to see what had precipitated their hostess's louder than normal screech. Tillie



stepped to the right—he had been blocking her view—and then let out a little gasp of, "Oh."

A large, green parrot sat perched on Lady Neeley's shoulder, and it was squawking, "Martin! Martin!"

"Who's Martin?" Peter asked Tillie.

"Miss Martin," she corrected. "Her companion."

"Martin! Martin!"

"I'd hide, were I her," Peter murmured.

"I don't think she can," Tillie said. "Lord Easterly was added to the guest list at the last minute, and Lady Neeley pressed Miss Martin into service to even up the numbers." She looked up at him, a mischievous smile crossing her lips. "Unless you decide to flee before dinner, poor Miss Martin is stuck here for the duration."

Peter winced as he watched the parrot launch itself off Lady Neeley's shoulder and flutter across the room to a thin, dark-haired woman who clearly wanted to be anywhere but where she was. She batted at the bird, but the creature would not leave her alone.

"Poor thing," Tillie said. "I hope it doesn't peck her."

"No," Peter said, watching the scene with amazement. "I think it fancies itself in love."

And sure enough, the parrot was nuzzling the poor woman, cooing, "Martin, Martin," as if it had just entered the gates of heaven,

"My lady," Miss Martin pleaded, rubbing her increasingly bloodshot eyes.

But Lady Neeley just laughed. "A hundred pounds I paid for that bird, and all he does is make love to Miss Martin."

Peter looked at Tillie, whose mouth was clamped into an angry line. "This is terrible," she said. "That bird is making the poor woman sick, and Lady Neeley doesn't give a fig about it."

Peter took this to mean that he was supposed to play the knight in shining armor and save Lady Neeley's poor, beleaguered companion, but before he could take a step,

Tillie had moved across the room. He followed with interest, watching as she held a finger out and encouraged the bird to leave Miss Martin's shoulder.

"Thank you," Miss Martin said. "I don't know why he's acting this way. He's never paid me any mind before."

"Lady Neeley should put him away," Tillie said sternly.

Miss Martin said nothing. They all knew that that would never happen.

Tillie took the bird back to its owner. "Good evening, Lady Neeley," she said. "Have you a perch for your bird? Or perhaps we should put him back in his cage."

"Isn't he sweet?" Lady Neeley said.

Tillie just smiled. Peter bit his lip to keep from chuckling.

"His perch is over there," Lady Neeley said, motioning with her head to a spot in the corner.

"The footmen filled his dish with seed; he won't go anywhere."

Tillie nodded and brought the parrot over to his perch. Sure enough, it began to peck furiously at its food.

"You must have birds," Peter said.

Tillie shook her head. "No, but I've seen others handle them."

"Lady Mathilda!" called Lady Neeley.

"You've been summoned, I'm afraid," Peter murmured.

Tillie shot him a supremely irritated look. "Yes, well, you seem to have fallen into the position of my escort, so you will have to come along as well. Yes, Lady Neeley?" she finished, her tone instantly transformed into pure sweetness and light.

"Come over here, gel, I want to show you something."

Peter followed Tillie back across the room, maintaining a safe distance when his hostess stuck out her arm.

"D'you like it?" she asked, jingling her bracelet. "It's new."

"It's lovely," Tillie said. "Rubies?"

"Of course. It's red. What else would it be?"

"Er.. ."

Peter smiled as he watched Tillie try to deduce whether or not the question was rhetorical. With Lady Neeley, one never could be sure.

"I've a matching necklace as well," Lady Neeley continued blithely, "but I didn't want to overdo it."

She leaned forward and said in a tone that on anyone else would not have been described as quiet,

"Not everyone here is as plump in the pocket as we two."

Peter could have sworn she looked at him, but he decided to ignore the affront. One really couldn't take offense at any of Lady Neeley's comments; to do so would ascribe too much importance to her opinion, and besides, one would forever be running around feeling insulted.

"Wore my earbobs, though!"

Tillie leaned in and dutifully admired her hostess's earrings, but then, just as she was straightening her shoulders, Lady Neeley's bracelet, about which she had made such a fuss, slid right off her wrist and landed on the carpet with a delicate thud.

While Lady Neeley shrieked with dismay, Tillie bent down and retrieved the jewels. "It's a lovely piece," Tillie said, admiring the rubies before handing them back to their owner.

"I can't believe that happened," Lady Neeley said. "Perhaps it is too big. My wrists are very delicate, you know."

Peter coughed into his hand.

"May I examine it?" Tillie said, kicking him in the ankle.

"Of course," the older woman said, handing it back to her. "My eyes aren't what they used to be."

A small crowd had gathered, and everyone waited as Tillie squinted and fiddled with the shiny gold mechanism of the clasp.

"I think you will need to have it repaired," Tillie finally said, returning the bracelet to Lady Neeley.

"The clasp is faulty. It will surely fall off again."

"Nonsense," Lady Neeley said, thrusting her arm out. "Miss Martin!" she bellowed.

Miss Martin rushed to her side and reattached the bracelet.

Lady Neeley let out a "hmmph" and brought her wrist up to her face, examining the bracelet one more time before lowering her arm. "I bought this at Asprey's, and I assure you there is no finer jeweler in London. They would not sell me a bracelet with a faulty clasp."

"I'm sure they didn't mean to," Tillie said, "but—"

She didn't need to finish. Everyone stared down at the spot on the carpet where the bracelet landed for the second time.

"Definitely the clasp," murmured Peter.

"This is an outrage," Lady Neeley announced.

Peter rather agreed, especially since they'd now wasted precious minutes on her shiny bracelet when all anyone wanted at this point was to go into supper and eat. So many bellies were rumbling he couldn't tell whose was whose.

"What am I to do with this now?" Lady Neeley said, after Miss Martin had retrieved the bracelet from the carpet and handed it back to her.

A tall, dark-haired man whom Peter did not recognize produced a small candy dish. "Perhaps this will suffice," he said, holding it out.

"Easterly," Lady Neeley muttered, rather grudgingly, actually, as if she didn't particularly care to acknowledge the gentleman's aid. She set the bracelet in the dish, then placed it on a nearby credenza. "There," she said, arranging the bracelet in a neat circle. "I suppose everyone can still admire it there."

"Perhaps it could serve as a centerpiece on the table while we dine," Peter suggested.

"Hmm, yes, excellent idea, Mr. Thompson. It's nearly time to go in for supper, anyway."

Peter could have sworn he heard someone whisper "*Nearly?*"

"Oh, very well we'll eat now," Lady Neeley said. "Miss Martin!"

Miss Martin, who had somehow managed to put several yards between herself and her employer, returned.

"See to it that everything is ready for supper," Lady Neeley said.

Miss Martin exited, and then, amid multiple sighs of relief, the party moved from the drawing room to the dining room.

To his delight, Peter found that he was seated next to Tillie. Normally he wouldn't find himself next to an earl's daughter, and in truth, he suspected that he was meant to be paired with the woman on his right, but she had Robbie Dunlop on the other side, and he seemed to be keeping her in conversation quite nicely.

The food was, as gossip had promised, exquisite, and Peter was quite happily spooning lobster bisque into his mouth when he heard a movement to his left, and when he turned, Tillie was looking at him, her lips parted as if she were about to say his name.

She was lovely, he realized. Lovely in a way that Harry could never have described, in a way that he, as her brother, could never even have seen. Harry would never have been able to see the woman beyond the girl, would never have realized that the curve of her cheek begged a caress, or that when she opened her mouth to speak, she sometimes paused first, her lips pursing together slightly, as if awaiting a kiss.

Harry would never have seen any of that, but Peter did, and it shook him to the core.

"Did you want to ask me something?" he asked, surprised that his voice came out sounding quite ordinary.

"I did," she said, "although I'm not sure how ... I don't know . . ."

He waited for her to collect her thoughts.

After a moment, she leaned forward, glanced about the table to ascertain if anyone was looking at them, and asked, "Were you there?"

"Where?" he asked, even though he knew exactly what she meant.

"When he died," she said quietly. "Were you there?"

He nodded. It wasn't a memory he cared to revisit, but he owed her that much honesty.

Her lower lip trembled, and she whispered, "Did he suffer?"

For a moment Peter didn't know what to say. Harry had suffered. He'd spent three days in what had to have been tremendous pain, both his legs broken, the right one so badly that the bone had burst through the skin. He might've survived that, maybe even without too much of a limp—their surgeon was quite adept at setting bones—but then the fever had set in, and it hadn't been long before Peter realized that Harry would not win his battle. Two days later he was dead.

But when he'd slipped from life, he'd been so listless that Peter hadn't been certain whether he'd felt pain or not, especially with the laudanum he'd stolen from his commander and poured down Harry's throat. And so, when he finally answered Tillie's question, he just said, "Some. It wasn't painless, but I think ... at the end ... it was peaceful."

She nodded. "Thank you. I've always wondered. I would have always wondered. I'm glad to know."

He turned his attention back to his soup, hoping that a bit of lobster and flour and broth could banish the memory of Harry's death, but then Tillie said, "It's supposed to be easier because he's a hero, but I don't think so."

He looked back at her, his question in his eyes.

"Everyone keeps saying we must be so proud of him," she explained, "because he's a hero, because he died on a battlefield at Waterloo, bis bayonet in the body of a French

soldier, but I don't think it makes it any easier." Her lips quivered tremulously, the kind of strange, helpless smile one makes when one realizes that some questions have no answers. "We still miss him just as much as we would have done had he fallen off his horse, or caught the measles, or choked on a chicken bone."

Peter felt his lips part as he digested her words. "Harry *was* a hero," he heard himself say, and it was the truth. Harry had proven himself a hero a dozen times over, fighting valiantly, and more than once saving the life of another. But Harry hadn't died a hero, not in the way most people liked to think of it. Harry was already dead by the time they fought the French at Waterloo, his body hopelessly mangled in a stupid accident, trapped for six hours beneath a supply wagon that someone had tried to repair one time too many. The damn thing should have been chopped for firewood weeks earlier, Peter thought savagely, but the army never had enough of anything, including humble supply wagons, and his regiment commander had refused to give it up for dead.

But clearly this wasn't the story Tillie had been told, and probably her parents as well. Someone had tried to soften the blow of Harry's death by painting his last minutes with the deep red colors of the battlefield, in all its horrible glory.

"Harry was a hero," Peter said again, because it was true, and he'd long since learned that those who hadn't experienced war could never understand the truth of it. And if it brought comfort to think that any death could be more noble than another, he wasn't about to pierce the illusion.

"You were a good friend to him," Tillie said. "I'm glad he had you."

"I made a promise to him," he blurted out. He hadn't meant to tell her, but somehow he couldn't help himself. "We both made a promise, actually. It was a few months before he died, and we'd both ...

Well, the night before had been grisly, and we'd lost many of our regiment."

She leaned forward, her eyes wide and glowing with compassion, and when he looked at her, he saw the rose milkiness of her skin, the light dusting of freckles across her nose—more than anything, he wanted to kiss her.

Good God. Right there at Lady Neeley's dinner party, he wanted to grab Tillie Howard by the shoulders, haul her against him and kiss her for everything he was worth.

Harry would have called him out on the spot.

"What happened?" she asked, and the words should have jolted him back to reality, reminded him that he was telling her something rather important, but all he could do was stare at her lips, which weren't quite pink, but rather a little peachy, and it occurred to him that he'd never, ever bothered to look at a woman's mouth before—at least not like this—before kissing her.

"Mr. Thompson?" she asked. "Peter?"

"Sorry," he said, his fingers fisting beneath the table, as if the pain of his nails against his palms could somehow force him back to the matter at hand. "I made Harry a promise," he continued. "We were talking about home, as we often did when it was particularly difficult, and he mentioned you, and I mentioned my sister—she's fourteen—and we promised each other that if anything should befall us, we would watch out for the other's sister. Keep you safe."

For a moment she did nothing but look at him, and then she said, "That's very kind of you, but don't worry, I absolve you of the vow. I'm no green girl, and I still have a brother in William. Besides, I don't need a replacement for Harry."

Peter opened his mouth to speak, then quickly thought better of it. He wasn't feeling brotherly toward Tillie, and he was quite certain this wasn't what Harry had had in mind when he'd asked him to look out for her.

And the *last* thing he wanted to be was her replacement brother.

But the moment seemed to call for a reply, and indeed Tillie was regarding him quizzically, her head tilted to the side as if she were waiting for him to say something quite meaningful and intelligent or, if not that, something that would allow her to offer a teasing retort.

Which was why, when Lady Neeley's awful voice screeched across the room, Peter didn't mind the sound of it, even if it was to say:

"It's gone! My bracelet is gone!"



## Chapter 2

*The week's most coveted invitation is now the week's most talked about event. If it is possible that you, Dear Reader, have not yet heard the news, This Author shall recount it here: Lady Neeley's hungry guests had not even finished their soup when their hostess's ruby bracelet was discovered to have been stolen.*

*There is, to be sure, some disagreement over the fate of the precious jewels. A number of guests maintain that the bracelet was simply misplaced, but Lady Neeley claims a crystal clear memory of the evening, and she says that it was burglary, without question.*

*Apparently, the bracelet (whose clasp was discovered to be faulty by Lady Mathilda Howard) was placed in a candy dish (selected by the elusive Lord Easterly) and set upon a table in Lady Neeley's drawing room. Lady Neeley intended to bring the dish to the dining room, so that her guests might admire its apparent brilliance, but in the rush to reach the food (by this time, This Author is told, the hour had grown so late that the guests, famished all, abandoned decorum and made a mad dash for the dining room), the bracelet was forgotten.*

*When Lady Neeley remembered the jewels in the next room, she sent a footman to collect them, but he returned with only the candy dish.*

*This, of course, was when the true excitement began.*

*Lady Neeley attempted to have all of her guests searched, but truly, does anyone think one such as the Earl of Canby would consent to have his person ransacked by a baroness's footman? The suggestion was made that the bracelet was stolen by a servant, but*

*Lady Neeley maintains an admirable loyalty toward her servants (who, quite remarkably, return the sentiment), and she refused to believe that any of her staff, none of whom have been in her employ for less than five years, would have betrayed her in such a manner.*

*In the end, all of the guests departed in bad humor. And perhaps most tragically, all of the food—save for the soup—went uneaten. One can only hope that Lady Neeley saw fit to offer the feast to her servants, whom she had so recently defended against attack.*

*And one can be sure, Dear Reader, that This Author shall continue to comment upon this latest on-dit. Is it possible that a member of the ton is nothing more than a common thief? Nonsense. One would have to be most uncommon to have spirited away such a valuable piece, right under Lady N's nose.*

**LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS, 29 MAY 1816**

"And then," gushed some elaborately dressed young gentleman, speaking in the tone of one who is quite certain he is always aware of the latest gossip, "she forced Mr. Brooks—her own nephew—to strip off his coat and allow two footmen to search him."

"I heard it was three."

"It was none," Peter drawled, standing at the entrance of the Canby drawing room. "I was there."

Seven gentleman turned to face him. Five looked annoyed, one bored, and one amused. As for Peter, he was profoundly irritated. He wasn't certain what he'd expected when he'd decided to travel to the opulent Canby residence in Mayfair to call upon Tillie, but it hadn't been *this*. The spacious drawing room was overfull with men and flowers, and the small bunch of irises in his hand seemed rather superfluous.

Who knew that Tillie was so popular?

"I'm quite sure," the first gentleman said, "that it was *two* footmen."

Peter shrugged. He didn't much care if the fop had the truth or not. "Lady Mathilda was there as well," he said. "You can ask her if you don't believe me."

"It's true," Tillie said, smiling at him in greeting. "Although Mr. Brooks did remove his coat."

The man who had claimed that three footmen had been searching guests turned to Peter and inquired, somewhat archly, "Did you remove your coat?"

"No."

"The guests revolted after Mr. Brooks was searched," Tillie explained, then changed the subject by asking her assembled beaux, "Are you acquainted with Mr. Thompson?"

Only two were; Peter was still rather new to town, and most of his acquaintances were limited to school friends from Eton and Cambridge. Tillie made the necessary introductions, then Peter was relegated to the eighth-best position in the room, as none of the other gentlemen was willing to relocate and allow another any advantage in courting the lovely—and wealthy—Lady Mathilda.

Peter read *Whistledown*; he knew that Tillie was considered the season's biggest heiress. And he recalled Harry saying—quite often, actually—that he was going to have to beat off the fortune hunters with a stick. But Peter hadn't realized until this moment just how assiduously the young men of London were fighting for her hand.

It was nauseating.

And in truth, he owed it to Harry to ensure that the man she chose (or as was more likely the case, the man her father chose for her) would treat her with the affection and respect she deserved.

And so he turned to the task of inspecting, and then when appropriate, scaring off the lovesick swain surrounding him.

The first gentleman was easy. It took mere minutes to determine that his vocabulary did not reach into the triple digits, and all Peter had to do was mention that Tillie had told him that the

activity she enjoyed above all else was reading philosophical tracts. The suitor made haste for the door, and Peter decided that even if Tillie hadn't actually mentioned such a predilection to him the night before, the fact remained that she was certainly intelligent enough to read philosophical tracts if she so chose, and that alone ought to disqualify the match.

The next gentleman was known to Peter by reputation. An inveterate gambler, all he required to bid his farewells was the mention of an impending horse race in Hyde Park. And, Peter thought with satisfaction, he took three of the others along with him. It was a good thing that the horse race was not fictitious, although the four young men might be a bit disappointed when they realized that Peter had misremembered the time of the event, and indeed, that all bets had been placed some sixty minutes earlier.

Oh, well.

He smiled. He was having considerably more fun than he would have imagined.

"Mr. Thompson," came a dry, feminine voice in his ear, "are you scaring off my daughter's suitors?"

He turned to face Lady Canby, who was regarding him with an amused expression, for which Peter was immensely thankful. Most mothers would have been irate. "Of course not," he replied. "Not the ones you'd want to see her marry, at any rate."

Lady Canby just raised her brows.

"Any man who'd rather throw money on a horse race than remain here in your presence isn't worthy of your daughter."

She laughed, and when she did so, she looked a great deal like Tillie. "Well spoken, Mr. Thompson," she said. "One cannot be too careful when one is the mother of a great heiress."

Peter paused, unsure whether that comment was meant to be more pointed than her tone might imply.

If Lady Canby knew who he was, and she did—she'd recognized his name immediately when they'd been introduced the night before—then she also knew he had little more than pennies to his name.

"I promised Harry I would look out for her," he said, his voice stolid and resolute. There could be no mistaking that he meant to fulfill his vow.

"I see," Lady Canby murmured, cocking her head slightly to the side. "And that is why you're here?"

"Of course." And he meant it. At least he told himself he meant it. It didn't matter if he'd spent the last sixteen or so hours fantasizing about kissing Tillie Howard. She wasn't for him.

He watched her conversing with the younger brother of Lord Bridgerton, gritting his teeth when he realized that there wasn't a single objectionable thing about the man. He was tall, strong, clearly intelligent, and of good family and fortune. The Canbys would be thrilled with the match, even if Tillie would be reduced to a mere Mrs.

"We're rather pleased with that one," Lady Canby said, motioning one small, elegant hand toward the gentleman in question. "He's quite a talented artist, and his mother has been my close friend for years."

Peter nodded tightly.

"Alas," Lady Canby said with a shrug, "I fear there is little reason to hold out hope in that quarter. I suspect he is just here to merely placate dear Violet, who has despaired of ever seeing her children married. Mr. Bridgerton doesn't seem ready to settle down, and his mother believes he is secretly besotted with another."

Peter remembered not to smile.

"Tillie, my dear," Lady Canby said, once the annoyingly handsome and personable Mr. Bridgerton kissed her hand and departed, "you have not yet chatted with Mr. Thompson. It is so kind of him to call, and all out of friendship for Harry."

"I wouldn't say *all*," Peter said, his words coming out a little less suave and practiced than he'd intended. "It is always a delight to see you, Lady Mathilda."

"Please," Tillie said, waving good-bye to the last of her lovesick swain, "you must continue to call me Tillie." She turned to her mother. "It's all Harry ever called me, and apparently he spoke of us often while on the Continent."

Lady Canby smiled sadly at the mention of her younger son's name, and she blinked several times. Her eyes took on a hollow expression, and while Peter didn't think she was going to burst into tears, he rather thought she wanted to. He immediately held out his handkerchief, but she shook her head and refused the gesture.

"I believe I shall fetch my husband," she said, rising to her feet. "I know he would like to meet you. He was off somewhere last night when we were introduced, and I— Well, I know he would like to meet you." She hurried out of the room, leaving the door wide open and positioning a footman just across the hall.

"She's off to go cry," Tillie said, not in a way to make Peter feel guilty. It was just an explanation, a sad statement of fact. "She does still, quite a bit."

"I'm sorry," he said.

She shrugged. "There's no avoiding it, it seems. For any of us. I don't think we ever really thought he might die. It seems quite stupid now. It shouldn't have been such a surprise. He went off to war, for heaven's sake. What else should we have expected?"

Peter shook his head. "It isn't stupid at all. We all thought we were a little bit immortal until we actually saw battle." He swallowed, not wanting to feel the memory. But once summoned, it was difficult to hold back. "It's impossible to understand until you see it."

Tillie's lips tightened slightly, and Peter worried that he might have insulted her. "I don't mean to condescend," he said.

"You didn't. It's not that. I was just . . . thinking." She leaned forward, a luminous new light in her eyes. "Let's not talk of Harry," she said. "Do you think we can? I'm just so tired of being sad."

"Very well," he said.

She watched him, waiting for him to say something more. But he didn't. "Er, how was the weather?" she finally asked.

"Bit of a drizzle," he replied, "but nothing out of the ordinary."

She nodded. "Was it warm?"

"Not especially. A bit warmer than last night, though."

"Yes, it was a bit chilly, wasn't it? And here it's May."

"Disappointed?"

"Of course. It ought to be spring."

"Yes."

"Quite."

"Quite."

One-word sentences, Tillie thought. Always the demise of any good conversation. *Surely* they had something in common other than Harry. Peter Thompson was handsome, intelligent, and, when he looked at her with that smoky, heavy-lidded expression of his, it sent a shiver right down her spine.

It wasn't fair that the only thing they ever seemed to talk about made her want to cry.

She smiled at him encouragingly, waiting for him to say something more, but he did not. She smiled again, clearing her throat.

He took the hint. "Do you read?" he asked.

"Do I *read*!" she echoed, incredulous.

"Not *can* you, *do* you?" he clarified.

"Yes, of course. Why?"

He shrugged. "I might have mentioned as much to one of the other gentlemen here."

"Might have?"

"Did."

She felt her teeth clenching. She had no idea *why* she should be irritated with Peter Thompson, only that she should. He'd clearly done something to merit her displeasure, else he wouldn't be sitting there with that cat-with-cream expression, pretending to inspect his fingernails. "Which gentleman?" she finally asked.

He looked up, and Tillie resisted the urge to thank him for finding her more interesting than his manicure.

"I believe his name was Mr. Berbrooke," he said.

Not anyone she wanted to marry. Nigel Berbrooke was a good-hearted fellow, but he was also dumb as a post and would likely be terrified at the thought of an intellectual wife. One might say, if one were feeling particularly generous, that Peter had done her a favor by scaring him away, but still, Tillie did not appreciate his meddling in her affairs. "What did you say I liked to read?" she asked, keeping her voice mild.

"Er, this and that. Perhaps philosophical tracts."

"I see. And you saw fit to mention this to him because?..."

"He seemed like the sort who'd be interested," he said with a shrug.

"And—just out of curiosity, mind you—what happened when you told him this?"

Peter didn't even have the grace to look sheepish. "Ran right out the door," he murmured. "Imagine that."

Tillie meant to remain arch and dry. She wanted to eye him ironically under delicately arched brows. But she wasn't nearly as sophisticated as she hoped to be, because she positively glared at him as she said, "And what gave you the idea that I like to read philosophical tracts?"

"Don't you?"

"It doesn't matter," she retorted. "You can't go around frightening off my suitors."

"Is that what you thought I was doing?"

"Please," she scoffed. "After touting my intelligence to Mr. Berbrooke, don't attempt to insult it now."

"Very well," he said, crossing his arms and regarding her with the sort of expression her father and older brother adopted when they meant to scold her. "Do you really wish to pledge your troth to Mr. Berbrooke? Or," he added, "to one of the men who rushed out the door to throw money on a horse race?"

"Of course not, but that doesn't mean I want you scaring them away."

He just looked at her as if she were an idiot. Or a woman. It was Tillie's experience that most men thought they were one and the same.



"The more men who come to call," she explained, somewhat impatiently, "the more men who *will* come to call."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're sheep. The lot of you. Only interested in a woman if someone else is as well."

"And it is your aim in life to collect a score of gentlemen in your drawing room?"

His tone was patronizing, almost insulting, and Tillie was *this close* to having him booted from the house. Only his friendship with Harry—and the fact that he was acting like such a prig because he thought it was what Harry would have wanted—kept her from summoning the butler right then.

"My aim," she said tightly, "is to find a husband. Not to snare one, not to trap one, not to drag one to the altar, but to find one, preferably one with whom I might share a long and contented life. Being a practical sort of girl, it seemed only sensible to meet as many eligible gentlemen as possible, so that my decision might be based on a broad base of knowledge, and not upon, as so many young women are accused, a flight of fancy."

She sat back, crossed her arms, and leveled a hard stare in his direction. "Do you have any questions?"

He regarded her with a blank expression for a moment, then asked, "Do you want me to go and drag them all back?" "No! Oh," she added, when she saw his sly smile. "You're teasing."

"Just a bit," he demurred.

If he'd been Harry, she would have tossed a pillow at him. If he'd been Harry, she would have laughed. But if he'd been Harry, her eyes wouldn't have lingered on his mouth when he smiled, and she wouldn't have felt this strange heat in her blood, or this prickling on her skin.

But most of all, if he'd been Harry, she wouldn't feel this *awful* disappointment, because Peter Thompson was not her older brother, and the last thing she wanted was for him to view himself as such.

But apparently, that was exactly how he felt. He'd promised Harry that he'd look after her, and now she was nothing more than an obligation. Did he even like her? Find her

remotely interesting or amusing? Or did he suffer - her company only because she was Harry's sister?

It was impossible to know—and a question she could never ask. And what she really wanted was for him to leave, but that would mark her a coward, and she didn't want to be a coward. It was what she owed Harry, she'd come to realize. To live her life with the courage and strength of purpose that he'd exhibited at the end of his.

Facing Peter Thompson seemed a rather pale comparison to Harry's brave deeds as a soldier, but no one was about to send her off to fight for her country, so if she wanted to continue in her quest to face her fears, this was going to have to do.

"You're forgiven this time," she said, crossing her hands in her lap.

"Did I apologize?" he drawled, spearing her once again with that slow, lazy smile.

"No, but you should have done." She smiled back, sweetly . . . too sweetly. "I was raised to be charitable, so I thought I'd grant you the apology you never gave."

"And the acceptance as well?"

"Of course. I'd be churlish, otherwise."

He burst out laughing, a rich, warm sound that took Tillie by surprise, and then made her smile in turn.

"Very well," he said. "You win. You absolutely, positively, indubitably—"

"Indubitably even?" she murmured with delight.

"Even indubitably," he conferred. "You win. I apologize."

She sighed. "Victory has never felt so sweet."

"Nor should it have done," he said with arched brows. "I assure you I don't hand out apologies lightly."

"Or with such good humor?" she queried.

*"Never with such good humor."*

Tillie was smiling, trying to think of something terribly witty to say, when the butler arrived with an unsolicited tea service. Her mother must have requested it, Tillie thought, which meant that she'd be back soon, which meant that her time alone with Peter was drawing to a close.

She should have paid attention to the keen disappointment squeezing in her chest. Or to the fluttering in her belly that amplified every time she looked at him. Because if she had, she wouldn't have been so surprised when she handed him a cup of tea, and their fingers touched, and then she looked at him, and he looked at her, and their eyes met.

And she felt like she was falling.

Falling . . . falling . . . falling. A warm rush of air washing over her, stealing her breath, her pulse, even her heart. And when it was all over—if indeed it was over, and not simply subsided—all she could think was that it was a wonder she hadn't dropped the teacup.

And had he noticed that in that moment, she had been transformed?

She paid careful attention to the fixing of her own cup, splashing in milk before adding the hot tea. If she could just concentrate on the mundane tasks at hand, she wouldn't have to ponder what had just happened to her.

Because she suspected that she had indeed fallen.

In love.

And she suspected that in the end, it would be her downfall. She hadn't much experience with men; her first season in London had been cut short by Harry's untimely death, and she'd spent the past year secluded in the country, in mourning with her family.

But even so, she could tell that Peter didn't think of her as a desirable woman. He thought of her as an obligation, as Harry's little sister. Maybe even as a child.

To him she was a promise that had to be kept. Nothing more, nothing less. It would have seemed cold and clinical, had she not been so touched by his devotion to her brother. "Is something wrong?"

Tillie looked up at the sound of Peter's voice and smiled wryly. Was something wrong? More than he would ever know.

"Of course not," she lied. "Why do you ask?"

"You have not drunk your tea."

"I prefer it lukewarm," she improvised, lifting the cup to her lips. She took a sip, faking a gingerly manner. "There," she said brightly. "Much better now."

He watched her curiously, and Tillie almost sighed at her misfortune. If one was going to develop an unrequited fancy for a gentleman, one would do a great deal better not to choose one of such obvious intelligence. Any more blunders like this one, and he would certainly discern her true feelings.

Which would be hideous.

"Do you plan to attend the Hargreaves Grand Ball on Friday?" she asked, deciding that a change of subject was her best course of action.

He nodded. "I assume you do as well?"

"Of course. It will be quite a crush, I'm sure, and I cannot wait to see Lady Neeley arrive with her bracelet on her wrist."

"She has found it?" he asked with surprise.

"No, but she must, don't you think? I cannot imagine anyone at the party actually stealing it. It probably fell behind the table, and no one has had the shrewdness to look."

"I agree with you that yours is the most likely theory," he said, but his lips pursed slightly when he paused, and he did not look convinced.

"But? .. ." she prompted.

For a moment she did not think he would answer, but then he said, "But you have never known want, Lady Mathilda. You could never understand the desperation that might push a man to steal."

She didn't like that he'd called her Lady Mathilda. It injected a formality into the conversation that she'd thought they'd dispensed with. And his comments seemed to

underscore the simple fact that he was a man of the world, and she was a sheltered young lady.

"Of course not," she said, since there was no point in pretending her life had been anything but privileged. "But still, it's difficult to imagine someone having the audacity to steal the bracelet right out from under her nose."

For a moment he did not move, just stared at her in an uncomfortably assessing manner. Tillie got the feeling that he thought her terribly provincial, or at the very least naive, and she hated that her belief in the general goodness of man was marking her a fool.

It shouldn't be that way. One *ought* to trust one's friends and neighbors. And she certainly shouldn't be ridiculed for doing so.

But he surprised her, and he just said, "You're probably right. I've long since realized that most mysteries have perfectly benign and boring solutions. Lady Neeley shall most probably be eating crow before the week is out."

"You don't think I'm silly for being so trusting?" Tillie asked, nearly kicking herself for doing so. But she couldn't seem to stop asking questions of this man; she couldn't recall anyone else whose opinions *mattered* quite so much.

He smiled. "No. I don't necessarily agree with you. But it's rather nice to share tea with someone whose faith in humanity has not been irreparably injured."

A somber ache washed over her, and she wondered if Harry, too, had been changed by the war. He must have been, she realized, and she couldn't quite believe that she'd never considered it before. She'd always imagined him the same old Harry, laughing and joking and pulling pranks at every opportunity.

But when she looked at Peter Thompson, she realized that there was a shadow behind his eyes that never quite went away.

Harry had been at Peter's side throughout the war. His eyes had seen the same horrors, and his eyes would have held the same shadows, had he not been buried in Belgium.

"Tillie?"

She looked up quickly. She'd been silent longer than she ought, and Peter was watching her with a curious expression. "Sorry," she said reflexively, "just woolgathering."

But as she sipped her tea, watching him surreptitiously over the rim of her cup, it wasn't Harry she was thinking about. For the first time in a year, finally, *thrillingly*, it wasn't Harry.

It was Peter, and all she could think was that he shouldn't have shadows behind his eyes. And she wanted to be the one to banish them forever.

## Chapter 3

*. . . and now that This Author has made public the guest list from The Dinner Party That Went Awry, This Author offers to you, as a delicious lagniappe, an analysis of the suspects.*

*Not much is known of Mr. Peter Thompson, although he is widely recognized as a courageous soldier in the war against Napoleon. Society hates to place a noted war hero on a list of suspects, but This Author would be remiss if it were not pointed out that Mr. Thompson is also recognized as something of a fortune hunter. Since his arrival in town, he has been quite obviously looking for a wife, although as This Author firmly believes in giving credit where credit is due, he has done so in a decidedly understated and unvulgar manner.*

*But it is well-known that his father, Lord Stoughton, is not among the wealthier of the barons, and furthermore, Mr. Thompson is a second son, and as his elder brother has already seen fit to procreate, he is a mere fourth in line for the title. And so if Mr. Thompson hopes to live in any manner of style once he departs the army, he will need to marry a woman of some means.*

*Or, one could speculate, if one was of a mind to do so, obtain funds in some other manner.*

*LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS, 31 MAY 1816*

If Peter had known the identity of the elusive Lady Whistledown, he would have strangled her on the spot.

Fortune Hunter. He detested the moniker, viewed it more as an epithet, and could not even think the words without nearly spitting in disgust. He'd spent this past month in London behaving with the utmost of care, all to ensure that the label was not applied to him.

There was a difference between a man who sought a woman with a modest dowry and one who seduced for money, and the differential could be summed up in one word.

Honor.

It was what had governed his entire life, from the moment his father had sat him down at the appallingly tender age of five and explained what set apart a true gentleman, and by God, Peter was not going to allow some cowardly gossip columnist to stain his reputation with a single stroke of her pen.

If the bloody woman had an ounce of honor herself, he thought savagely, she would not coyly cloak her identity. Only the craven used anonymity to insult and impugn.

But he didn't know who Lady Whistledown was, and he suspected no one ever would, not in his lifetime, anyway, so he had to content himself with taking out his foul mood on everyone else with whom he came into contact.

Which meant that he was probably going to owe his valet a rather large apology on the morrow.

He tugged at his cravat as he navigated the too-crowded ballroom at the home of Lady Hargreaves. He couldn't refuse this invitation; to do so would have given too much credence to Lady Whistledown's words. Better to brazen it out and laugh it off and take some solace in the fact that he wasn't the only one savaged in this morning's edition; Lady W had devoted a fair bit of space to five guests in total, including the poor beleaguered Miss Martin, whom the *ton* would

surely turn upon, as she was merely Lady Neeley's companion and not, as he had already heard someone say, one of their own.

Besides, he'd had to come tonight. He had already accepted the invitation, and furthermore, every eligible young miss in London would be in attendance. He couldn't let himself forget that there was a purpose to his presence in town. He could not afford to finish the season without a betrothal; as it was, he could barely manage to pay the rent on his humble bachelor lodgings north of Oxford Street.

He imagined that the fathers of those marriageable misses might view him a little more carefully tonight, and several would not allow their daughters to associate with him, but hiding at home would, in the eyes of society, be tantamount to admitting guilt, and he would be far better off acting as if nothing had happened.

Even if he wanted rather desperately to put his fist through the wall.

The worst of it was that the one person with whom he absolutely couldn't associate was Tillie. She was universally acknowledged as the season's biggest heiress, and her good looks and vivacious personality had made her quite the catch indeed. It was difficult for *anyone* to pay court to her without being labeled a fortune hunter, and if Peter were seen to be dangling after her, he would never be rid of the stain on his reputation.

But of course Tillie was the one person—the only person—he wanted to see.

She came to him in his thoughts, in his dreams. She was smiling, laughing, then she was serious, and she seemed to *understand* him, to soothe him with her very presence. And he wanted more. He wanted everything; he wanted to know how long her hair was, and he wanted to be the one to release it from the prim little bun at the nape of her neck. He wanted to know the scent of her skin and the exact curve of her hips. He wanted to dance with her more closely than propriety allowed, and he wanted to spirit her away, where no other man could even gaze upon her.

But his dreams were going to have to remain just that. Dreams. There was no way the Earl of Canby would approve of a match between his only daughter and the penniless younger son of a baron. And if he stole Tillie away, if they eloped without her family's permission.... Well, she'd be cut off for certain, and Peter would not drag her into a life of genteel poverty.



It wasn't, Peter thought dryly, what Harry had had in mind when he'd asked him to watch out for her.

And so he just stood at the perimeter of the ballroom, pretending to be very interested in his glass of champagne, and rather glad that he couldn't see her. If he knew where Tillie was, then he wouldn't be able to stop himself from watching for her.

And if he did that, then he'd surely catch a glimpse of her. And once that happened, did he really think he could take his eyes off her?

She'd see him, of course, and their eyes would meet, and then he'd have to go over to offer his greetings, and then she might want to dance....

It occurred to him in a sharp flash of irony that he'd left the war precisely to *avoid* the threat of torture.

He might as well just yank off his fingernails now.

Peter subtly adjusted his position so that his back was more toward the crowds. Then he gave himself a mental smack when he caught himself glancing over his shoulder.

He'd found a small group of men he knew from the army, all of whom, he was sure, had come to London for the same reason he had, although with the exception of Robbie Dunlop, none of them had had the misfortune of having been invited to Lady Neeley's ill-fated dinner party. And Robbie hadn't been chosen for scrutiny by Lady Whistledown; it seemed that even that wizened old crone knew that Robbie hadn't the guile to concoct—much less carry out—such an audacious theft.

"Bad luck about *Whistledown*," one of the former soldiers commented, shaking his head with honest commiseration.

Peter just grunted and lifted one shoulder in a lopsided shrug. It seemed a good enough answer to him.

"No one will remember by next week," said another. "She'll have some new scandal to report on, and besides, no one really thinks you stole that bracelet."

Peter turned to his friend with dawning horror. It had never even occurred to him that anyone might actually think he was a *thief*. He'd been merely concerned with the bit about being a fortune hunter.

"Er, didn't mean to bring it up," the fellow stammered, stepping back at what must have been a ferocious expression on Peter's face. "I'm certain it will turn out to be that companion. That sort never has two shillings to rub together."

"It wasn't Miss Martin," Peter bit off.

"How d'you know?" asked one of the men. "Do you know her?"

"Does anyone know her?" someone else asked.

"It wasn't Miss Martin," Peter said, his voice hard. "And it is beneath you to speculate with a woman's reputation."

"Yes, but how do you—"

"I was standing right next to her!" Peter snapped. "The poor woman was being mauled by a parrot. She hadn't the opportunity to take the bracelet. Of course," he added caustically, "I don't know who will trust my word on the matter now that I've been labeled as the prime suspect."

The men all rushed to assure him that they still trusted his word on anything, although one was foolish enough to point out that Peter was hardly the *prime* suspect.

Peter just glared at him. Prime or not, it appeared that much of London now thought he might be a thief.

Bloody hell.

"Good evening, Mr. Thompson."

*Tillie*. The night only needed this.

Peter turned, wishing his blood weren't racing with quite so much energy at the mere sound of her voice. He shouldn't see her. He shouldn't *want* to see her.

"It is good to see you," she said, smiling as if she had a secret.

He was sunk.

"Lady Mathilda," he said, bowing over her proffered hand.

She turned and greeted Robbie, then said to Peter, "Perhaps you might introduce me to the rest of your compatriots?"

He did so, frowning as they all fell under her spell. Or possibly, it occurred to him, the spell of her dowry. Harry hadn't exactly been circumspect when he'd spoken of it on the Continent.

"I could not help but overhear your defense of Miss Martin," Tillie said, once the introductions had been completed. She turned to the rest of the crowd and added, "I was there as well, and I assure you, the thief could not have been she."

"Who do you think stole the bracelet, Lady Mathilda?" someone asked.

Tillie's lips pursed for a fraction of a second—just long enough to inform someone who was watching her very closely that she was irritated. But to anyone else (which consisted of everyone except for Peter) her sunny expression never wavered, especially as she said, "I do not know. I rather think it will be found behind a table."

"Surely Lady Neeley has already searched the room," one of the men drawled.

Tillie waved one of her hands through the air, a blithe gesture that Peter suspected was meant to lull the other gentlemen into thinking she couldn't be bothered to think about such weighty questions. "Nevertheless," she said with a sigh.

And that was that, Peter thought admiringly. No one spoke of it again. One "*nevertheless*" and Tillie had maneuvered the discussion exactly where she wanted it.

Peter tried to ignore the rest of the conversation. It was mostly inanities about the weather, which had been a bit chillier than was normal for this time of year, peppered with the occasional remark about someone's attire. His expression, if he had any control over it, was politely bored; he did not want to appear overly interested in Tillie, and while he did not flatter himself to think that he was the main topic of gossip at the ball, he had already seen more than one old biddy point in his direction and then whisper something behind her hand.

But then all of his good intentions were spoiled when Tillie turned to him and said, "Mr. Thompson, I do believe the music has begun."

There was no misunderstanding that statement, and even as the rest of the gentlemen rushed to fill the subsequent slots on her dance card, he was forced to crook his arm and invite her onto the dance floor.

It was a waltz. It would have to be a waltz.

And as Peter took her hand in his, fighting the urge to entwine their fingers, he had the distinct sensation that he was falling off a cliff.

Or worse, throwing himself over the side.

Because try as he might to convince himself that this was a terrible mistake, that he shouldn't be seen with her—hell, that he shouldn't be *with* her, period—he couldn't quite quash the pure, almost incandescent tingle of joy that rose and swirled within him when he held her in his arms.

And if the gossips wanted to label him the worst of all fortune hunters, then let them.

It would be worth it for this one dance.

Tillie had spent her first ten minutes of the Hargreaves' Grand Ball trying to escape her parents' clutches, her second ten looking for Peter Thompson, and her third standing at his side while she chattered about nothing at all with his friends.

She was going to spend the next ten minutes with his complete attention if it killed her.

She was still a little irritated that she'd practically had to beg him to dance with her, *and* in full view of a dozen other gentlemen. But there seemed little point in dwelling upon it now that he was holding her hand and twirling her elegantly around the dance floor.

And why was it, she wondered, that his hand on her back could send such a strange rush of desire straight to the very core of her being? One would think that if she were to feel seduced, it would be from his eyes, which, after ten minutes of studiously ignoring her, burned into hers with an intensity that stole her breath.

But in truth, if she was ready to throw caution to the wind, if she now required every last ounce of her fortitude not to sigh and sink into him and beg him to touch his lips to hers, it was all because of that hand on her back.

Maybe it was the location, at the base of her spine, just inches through her body to her most intimate place. Maybe it was the way she felt pulled, as if any moment she would lose herself, and her body would be pressed up against his, hot and scandalous, and aching for something she didn't quite understand.

The pressure was relentlessly tender, drawing her toward him, slowly, inexorably . . . and yet when Tillie looked down, the distance between their bodies had not changed.

But the heat within them had exploded.

And she burned.

"Have I done something to displease you?" she asked, desperately trying to shift her thoughts onto anything besides the heady desire that was threatening to overtake her.

"Of course not," he said gruffly. "Why would you think something so absurd?"

She shrugged. "You seemed ... oh, I don't know... a bit distant, I suppose. As if you did not welcome my company."

"That's ridiculous," he grunted, in that way that men did when they knew a woman was right but had no intention of admitting it.

She'd grown up with two brothers, however, and knew better than to push, so instead she said, "You were magnificent when you defended Miss Martin."

His hand tightened around hers, but sadly, only for a second. "Anyone would have defended her," he said.

"No," she said slowly. "I don't think so. I'd say the opposite, actually, and I believe you know I'm right."

She looked up at him, her eyes defiant, waiting for him to contradict her. Smart man that he was, he didn't.

"A gentleman should never wreak havoc with a woman's reputation," he said stiffly, and she realized with a strange little bubble of delight that she loved that little hint of stodginess, loved that he was actually embarrassed by his own strict code of ethics.

Or maybe it wasn't the code as much as the fact that she had caught him in it. It was much more fashionable to be an unfeeling rake, but Peter could never be that cruel.

"A woman shouldn't wreak havoc with a gentleman's reputation, either," Tillie said softly. "I'm sorry about what Lady Whistledown wrote. It wasn't well done of her."

"And do you have the ear of our esteemed gossip columnist?"

"Of course not, but I do approve of her words more often than not. This time, however, I think she may have crossed the line."

"She accused no one." He shrugged as if he didn't care, but his tone could not lie. He was furious—and pained—by that morning's column, and if Tillie had known who Lady Whistledown was, she would have happily trussed her up like a goose.

It was a strange, fierce feeling, this anger that he'd been hurt.

"Lady Mathilda . . . *Tillie*."

She looked up in surprise, unaware that she'd been off in her own thoughts.

He offered her an amused smile and glanced down at their hands.

She followed his gaze, and it was only then that she realized she was gripping his fingers as if they were Lady Whistledown's neck. "Oh!" she let out in surprise, followed by the more mumbly, "Sorry."

"Do you make a habit of amputating your dance partners' fingers?"

"Only when I have to twist their arms to get them to ask me to dance," she shot back.

"And here I thought the war was dangerous," he murmured.

She was surprised that he could joke about it, surprised that he *would*. She wasn't quite certain how to respond, but then the orchestra finished the waltz with a surprisingly livery flourish, and she was saved from having to reply.

"Shall I return you to your parents?" Peter asked, leading her off the dance floor. "Or to your next partner?"

"Actually," she improvised, "I'm rather thirsty. Perhaps the lemonade table?" Which, she had noted, was clear across the room.

"As you wish."

Their progress was slow; Tillie kept her pace uncharacteristically sedate, hoping to stretch their time together by another minute or two.

"Have you been enjoying the ball?" she asked him.

"Bits and pieces," he said, keeping his gaze straight ahead.

But she saw the corner of his mouth curve up.

"Am I a bit or a piece?" she asked daringly.

He actually stopped. "Do you have any idea what you just said?"

Too late, she remembered overhearing her brothers talk about bits of muslin and pieces of...

Her face flamed.

And then, God help them, they both laughed.

"Don't tell anyone," she whispered, catching her breath. "My parents will lock me away for a month."

"That would certainly—"

"Lady Mathilda! Lady Mathilda!"

Whatever Peter had meant to say was lost as Mrs. Featherington, a friend of Tillie's mother and one of society's biggest gossips, bustled up next to them, dragging along her daughter

Penelope, who was dressed in a rather unfortunate shade of yellow.

"Lady Mathilda," Mrs. Featherington said. Then she added, in a decidedly frosty voice, "Mr. Thompson."

Tillie had been about to make introductions, but then she remembered that Mrs. Featherington and Penelope had been present at Lady Neeley's dinner party. In fact, Mrs. Featherington was one of the unfortunate five to have been profiled by Lady Whistledown in that morning's column.

"Do your parents know where you are?" Mrs. Featherington asked Tillie.

"I beg your pardon?" Tillie asked, blinking with surprise. She turned to Penelope, whom she had always thought was a rather nice, if quiet, sort.

But if Penelope knew what her mother was about, she gave no indication, other than a pained expression that led Tillie to believe that if a hole had suddenly opened up in the middle of the ballroom floor, Penelope would have gladly jumped into it.

"Do your parents know where you are?" Mrs. Featherington repeated, this time more pointedly.

"We drove over together," Tillie answered slowly, "so yes, I would assume they are aware—"

"I shall return you to their sides," Mrs. Featherington interrupted.

And then Tillie understood. "I assure you," she said icily, "that Mr. Thompson is more than capable of returning me to my parents."

"Mother," Penelope said, actually grasping her mother's sleeve.

But Mrs. Featherington ignored her. "A girl such as you," she told Tillie, "must take care with her reputation."

"If you refer to Lady Whistledown's column," Tillie said, her voice uncharacteristically icy, "then I must remind you that you were mentioned as well, Mrs. Featherington."

Penelope gasped.



"Her words do not concern me," Mrs. Featherington said. "I know that I did not take that bracelet."

"And I know that Mr. Thompson did not, either," Tillie returned.

"I never said he did," Mrs. Featherington said, and then she surprised Tillie by turning to Peter and saying, "I apologize if I gave that indication. I would never call someone a thief without proof."

Peter, who had been standing tensely still at Tillie's side, did nothing but nod at her apology. Tillie rather suspected it was all he could do without losing his temper.

"Mother," Penelope said, her tone almost desperate now, "Prudence is over by the door, and she's waving rather madly."

Tillie could see Penelope's sister Prudence, and she seemed quite happily engaged in conversation with one of her friends. Tillie made a mental note to befriend Penelope Featherington, who was well-known as a wallflower, on the next possible occasion.

"Lady Mathilda," Mrs. Featherington said, ignoring Penelope entirely, "I must—"

"Mother!" Penelope yanked hard on her mother's sleeve.

"Penelope!" Mrs. Featherington turned to her daughter with obvious irritation. "I'm trying to—"

"We must be going," Tillie said, taking advantage of Mrs. Featherington's momentary distraction.

"I shall be sure to pass along your greetings to my mother."

And then, before Mrs. Featherington could disentangle herself from Penelope, who had a viselike grip on her arm, Tillie made her escape, practically dragging Peter along behind her.

He hadn't said a word during the interchange. Tillie wasn't quite certain what that meant.

"I'm terribly sorry," she said once they were out of Mrs. Featherington's earshot.

"You did nothing," he said, but his voice was tight.

"No, but, well . . ." She stopped, unsure of how to proceed. She didn't particularly want to take the blame for Mrs. Featherington, but nonetheless, it seemed that *someone* ought to be apologizing to Peter. "No one should be calling you a thief," she finally said. "It's unacceptable."

He smiled at her humorlessly. "She wasn't calling me a thief," he said. "She was calling me a fortune hunter."

"She never—"

"Trust me," he said, cutting her off with a tone that made her feel like a foolish girl. How could she have missed such an undercurrent? Was she really that unaware?

"That's the silliest thing I've ever heard," she muttered, as much to defend herself as anything else.

"Is it?"

"Of course. You're the last person who would marry a woman for her money."

Peter stopped, leveling a hard stare at her face. "And you have reached this conclusion in the three days of our acquaintance?"

Her lips tightened. "No more time was required." He felt her words like a blow, nearly reeling from the force of her belief in him. She was staring up at him, her chin so determined, her arms like sticks at her sides, and he was seized by a strange need to scare her, to push her away, to remind her that men were, above all else, bounders and fools, and she ought not to trust with such an open heart.

"I came to London," he told her, his words deliberate and sharp, "for the sole purpose of finding a bride."

"There is nothing uncommon in that," she said dismissively. "I am here to find a husband."

"I have barely a cent to my name," he stated.

Her eyes widened.

"I am a fortune hunter," he said baldly.

She shook her head. "You are not."

"You can't add two to two and expect it to sum only three."

"And you can't speak in such ridiculous crypticisms and expect me to understand a word you say,"  
she replied.

"Tillie," he said with a sigh, hating that she'd almost made him laugh. It made it prodigiously more  
difficult to scare her away.

"You might need money," she continued, "but that doesn't mean you'd seduce someone to get it."

"Tillie—"

"You are not a fortune hunter," she said rather forcefully, "and I will say so to anyone who dares to intimate that you are."

And so he had to say it. He had to lay it on the table, make her understand the truth of the situation.

"If you seek to repair my reputation," he said slowly, and just a bit wearily as well, "then you will have  
to depart my company."

Her lips parted in shock.

He shrugged, trying to make light of it. "If you must know, I've spent the last three weeks trying rather desperately to avoid being called a fortune hunter," he said, not quite able to believe that he was telling  
her all this. "And I succeeded rather well until this morning's *Whistledown*."

"It will all blow over," she whispered, but her voice lacked conviction, as if she were trying to convince herself of it as well.

"Not if I'm seen to be courting you."

"But that's horrid."

*In a nutshell*, he thought. But there was no point in saying it.

"And you're not courting me. You're fulfilling a promise to Harry." She paused.  
"Aren't you?"

"Does it matter?"

"To me it does," she muttered.

"Now that Lady Whistledown has gone and labeled me," he said, trying not to wonder *why* it mattered to her, "I shan't be able to even stand near you without someone speculating that I'm after your fortune."

"You're standing next to me now," she pointed out.

And a damned torture it was. He sighed. "I should return you to your parents."

She nodded. "I'm sorry."

"*Don't* apologize," he snapped. He was angry at himself, and angry with Lady Whistledown, and angry at the whole damned *ton*. But not at her. Never at her. And the last thing he wanted was her pity.

"I'm ruining your reputation," she said, her voice breaking with a helplessly sad laugh.  
"It's almost funny, that."

He eyed her sardonically.

"We young maidens are the ones who have to watch our every move," she explained.  
"You lot get to do whatever you want."

"Not quite," he said, moving his gaze over her shoulder, lest it fall to riper areas.

"Whatever the case," she said, waving her hand in that blithe move she'd used so successfully earlier in the evening, "it seems that I am the obstacle in your path. You want a wife, and, well..." Her voice lost its breeziness, and when she smiled, there was something missing in it.

No one else would notice, Peter realized. No one would realize that her smile wasn't quite right.

But he did. And it broke his heart.

"Whomever you choose . . ." she continued, bolstering that smile with a hollow little laugh, "you shan't get her with me around, it seems."

But not, he realized, for any of the reasons she thought. If he wouldn't find a wife with Tillie Howard nearby, it would be because he couldn't take his eyes off of her, couldn't even begin to think of another woman when he could sense her presence.

"I should go," she said, and he knew she was right, but he couldn't seem to bring himself to say farewell. He'd avoided her company for precisely this reason.

And now that he had to send her on her way once and for all, it was even harder than he'd thought.

"You're breaking your promise to Harry," she reminded him.

He shook his head, even though she would never understand just how tightly he was *keeping* his promise. He'd promised Harry that he'd protect her.

She swallowed. "My parents are over there," she said, motioning to her left and behind her.

He nodded and took her arm, turning her so that they could make their way to the earl and countess.

And found themselves face-to-face with Lady Neeley.

## Chapter 4

*One can only wonder what events will transpire at tonight's Hargreaves' Grand Ball. This Author has it on the best authority that Lady Neeley plans to attend, as do all of the major suspects, with the possible exception of Miss Martin, who received an invitation only at the discretion of Lady Neeley herself.*

*But Mr. Thompson has RSVP'ed in the affirmative, as have Mr. Brooks, Mrs. Featherington, and Lord Easterly.*

*This Author finds that she can only say, "Let the games begin!"*

*LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS, 31 MAY 1816*

"Mr. Thompson!" Lady Neeley shrilled. "Just the person I've been looking for!"

"Really?" Tillie asked with surprise, before she could remember that she was actually rather peeved with Lady Neeley and had quite intended to be politely icy when next they met.

"Indeed," the older woman said sharply. "I'm furious over that *Whistledown* column this morning. That infernal woman never gets but half of anything right."

"To which half do you refer?" Peter asked coldly.

"The bit about your being a thief, of course," Lady Neeley said. "We all know you're hunting down a fortune"—she glanced rather obviously at Tillie—"but you're no thief."

"Lady Neeley!" Tillie exclaimed, unable to believe that even she would be so rude.

"And how," Peter said, "did you come to that conclusion?"

"I know your father," Lady Neeley said, "and that is good enough for me."

"The sins of the father in reverse?" he asked dryly.

"Precisely," Lady Neeley replied, completely missing his tone. "Besides, I rather suspect Easterly. He's far too tanned."

"Tanned?" Tillie echoed, trying to figure out how that related to a theft of rubies.

"And," Lady Neeley added, rather officiously, "he cheats at cards."

"Lord Easterly seemed a good sort to me," Tillie felt compelled to put in. She wasn't allowed to gamble, of course, but she'd spent enough time out in society to know that an accusation of cheating was a serious indictment, indeed. More serious, some would say, than an accusation of theft.

Lady Neeley turned to her with a condescending air. "You, dear girl, are far too young to know the story."

Tillie pursed her lips and forced herself not to reply.

"You ought to make certain you have proof before you accuse a man of theft," Peter said, his spine ramrod straight.

"Bah. I'll have all the proof I need when they find my jewels in his apartments."

"Lady Neeley, have you had the room searched?" Tillie cut in, eager to diffuse the conversation.

"His room?"

"No, yours. The drawing room."

"Of course I have," Lady Neeley retorted. "D'you think I'm a fool?"

Tillie declined to comment.

"I had the room searched twice," the older woman stated. "And then I searched it myself for a third time, just to make sure. The bracelet is not in the drawing room. I can say that as a fact."

"I'm certain you're right," Tillie said, still trying to smooth things over. They'd attracted a crowd, and no fewer than a dozen onlookers were leaning in, eager to hear the interchange between Lady Neeley and one of her prime suspects. "But be that as it may—"

"You had better watch your words," Peter cut in sharply, and Tillie gasped, stunned by his tone, and then was relieved when she realized it wasn't directed at her.

"I beg your pardon," Lady Neeley said, drawing her shoulders back at the affront.

"I am not well acquainted with Lord Easterly, so I cannot vouch for his character," Peter said, "but I do know that you have no proof with which to level a charge. You are treading in dangerous waters, my lady, and you would do well not to besmirch a gentleman's good name. Or you may find," he added forcefully, when Lady Neeley opened her mouth in further argument, "that your own name is dragged through the very same mud."

Lady Neeley gasped, Tillie's mouth fell open, and then a strange hush fell over the small crowd.

"This'll be in tomorrow's *Whistledown* for certain!" someone finally said.

"Mr. Thompson, you forget yourself," Lady Neeley said. "No," Peter said grimly. "That's the one thing I never forget."

There was a moment of silence, and then, just when Tillie was quite certain that Lady Neeley was going to spew venom, she laughed.

Laughed. Right there in the ballroom, leaving all the onlookers gaping with surprise.

"You have pluck, Mr. Thompson," she said. "I will give you that."

He nodded graciously, which Tillie found rather admirable under the circumstances.

"I do not change my opinion of Lord Easterly, mind you," she said. "Even if he didn't take the bracelet, he has behaved appallingly toward dear Sophia. Now then," she said, changing the subject with disconcerting speed, "where is my companion?"

"She's here?" Tillie asked.

"Of course she's here," Lady Neeley said briskly. "If she'd stayed home, everyone would think her a thief." She turned and leveled a shrewd look at Peter. "Rather like you, I expect, Mr. Thompson."

He said nothing, but he did incline his head ever so slightly.

Lady Neeley smiled—a rather frightening stretch of her lips in her face, and then she turned and bellowed, "Miss Martin! Miss Martin!"

And she was off, with swirls of pink silk flouncing behind her, and all Tillie could think was that poor Miss Martin surely deserved a medal.



"You were magnificent!" Tillie said to Peter. "I've never known anyone to stand up to her like that."

"It was nothing," he said under his breath.

"Nonsense," she said. "It was nothing short of—"

"Tillie, stop," he said, clearly uncomfortable with the continued attention from the other partygoers.

"Very well," she acceded, "but I never did get my lemonade. Would you be so kind to escort me?"

He couldn't very well refuse a direct request in front of so many onlookers, and Tillie tried not to smile with delight as he took her arm and led her back to the refreshment table. He looked almost unbearably handsome in his evening attire. She didn't know when or why he'd decided to forgo his military uniform, but he still cut a dashing figure, and it was a heady delight to be on his arm.

"I don't care what you say," she whispered. "You were wonderful, and Lord Easterly owes you a debt of gratitude."

"Anyone would have—"

"Anyone wouldn't have, and you know it," Tillie cut in. "Stop being so ashamed of your own sense of honor. I find it rather fetching myself."

His face flushed, and he looked like he wanted to yank at his cravat. Tillie would have laughed with delight if she hadn't been quite sure that it would just discomfort him further.

And she realized—she'd thought it was true two days before, but now she knew—that she loved him.

It was an amazing, stunning feeling, and it had become, quite spectacularly, a part of who she was. Whatever she'd been before, she was something else now. She didn't exist for him, and she didn't exist because of him, but somehow he had become a little piece of her soul, and she knew that she would never be the same.

"Let's go outside," she said impulsively, tugging toward the door.

He resisted her movement, holding his arm still against the pressure of her hand.

"Tillie, you know that  
is a bad idea."

"For your reputation or mine?" she teased. "Both," he replied forcefully, "although I might remind you that mine would recover."

And so would hers, Tillie thought giddily, provided he married her. Not that she wanted to trap him into matrimony, but still, it was impossible not to think of it, not to fantasize right here in the middle of the ball about standing beside him at the front of a church, all her friends behind her, listening as she spoke her vows.

"No one will see," she said, pulling his arm as best as she could without attracting attention. "Besides, look, the party has moved out to the garden. We shan't be the least bit alone." Peter followed her gaze toward the French doors. Sure enough, there were several couples milling about, enough so that no one's reputation would suffer stain. "Very well," he said, "if you insist." She smiled winningly. "Oh, I do." The night air was cool but welcome after the humid crush in the ballroom. Peter tried to keep them in full view of the doors, but Tillie kept tugging toward the shadows, and though he should have stood his ground and rooted her to the spot, he found he couldn't.

She led, and he followed, and he knew it was wrong, but there was nothing he could make himself do about it.

"Do you really think someone stole the bracelet?" Tillie asked once they were leaning against the balustrade, staring out at the torchlit garden.

"I don't want to talk about the bracelet." "Very well," she said. "I don't want to talk about Harry." He smiled. There was something in her tone that struck him as funny, and she must have heard it, too, because she was grinning at him.

"Have we anything left about which to converse?" she asked.

"The weather?"

She gave him a vaguely scolding expression.

"I *know* you don't want to discuss politics or religion."

"Quite," she said pertly. "Not now, at any rate."

"Very well, then," he said. "It's your turn to suggest a topic."

"All right," she said. "I'm game. Tell me about your wife."

He choked on what had to be the largest speck of dust in creation. "My wife?" he echoed.

"The one you claim you're looking for," she explained. "You might as well tell me just what it is you're seeking, since clearly I will have to aid you in the search."

"Will you?"

"Indeed. You said I do nothing but make you appear a fortune hunter, and we've just spent the last thirty minutes in each other's company, several of them in full view of the worst gossips in London. According to your arguments, I have set you back a full month." She shrugged, although the motion was obscured by the soft blue wrap she'd pulled tightly around her shoulders. "It's the very least I can do."

He regarded her for a long moment, then lost his inner battle and gave in. "Very Well. What do you want to know?"

She smiled with delight at her victory. "Is she intelligent?"

"Of course."

"Very good answer, Mr. Thompson."

He nodded graciously, wishing he was strong enough not to enjoy the moment. But there was no hope for him; he couldn't resist her.

She tapped her index finger against her cheek as she pondered her questions. "Is she compassionate?" she asked.

"I would hope so."

"Kind to animals and small children?"

"Kind to *me*," he said, smiling lazily. "Isn't that all that matters?"

She shot him a peevish expression and he chuckled, leaning a bit more heavily against the balustrade. A strange, sensual lethargy was stealing over him, and he was

losing himself in the moment. They might have been guests at a grand London ball, but at that moment, nothing existed but Tillie and her teasing words.

"You may find," Tillie said, glancing down her nose at him in a most superior fashion, "that if she is intelligent— and I do believe you stated that as a requirement?"

He nodded, graciously granting her the point.

"—that her kindness depends upon your own. Do unto others, and all that."

"You may be assured," he murmured, "that I will be very kind to my wife."

"You will?" she whispered. And he realized that she was near. He didn't know how it had happened, if it had been him or her, but the distance between them had been halved. She was standing close, too close. He could see every freckle on her nose, catch every glint of the flickering torchlights in her hair. The fiery tresses had been pulled back into an elegant chignon, but a few strands had pulled free of the coiffure and were curling around her face.

Her hair was curly, he realized. He'd not known that. It seemed inconceivable that he wouldn't have known something so basic, but he'd never seen her thus. Her hair was always pulled back to perfection, every strand in its place.

Until now. And he couldn't help but feel fanciful and think that somehow this was for him. "What does she look like?"

"Who?" he asked distractedly, wondering what would happen if he tugged on one of those curls. It looked like a corkscrew, springy and soft.

"Your wife," she replied, amusement making her voice like music.

"I'm not sure," he said. "I haven't met her yet."

"You haven't?"

He shook his head. He was nearly beyond words.

"But what do you wish for?" Her voice was soft now, and she touched his sleeve with her index finger, ran it along the fabric of his coat from his elbow to his wrist. "Surely you carry some image in your mind."

<> "Tillie," he said hoarsely, looking about to see if anyone had seen. He had felt her touch through the fabric of his coat. There was no one left on the patio, but that did not mean that they would remain without interruption.

"Dark hair?" she murmured. "Light?"

"Tillie . . ."

"Red?"

And then he could take it no longer. He was a hero of the war, had fought and slain countless French soldiers, risked his life more than once to pull an injured compatriot from the line of fire, and yet he was not proof against this slip of a girl, with her melodious voice and flirtatious words. He had been pushed to his limit and had found no ramparts or walls, no last-ditch defense against his own desire.

He pulled her to him and then in a circle around him, moving until they were obscured by a pillar.

"You shouldn't push me, Tillie."

"I can't help it," she said.

Neither could he. His lips found hers, and he kissed her.

He kissed her even though it would never be enough. He kissed her even though he could never have more.

And he kissed her to spoil her for all other men, to leave his mark so that when her father finally married her off to someone else, she'd have the memory of this, and it would haunt her to her dying day.

It was cruel and it was selfish, but he couldn't help himself. Somewhere, deep within him, he knew that she was *his*, and it was a knife in his gut to know that his primitive awareness amounted to nothing in the world of the *ton*.

She sighed against his mouth, a soft mewling sound that moved through him like flame. "Tillie, Tillie," he murmured, sliding his hands to the curve of her bottom. He cupped her, then pressed her against him, hard and tight, branding her through thick clothing.

"Peter!" she gasped, but he silenced her with another kiss. She squirmed in his arms, her body responding to his onslaught. With every motion, her body rubbed against his, and his desire grew harder, hotter, more intense, until he was quite certain he would explode.

He should stop. He had to stop. And yet he couldn't.

Somewhere within him, he knew that this might be his only chance, the one kiss he'd ever play across her lips. And he wasn't ready to end it. Not yet, not until he'd had more. Not until she knew more of his touch.

"I want you," he said, his voice husky with need. "Never doubt that, Tillie. I want you like I want water, like I want air. I want you more than all that, and ..."

His voice failed him. There were no words left. All he could do was look at her, stare deeply into her eyes and shudder when he saw the echo of his own desire. Her breath was passing over her lips in short gasps, and then she touched one finger to his lips and whispered, "What have you done?"

He felt his brows rise up in question.

"To me," she clarified. "What have you done to me?"

He couldn't answer. To do so would be to give voice to all of his frustrated dreams. "Tillie," he managed to say, but that was all.

"Don't tell me this shouldn't have happened," she whispered.

He didn't. He couldn't. He knew it was true, but he couldn't bring himself to regret the kiss. He might later, when he was lying in bed, burning with unfulfilled need, but not now, not when she was so close, her scent on the wind, her heat pulling him near.

"Tillie," he said again, since it seemed to be the only word his lips could form.

She opened her mouth to speak, but then they both heard the sound of someone else approaching, and they realized they were no longer alone on the patio. Peter's protective instincts took over, and he pulled her farther behind the pillar, pressing one finger to his lips to signal for quiet.

It was Lord Easterly, he realized, arguing in hushed voices with his wife, whom, if Peter had the story correctly, he'd abandoned under mysterious circumstances some

twelve years earlier. They were quite involved in their own drama, and Peter was optimistic that they would never notice they had company. He stepped back, trying to cloak himself more deeply in the shadows, but then— "Ow!" Tillie's foot. Damn.

The viscount and viscountess turned sharply, their eyes widening when they realized they were not alone.

"Good evening," Peter said gamely, since he seemed to have no other choice but to brazen it out. "Er, fine weather," Easterly said.

"Indeed," Peter replied, at much the same time as Tillie's chirpy, "Oh, yes!"

"Lady Mathilda," Easterly's wife said. She was a tall, blond woman, the sort who looked always elegant, but tonight she appeared nervous.

"Lady Easterly".Tillie returned. "How are you?"

"Very well, thank you. And you?"

"Just fine, thank you. I was just, er, a little overheated." Tillie waved her hand about as if to indicate the cool night air. "I thought a spot of fresh air might revive me."

"Quite," Lady Easterly said. "We felt the exact same way."

Her husband grunted his agreement. "Er, Easterly," Peter said, finally sparing the two ladies their uncomfortable small talk, "I should warn you of something."

Easterly inclined his head in question. "Lady Neeley has been publicly accusing you of the theft."

"What?" Lady Easterly demanded. "Publicly?" Lord Easterly queried, cutting off any further exclamations from his wife.

Peter nodded curtly. "In no uncertain terms, I'm afraid."

"Mr. Thompson defended you," Tillie put in, her eyes alight. "He was magnificent."

"Tillie," Peter muttered, trying to get her to be quiet. "Thank you for your defense," Lord Easterly said, after a polite nod to Tillie. "I knew that she suspected me. She has made that much abundantly clear. But she had not yet gone so far as to accuse me publicly."

"She has now," Peter said grimly. Beside him, Tillie nodded. "I'm sorry," she said. She turned to Lady Easterly and added, "She's rather horrid." Lady Easterly nodded in return. "I would never have **accepted** her invitation had I not heard so much about the chef."

But her husband was clearly uninterested in the chef's renown. "Thank you for the warning," he said to Peter.

Peter acknowledged the thanks with a single nod, then said, "I must return Lady Mathilda to the party."

"Perhaps my wife would be a better escort," Lord Easterly said, and Peter realized that he was returning the favor. The Easterlys would never mention that they'd found Peter and Tillie quite alone, and furthermore, Lady Easterly's impeccable reputation would ensure that Tillie was not the subject of scurrilous gossip.

"You are more than correct, my lord," Peter said, pulling gently on Tillie's arm and steering her toward Lady Easterly. "I will see you tomorrow," he said to Tillie.

"Will you?" she asked, and he could see in her eyes that she wasn't being coy.

"Yes," he said, and much to his surprise, he realized he meant it.

## Chapter 5

*As there are no new developments to report in the Mystery of the Disappeared Bracelet, This Author must content herself with her more ordinary subject matter, namely the day-to-day foibles of the ton, as they proceed in their quest for wealth, prestige, and the perfect spouse.*

*Chief among This Author's topics is Mr. Peter Thompson, who, as anyone with an observant eye will have noted, has been most assiduously courting Lady Mathilda Howard, only daughter of the Earl of Canby, for more than a week. The pair were quite inseparable at the Hargreaves' Grand Ball, and in the week since, Mr.*



*Thompson has been known to call upon Canby House nearly every single morning.*

*Such activities can only attract attention. Mr. Thompson is known to be a fortune hunter, although to his credit, it must be noted that until Lady Mathilda, his monetary aspirations had been modest and, by the standards of society, unworthy of reproach.*

*Lady Mathilda's fortune, however, is quite a prize, and it has long been accepted by society that she would marry none less than an earl. Indeed, This Author has it on the highest authority that the betting book at White's predicts that she will pledge her troth to the Duke of Ashbourne, who, as all know, is the last remaining eligible duke in Britain.*

*Poor Mr. Thompson.*

#### *LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS, 10 JUNE 1816*

Poor Mr. Thompson, indeed.

Peter had spent the past week alternating between misery and bliss, his mood entirely dependent upon whether he was able to forget that Tillie was one of the richest people in Britain and he was, to be quite blunt about it, not.

Her parents had to know of his interest in her. He'd called at Canby House nearly every day since the Hargreaves ball, and neither had sought to dissuade him, but they also knew of his friendship with Harry. The Canbys would never turn away a friend of their son, and Lady Canby in particular seemed to enjoy his presence. She liked talking to him about Harry, hearing stories of his final days, especially when Peter told her how Harry could make anyone laugh, even while surrounded by the worst degradations of war.

In fact, Peter was quite certain that Lady Canby liked hearing about Harry so much that she would allow him to dangle hopelessly after Tillie, even though he was, as was patently obvious, a most unsuitable prospect for marriage.

Eventually the time would come when the Canbys sat him down and had a little chat, and Peter would be told in no uncertain terms that while he was an admirable,

upstanding fellow, and certainly a fine friend for their son, it was quite another thing altogether to make a match with their daughter.

But that time had not yet arrived, and so Peter had decided to make the best of his situation and enjoy what time he was allowed. To that end, he and Tillie had arranged to meet this morning in Hyde Park. They were both avid riders, and as the day was sporting the first patch of sun in a week, they could not resist an outing.

The sentiment appeared to be shared by the rest of the *ton*. The park was a crush, with riders slowed to the most sedate of trots to avoid entanglements, and as Peter waited patiently for Tillie near the Serpentine, he idly watched the crowds, wondering if there were any other lovesick fools in their ranks.

Maybe. But probably none quite as lovesick—or as foolish— as he.

"Mr. Thompson! Mr. Thompson!"

He smiled at the sound of Tillie's voice. She was always careful not to address him by his given name in public, but when they were alone, and especially when he was stealing a kiss, he was always Peter.

He had never before given a thought to his parents' choice of names, but since Tillie had taken to whispering it in the heat of passion, he had come to adore the sound of it, and he'd decided that Peter was a splendid choice, indeed.

He was surprised to see that Tillie was on foot, moving along the path with two servants, one male and one female, following.

Peter immediately dismounted. "Lady Mathilda," he said with a formal nod. There were a great many people nearby, and it was difficult to tell who was within earshot. For all he knew, that wretched Lady Whistledown herself could be lurking behind a tree.

Tillie grimaced. "My mare is favoring a leg," she explained. "I didn't want to take her out. Do you mind if we walk? I brought my groom to tend to your horse."

Peter handed the reins over as Tillie assured him, "John is very good with horses. Roscoe will be more than safe with him. And besides," she added with a whisper,

once they'd moved a few yards away from the servants, "he and my maid are quite sweet on each other. I was hoping they might be easily distracted."

Peter turned to her with an amused smile. "Mathilda Howard, did you plan this?"

She drew back as if affronted, but her lips were twitching. "I wouldn't dream of lying about my mare's injury."

He chuckled.

"She really was favoring a leg," Tillie said.

"Right," he said.

"She was!" she protested. "Truly. I merely decided to take advantage of the situation. You wouldn't have wanted me to cancel our outing, would you?" She glanced over her shoulder, back at her maid and groom, who were standing side by side near a small cluster of trees, chattering happily.

"I don't think they'll notice if we disappear," Tillie said, "provided we don't go far."

Peter quirked a brow. "Disappeared is disappeared. If we're out of their sight, does it really matter how far we venture?"

"Of course it does," Tillie returned. "It's the principle of the matter. I don't want to get them in trouble, after all, especially while they are providing such a thoughtful blind eye."

"Very well," Peter said, deciding there was little point in following her logic. "Will that tree do?" He pointed to a large elm, halfway between Rotten Row and Serpentine Drive.

"Right between the two main thoroughfares?" she said, scrunching her nose. "That's a terrible idea.

Let's go over there, on the other side of the Serpentine."

And so they strolled, just a little bit out of sight of Tillie's servants, but not, much to Peter's simultaneous relief and dismay, out of sight of everyone else.

They walked for several minutes in silence, and then Tillie said, in a rather casual tone, "I heard a rumor about you this morning."

"Not something you read in *Whistledown*, I hope."

"No," she said thoughtfully, "it was mentioned this morning. By another one of my suitors." And then, when he didn't rise to her bait, she added, "When you didn't call."

"I can hardly call upon you every day," he said. "It would be remarked upon, and besides, we had already made arrangements to meet this afternoon."

"Your visits to my home have already been remarked upon. I hardly think one more would attract additional notice."

He felt himself smiling—a slow, lazy grin that warmed him from the inside out. "Why, Tillie Howard, are you jealous?"

"No," she returned, "but aren't you?"

"Should I be?"

"No," she admitted, "but while we're on the subject, why should *I* be jealous?"

"I assure you I haven't a clue. I spent the morning at Tattersall's, gazing upon horses I can't afford."

"That sounds rather frustrating," she commented, "and don't you want to know what the rumor was I heard?"

"Almost as much," he drawled, "as I suspect you wish to tell it to me."

She pulled a face at that, then said, "I'm not one to gossip ... much, but I heard that you led a somewhat wild existence when you returned to England last year."

"And who told you this?"

"Oh, nobody in particular," she said, "but it does beg the question—"

"It begs a great many questions," he muttered.

"How was it," she continued, ignoring his grunts, "that I never heard of this debauchery?"

"Probably," he said rather starchily, "because it's not fit for your ears."

"It grows more interesting by the second."

"No, it grew *less* interesting by the second," he stated, in a tone meant to quell further discussion.

"And that is why I've reformed my ways."

"You make it sound vastly exciting," she said with a smile.

"It wasn't."

"What happened?" Tillie asked, proving once and for all that any attempts he made to cow her into submission would be fruitless.

He stopped walking, unable to think clearly and move at the same time. One would think he'd have mastered the art in battle, but no, it didn't seem to be in evidence. Not here in Hyde Park, anyway.

And not with Tillie.

It was funny—he'd been able to forget Harry for much of the past week. There had been the conversations with Lady Canby, to be sure, and the undeniable pang he felt whenever he saw a soldier in uniform, whenever he recognized the hollow shadow in their eyes.

The same shadow he'd seen so many times in the mirror.

But when he was with Tillie—it was strange, because she was Harry's sister, and so like him in so many ways—but when he was with her, Harry was gone. Not forgotten, precisely, but just not *there*, not hanging over him like a guilty specter, reminding him that he was alive and Harry was not, and such it would be for the rest of his life.

But before he'd met Tillie\_\_\_\_

"When I returned to England," he said to her, his voice soft and slow, "it wasn't long after Harry's death. It wasn't long after the death of a lot of men," he added caustically, "but Harry's was the one I felt most deeply."

She nodded, and he tried not to notice that her eyes were glistening.

"I'm not really sure what happened," he continued. "I don't think I planned it, but it seemed so chance that I was alive and he was not, and then one night I went out with some friends, and suddenly I felt as if I had to live for both of us."

He'd been lost for a month. Maybe a little more. He didn't remember it well; he'd been drunk more often than not. He'd gambled money he didn't have, and it was only through sheer luck that he hadn't sent himself to the poorhouse. And there had been women. Not as many as there could have been, but more than there should have been, and now, as he looked at Tillie, at the woman he was quite certain he'd worship until his dying day, he felt rude and unclean, and rather like he'd made a mockery of something that should have been precious and divine.

"Why did you stop?" Tillie asked.

"I don't know," he said with a shrug. And he didn't know. He'd been at a gambling hell one night and, in a moment of rare sobriety, he'd realized that all this "living" wasn't making him happy. He wasn't living for Harry. He wasn't even living for himself. He was simply avoiding his future, pushing back any reason to make a decision and move forward. He'd walked out that night and never looked back. And he realized that he must have been a bit more circumspect in his dissolution than he'd realized, because until now, no one had brought it up. Not even Lady Whistledown.

"I felt the same way," she said softly, and her eyes held a strange, faraway softness, as if she were somewhere else, some *time* else. "What do you mean?"

She shrugged. "Well, I didn't go about drinking and gambling, of course, but after we were notified of..." She stopped, cleared her throat, and looked away before she continued. "Someone came out to our home, did you know that?"

Peter nodded, even though he hadn't been privy to that information. But Harry was a son of one of England's most noble houses. It stood to reason that the army would inform his family of his demise with a personal messenger.

"It was almost as if I were pretending he was with me," Tillie said. "I suppose I was, actually. Everything I saw, everything I did, I would think to myself—*What would Harry think? Or—Oh, yes, Harry would like this pudding. He'd have eaten double portions and left none for me.*"

"And did you eat more or less?"

She blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"Of the pudding," Peter explained. "When you realized Harry would have taken your share, did you eat your portion or leave it?"

"Oh." She stopped, thought about that. "Left it, I think. After a few bites. It didn't seem right to enjoy it so much."

Quite suddenly, he took her hand. "Let's walk some more," he said, his voice strangely insistent.

Tillie smiled at his urgency and sped her pace to match his. He walked with a long-legged stride, and she found herself nearly skipping along to keep up. "Where are we going?"

"Anywhere."

"Anywhere?" she asked bemusedly. "In Hyde Park?"

"Anywhere but here," he clarified, "with eight hundred people about."

"Eight hundred?" She couldn't help but smile. "I see but four."

"Hundred?"

"No, just four."

He stopped, gazing down at her with a vaguely paternal expression.

"Oh, very well," she conceded, "maybe eight, if you're willing to count Lady Bridgerton's dog."

"Are you up to a footrace?"

"With you?" she asked, her eyes widening with surprise. He was acting most odd. But it wasn't worrisome, just amusing, really.

"I'll give you a head start."

"To make up for my shorter limbs?"

"No, for your feeble constitution," he said provokingly.

And it worked. "Now *that is* a lie."

"Do you think?"

"I *know*."

He leaned against a tree, crossing his arms in a most annoyingly condescending manner. "You shall have to prove it to me."

"In front of all eight hundred onlookers?" He quirked a brow. "I see but four. Five with the dog." "For a man who doesn't like to attract attention, you're rather pushing the edge just now."

"Nonsense. Everyone is more than wrapped up in their own affairs. And besides, they're all enjoying the sun too much to take notice."

Tillie looked around. He had a point. The other people in the park—and there were considerably more than eight, although not nearly the hundreds he'd bemoaned—were laughing and joking and, all in all, acting in a most indecorous manner. It was the sun, she realized. It had to be. It had been overcast for what had felt like years, but today was one of those perfect blue-sky days, with sunshine so intense that every leaf on every tree seemed drawn more crisply, every flower painted from a more vivid palette. If there were rules to be followed—and Tillie was quite sure there were; they'd certainly been drummed into her since birth—then the *ton* seemed to have forgotten them this afternoon, at least the ones that governed staid behavior on a sunny day.

"All right," she said gamely. "I accept your challenge. Where shall we race to?"

Peter pointed to a cluster of tall trees in the distance. "That tree right there."

"The near one or the far one?"

"The middle one," he said, clearly just to be contrary.

"And how much of a head start do I receive?"

"Five seconds."

"Timed or counted in your head?"

"Good glory, woman, you're a bit of a stickler."

"I've grown up with two brothers," she said with a level stare. "I've had to be."



"Counted in my head," he said. "I haven't a watch with me in any case."

She opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, he interjected, "*Slowly*. Counted *slowly* in my head. I have a brother, too, you know."

"I know, and did he ever let you win?"

"Not even once."

Her eyes narrowed. "Are you going to let me win?"

He smiled, slowly, like a cat. "Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"It depends."

"On what?"

"On the boon I'm to receive if I lose."

"Isn't one meant to receive a boon for winning?"

"Not when one throws the race."

She gasped with outrage, then retorted, "You won't have to throw a thing, Peter Thompson. I'll see you at the finish line!" And then, before he could get his footing, she was off, tearing across the grass with an abandon that would surely come to haunt her the following day, when all of her mother's friends came calling for their daily dose of tea and gossip.

But right then, with the sun shining on her face and the man of her dreams nipping at her heels, Tillie Howard could not bring herself to care.

She was fast; she'd always been fast, and she laughed as she ran, one hand pumping along, the other holding her skirt a few inches off the grass. She could hear Peter behind her, laughing as his footsteps rumbled ever closer. She was going to win; she was quite certain of that. She'd either win it fair and square, or he'd throw the race and hold it over her head for eternity, but she didn't much care.

A win was a win, and right now Tillie felt invincible.

"Catch me if you can!" she taunted, looking over her shoulder to gauge Peter's progress. "You'll never— Oomph!"

The breath flew from her body with stunning speed, and before Tillie could make another sound, she was sprawled on the grass, tangled up with what was—thank heavens!— another female.

"Charlotte!" she gasped, recognizing her friend Charlotte Birling. "I'm so sorry!"

"What were you doing?" Charlotte demanded, righting her bonnet, which had gone drunkenly askew.

"A footrace, actually," Tillie mumbled. "Don't tell my mother."

"I won't have to," Charlotte replied. "If you think she's not going to hear of *this*—"

"I know, I know," Tillie said with a sigh. "I'm hoping she'll chalk it up to sun-induced insanity."

"Or perhaps sun-blindness?" came a masculine voice. Tillie looked up to see a tall, sandy-haired man she did not know. She looked to Charlotte, who quickly made introductions. "Lady Mathilda," Charlotte said, rising to her feet with the stranger's help, "this is Earl Matson."

Tillie murmured her greetings just as Peter skidded to a halt beside her. "Tillie, are you all right?" he demanded.

"I'm fine. My dress might be ruined, but the rest of me is no worse for wear." She accepted his helpful hand and stood up. "Are you acquainted with Miss Birling?"

Peter shook his head no, and Tillie made the introductions. But when she turned to introduce him to the earl, he nodded and said, "Matson."

"You already know each other?" Tillie queried. "From the army," Matson supplied. "Oh!" Tillie's eyes widened. "Did you know my brother? Harry Howard?"

"He was a fine fellow," Matson said. "We all liked him a great deal."

"Yes," Tillie said, "everyone liked Harry. He was quite special that way."

Matson nodded his agreement. "I'm very sorry for your loss."

"As are we all. I thank you for your regards."

"Were you in the same regiment?" Charlotte asked, looking from the earl to Peter.

"Yes, we were," Matson said, "though Thompson here was lucky enough to remain through the action."

"You weren't at Waterloo?" Tillie asked.

"No. I was called home for family reasons,"

"I'm so sorry," Tillie murmured.

"Speaking of Waterloo," Charlotte said, "do you intend to go to next week's reenactment? Lord Matson was just complaining that he missed the fun."

"I'd hardly call it fun," Peter muttered.

"Right," Tillie said brightly, eager to avoid an unpleasant encounter. She knew that Peter despised the glorification of war, and she rather thought he'd not be able to remain polite to someone who was actually sorry he'd missed such a scene of death and destruction. "Prinny's reenactment! I'd quite forgotten about it. It's to be at Vauxhall, is it not?"

"A week from today," Charlotte confirmed. "On the anniversary of Waterloo. I've heard that Prinny is beside himself with excitement. There are to be fireworks."

"Because we want this to be an *accurate* representation of war," Peter bit off.

"Or Prinny's idea of accurate, anyway," Matson said, his tone noticeably cool.

"Perhaps it is meant to mimic gunfire," Tillie said quickly. "Will you go, Mr. Thompson? I should appreciate your escort."

He paused for a moment, and she absolutely *knew* he didn't want to. But even so, she could not quell

her selfishness and she said, "Please. I want to see what Harry saw."

"Harry didn't—" He stopped, coughed. "You won't see what Harry saw."

"I know, but still, it's as close as I'm to come. Please say you'll accompany me."

His lips tightened, but he said, "Very well."

She beamed. "Thank you. It's very kind of you, especially since—" She cut herself off. She didn't need to inform Charlotte and the earl that Peter didn't wish to attend. They might have deduced as much on their own, but Tillie didn't need to spell it out.

"Well, we must be going," Charlotte said, "er, before anyone—"

"We need to be on our way," the earl said smoothly.

"Terribly sorry about the footrace," Tillie said, reaching out and squeezing Charlotte's hand.

"Think nothing of it," Charlotte replied, returning the gesture. "Pretend I'm the finish line, and then you've won."

"An excellent idea. I should have thought of it myself."

"I knew you'd find a way to win," Peter murmured once Charlotte and the earl had wandered off. "Was it ever in doubt?" Tillie teased. He shook his head slowly, his eyes never leaving her face. He was watching her with an odd intensity, and she suddenly realized that her heart was beating a little too fast, and her skin was tingling, and—

"What is it?" she asked, because if she didn't speak, she was quite certain she would forget to breathe. Something had changed in the last minute; something had changed within Peter, and she had a feeling that whatever it was, it would change her life as well. "I need to ask you a question," he said. Her heart soared. *Oh, yes, yes, yes!* This could only be one thing. The entire week had been leading up to it, and Tillie knew that her feelings for this man were not one-sided. She nodded at him, knowing that her heart was in her eyes.

"I—" He stopped and cleared his throat. "You must know that I care for you a great deal." She nodded. "I had hoped," she murmured. "And I believe that you return my feelings?" He said it as a question, which she found absurdly touching. So she nodded again, and then threw caution to the wind and added, "Very much."

"But you also must know that a match between the two of us is not anything that your family, or indeed, anyone, would have expected."

"No," she said cautiously, not certain where he was leading with this. "But I fail to see—"

"Please," he said, cutting her off, "allow me to finish."

She held silent, but it didn't feel right, and her mood, which had been spinning toward the stars, took a brutal tumble back to earth.

"I want you to wait for me," he said.

She blinked, unsure of how to interpret that. "What do you mean?"

"I want to marry you, Tillie," he said, his voice unbearably solemn. "But I can't. Not now."

"When?" she whispered, hoping for two weeks, or two months, or even two years. Anything, as long as he put a date on it.

But all he said was, "I don't know."

And all she could do was stare at him. And wonder why. And wonder when. And wonder... and wonder... And...

"Tillie?"

She shook her head.

"Tillie, I—"

"No, don't."

"Don't... what?"

"I don't know." Her voice was forlorn, and hurt, and it cut through Peter like a knife.

He could tell she didn't understand what he was asking. And the truth was, he wasn't completely certain, either. He'd never intended this to be anything but a stroll in the park; it was simply to be another in this series of engagements that made up his futile courtship of Tillie Howard. Marriage had been the last thing on his mind.

But then something had happened; he didn't know what. He'd been looking at her, and she'd smiled, or maybe she hadn't smiled, or maybe she'd just moved her lips in some bewitching manner, and then it was as if he'd been shot by Cupid, and somehow he was asking her, the words bursting forth from some daring, impractical corner of his soul. And he couldn't stop himself, even though he knew it was wrong.

But maybe it didn't have to be impossible. Maybe not quite. There was one way he could make it all happen. If he could just make her understand.. ..

"I need some time to establish myself," he tried to explain. "I have very little right now, almost nothing, really, but once I sell my commission, I'll have a small sum to invest."

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"I need you to wait a few years. Give me some time to make my fortunes more secure before we marry."

"Why would I do that?" she asked.

His heart slammed in his chest. "Because you care for me."

She didn't speak; he didn't breathe.

"Don't you?" he whispered.

"Of course I do. I just told you as much." Her head shook slightly, as if she were trying to jog her thoughts, force them to coalesce into something she could comprehend. "Why would I wait? Why can't we just marry *now*?"

For a moment Peter could do nothing but stare. She didn't know. How could she not know? All this time he'd been in a state of agony, and she'd never even given it *athought*. "I can't provide for you," he said. "You must know that."

"Don't be silly," she said with a relieved smile. "There's my dowry, and—"

"I'm not going to live off your dowry," he bit off.

"Why not?"

"Because I have some pride," he said stiffly.

"But you came to London to marry for money," she protested. "You told me as much."

His jaw clamped into a resolute line. "I won't marry *you* for money."

"But you wouldn't be marrying me for money," she said softly. "Would you?"

"Of course not. Tillie, you know how much I care for you—"

Her voice grew sharper. "Then don't ask me to wait."

"You deserve more than what I can offer."

"Let me be the judge of that," she hissed, and he realized she was angry. Not annoyed, not irritated, but well and truly furious.

But she was also naive. Naive as only someone who had never faced hardship could be. She knew nothing but the complete admiration of the *ton*. She was feted and adored, admired and loved, and she could not even conceive of a world in which people whispered behind her back or looked down their noses at her.

And it certainly had never occurred to her that her parents might deny her anything she wanted.

But they would deny her this, and more specifically, they would deny her *him*. Peter was quite certain of that. There was no way they would allow her to marry him, not with his fortunes the way they currently stood.

"Well," she finally said, the silence between them having stretched far too long, "if you won't accept my dowry, then so be it. I don't need much."

"Oh, you don't?" he asked. He hadn't meant to laugh at her, but the words came out vaguely mocking.

"No," she shot back, "I don't. I'd rather be poor and happy than rich and miserable."

"Tillie, you've never been anything but rich and happy, so I doubt you understand how being poor could—"

"*Don't* patronize me," she warned. "You can deny me and you can reject me, but don't you dare patronize me."

"I will not ask you to live on my income," he said, each syllable clipped. "I rather doubt my promise to Harry included forcing you into poverty."

She gasped. "Is that what this is about. *Harry*?"

"What the devil are you—"

"Is that what this has all been about? Some silly deathbed promise to my brother?"

"Tillie, don't—"

"No, now you allow me to finish." Her eyes were flashing, and her shoulders were shaking, and she would have looked magnificent if his heart weren't breaking.

"Don't you ever tell me you care for me," Tillie said. "If you did, if you even began to understand the emotion, then you would care more for my feelings than for Harry's. He's dead, Peter. Dead."

"I know that better than anyone," he said in a low voice.

"I don't think you even know who I am," she said, her entire body trembling with emotion. "I'm just Harry's sister. Harry's silly little sister, who you vowed to look after."

"Tillie—"

"No," she said forcefully. "Don't say my name. Don't even speak to me until you know who I am."

He opened his mouth, but his lips fell silent. For a moment, they did nothing but stare at each other in a strange, noiseless horror. They didn't move, perhaps hoping that this all was a mistake, that if they just remained there one moment longer, it would all just melt away, and they'd be left as they'd been before.

But it didn't, of course, and while Peter just stood there, speechless and impotent, Tillie turned on her heel and left, her gait a painful combination of walk and run.

A few minutes later, Tillie's groom appeared with Peter's horse, wordlessly handing him the reins.

And as Peter took them, he couldn't help but feel a certain finality in the action, as if he were being told, *Take these and go. Go.*

It was, he realized with surprise, quite the worst moment of his life.



## Chapter 6

*Poor Mr. Thompson! Poor, poor Mr. Thompson.  
It all takes on new meaning, doesn't it?*

*LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS, 17 JUNE  
1816*

He shouldn't have come.

Peter was quite positive that he did not wish to watch a reenactment of the Battle of Waterloo; the first had been hellish enough, thank you very much. And while he didn't think that Prinny's version—currently raging to his left—was particularly frightening or accurate, it made him rather sick to realize that the scene of so much death and destruction was being turned into entertainment for the good people of London.

Entertainment? Peter shook his head with disgust as he watched Londoners of all walks of life laughing and making merry as they strolled through Vauxhall Gardens. Most weren't even paying attention to the mock battle. Didn't they understand that men had died at Waterloo? Good men. Young men.

Fifteen thousand men. And that didn't even count the enemy.

But despite all of his misgivings, here he was. Peter had paid his two shillings and made his way into the gardens— not to watch this mockery of a battle or remark upon the spectacular gaslighting or even to marvel over the fireworks, which, he was told, were to be the finest ever staged in Britain.

No, he'd come to see Tillie. He was originally to have escorted her, but he rather doubted she'd canceled her plans just because they were no longer speaking to one another. She'd told him that she needed to see the reenactment, if only to finally make her farewells to her brother. Tillie would be here. Peter was sure of it. What he was

less sure of, however, was whether he'd be able to locate her. Thousands of people had already arrived at the Gardens, and hundreds more were still pouring in. The paths were jammed

with revelers, and it occurred to Peter that if there was one thing about this night that was an accurate representation of battle, it was the odor. It was missing the tang of blood and death, but it certainly had that rather distinctive stench of too many people packed too closely together.

Most of whom, Peter thought as he veered down a lane to avoid a pack of ruffians bounding toward him, hadn't bathed in months.

And who said one had to leave the delights of the army behind upon retirement?

He didn't know what he'd say to Tillie, assuming he was able to find her. He didn't know if he'd say anything. He just wanted to see her, as pathetic as that sounded. She'd rebuffed all of his overtures since their falling out in Hyde Park the week before. He'd called upon her twice, but both times he'd been informed that she was not "at home." His notes had been returned, although not unopened. And finally, she'd sent a letter of her own, simply saying that unless he was prepared to ask her a very specific question, he needn't contact her again.

Trust Tillie not to mince words.

Peter had heard a rumor that most of the ton were planning to congregate at the north side of the meadow, where Prinny had set up a viewing area for the battle. He had to skirt the perimeter of the field, and he kept his distance from the soldiers, not trusting that they were all possessed of enough diligence to make sure their guns lacked real bullets. Peter pushed through the crowds, cursing under his breath as he made his way to the north meadow. He was a man who liked to walk quickly, with a long-legged stride, and the crush at Vauxhall was his version of hell on earth. Someone stepped on his toe, another jabbed him in the shoulder, and as for the third—Peter smacked away a hand he was quite certain was attempting to pick his pocket.

Finally, after nearly half an hour of battling his way through the swarms, Peter broke out into a clearing; Prinny's men had obviously evacuated all but the most noble of guests, giving the prince an unobstructed view of the battle. Which, Peter noted thankfully, appeared to be reaching its finale.

He scanned the crowds, looking for a familiar glimpse of red hah\*. Nothing. Could she possibly have decided not to attend?

A cannon boomed near his ear. He flinched.

Where the hell was Tillie?

One final explosion, and then . . . Good God, was that Handel?

Peter looked to his left with disgust. Sure enough, a hundred-person orchestra had picked up their instruments and begun to play.

Where was Tillie?

The noise began to grate. The audience was roaring, the soldiers were laughing, and the music—why the hell was there music?

And then, in the midst of it all, he saw her, and he could have sworn that it all went silent.

He saw her, and there was nothing else.

Tillie wished she hadn't come. She hadn't expected to enjoy the reenactment, but she'd thought she might ... oh, she didn't know . . . perhaps *learn* something. Feel some sense of bond with Harry.

It wasn't every sister who got the chance to see a reenactment of the scene of her brother's death.

But instead she just wished she'd brought cotton for her ears. The battle was loud, and what's more, she'd found herself standing next to Robert Dunlop, who had obviously found it his duty to offer a running commentary of the scene.

And all she could think was, *It should have been Peter*. It should have been Peter standing next to her, Peter explaining what the battle maneuvers meant, Peter warning her to cover her ears when it grew too loud.

If she'd been with Peter, she might have discreetly held his hand, then squeezed it when the battle grew too intense. With Peter she would have felt comfortable asking him to tell her at what moment Harry had fallen.

But instead she had Robbie. Robbie, who thought this all a grand adventure, who'd actually leaned down and yelled, "Great, good fun? Eh?" Robbie, who, now that the battle was over, was chattering on about waistcoats and horses, and probably something else as well.

It was too hard to listen. The music was loud, and frankly, Robbie was always a bit hard to follow.

And then, just as the music reached a quiet moment, he leaned down and said, "Harry would have liked this."

Would he? Tillie didn't know, and somehow that bothered her. Harry would have been a different person if he'd come home from the war, and it pained her that she would never know the man he'd become in his last days.

But Robbie meant well, and he had a good heart, so Tillie just smiled and nodded.

"Shame about his death," Robbie said. "Yes," Tillie replied, because really, what else was there to say?

"What a senseless way to go."

At that, she turned and looked at him. It seemed an odd statement for Robbie, who wasn't one for fine points or subtleties. "All war is senseless," Tillie said slowly. "Don't you think?"

"Well, yes, I suppose," Robbie said, "although someone had to go out there and get rid of Boney. I don't think an if-you-please would have done the trick."

It was, Tillie realized, quite the most complex sentence she'd ever heard from Robbie, and she was wondering if there might be a little more to him, when she suddenly . . . *knew*.

It wasn't that she'd heard something, and it wasn't that she'd seen something. Rather, she just knew that he was there, and sure enough, when she tilted her face to the right, she saw him.

Peter. Right next to her. It seemed stunning that she hadn't sensed his presence earlier.

"Mr. Thompson," she said coolly. Or at least she tried for frost. She rather doubted she succeeded; she was just so *relieved* to see him.

She was still furious with him, of course, and she wasn't at all certain that she wanted to speak to him, but the night felt so strange, and the battle had been discomfoting, and Peter's solemn face was like a lifeline to sanity.

"We were just talking about Harry," Robbie said jovially.

Peter nodded.

"It's too bad he missed the battle," Robbie continued. "I mean, all that time in the army, and then you miss the battle?" He shook his head. "Bit of a shame, don't you think?"

Tillie stared at him in confusion. "What do you mean, he missed the battle?" She turned to Peter just in time to see him shaking his head frantically at Robbie, who was responding with a loud, "Eh? Eh?"

"What do you mean," Tillie repeated, loudly this time, "he missed the battle?"

"Tillie," Peter said, "you must understand—"

"They told me he died at Waterloo." She looked from man to man, searching their faces. "They came to my *house*. They told me he died at Waterloo."

Her voice was growing shrill, panicked. And Peter didn't know what to do. He could have killed Robbie; did the man have no sense? "Tillie," he said, saying her name again, stalling for time.

"How did he die?" she persisted. "I want you to tell me right now."

He looked at her; she was starting to shake.

"Tell me how he died."

"Tillie, I—"

"Tell—"

BOOM!

They all three jumped as an explosion of fireworks took off not twenty yards from their spot.

"Ripping good show!" Robbie yelled, his face to the sky.

Peter glanced up at the fireworks; it was impossible not to look. Pink, blue, green—starbursts in the heavens, crackling, splintering, raining showers of sparks down on the gardens.

"Peter," Tillie said, tugging at his sleeve, "tell me. Tell me *now*."

Peter opened his mouth to speak, knowing he should be giving her his full attention but somehow unable to keep his eyes off the fireworks. He glanced at her, then back up at the sky, then back at—

"Peter!" she nearly yelled.

"It was a cart," Robbie said suddenly, looking down at her during a lull in the pyrotechnics.

"Fell on him."

*"He was crushed by a cart?"*

"A wagon, actually," Robbie said, correcting himself. "He was—" BOOM!

"Whoa!" Robbie yelled. "Look at that one!" "Peter," Tillie begged.

"It was stupid," Peter said, finally forcing his eyes off the sky. "It was stupid and horrible and unforgivable. It should have been broken up for firewood weeks earlier."

"What happened?" she whispered. And he told her. Not everything, not every last detail; this wasn't the time or the place. But he sketched it out, enough so that she understood the truth. Harry was a hero, but he hadn't died a hero's death; at least not in the way England viewed its heroes.

It shouldn't have mattered, of course, but he could tell from her face that it did.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked, her voice low and shaking. "You lied to me. How could you lie?" "Tillie, I—"

"You *lied* to me. You told me he died in battle."

"I never—"

"You let me believe it," she cried out. "How could you?"

"Tillie," he said desperately. "I—" BOOM!

They both looked up; they couldn't help it. "I don't know why they lied to you," Peter said once the explosion had trickled down into spiraling green sparks. "I didn't know that you didn't know the truth until Lady Neeley's dinner party. And I didn't know what to say. I didn't—

"Don't," she said haltingly. "Don't try to explain."

She had just *asked* him to explain. "Tillie—"

"Tomorrow," she choked out. "Talk to me tomorrow. Right now I... right now . . ."

BOOM!

And then, as pink sparks rained from above, she took off, skirts in her hands, running blindly through the one clear spot in the crowd, right past Prinny, right past the orchestra.

Right out of his life.

"You idiot!" Peter hissed at Robbie.

"Eh?" Robbie was too busy staring up at the sky.

"Forget it," Peter snapped. He had to find Tillie. He knew she didn't want to see him, and ordinarily he would have respected her wishes, but damn it all, this was Vauxhall Gardens, and there were thousands of people milling about, some to be entertained and some with more malicious intentions.

It was no place for a lady alone, especially one as obviously distraught as Tillie.

He followed her through the clearing, mumbling an apology as he bumped into one of Prinny's guards. Tillie's dress was a pale, pale green, almost ethereal in the gaslight, and once she'd been slowed down by the crowds, she was easy to follow. He couldn't catch up with her, but at least he could see her.

She moved quickly through the throng, at least more quickly than he was able. She was small and could squeeze into spaces through which he could only bludgeon his way. The distance between them grew,

but Peter could still see her, thanks to the slight incline they were both trying to make their way down.

And then— "Ah, damn," he sighed. She was heading for the Chinese pagoda. Why the hell would she do that? He had no idea who else was inside, if anyone. Not to mention the fact that there were probably multiple exits. It'd be fiendishly difficult to keep track of her once she ran inside.

"Tillie," he grumbled, redoubling his efforts to close the space between them. He didn't even think she knew he was chasing her, and still she'd chosen the one surefire way to lose him.

BOOM!

Peter flinched. Another firework, for certain, but this one sounded odd, whistling just overhead, as if it had been pointed too low. He looked back up, trying to figure out what had happened, when—

*"Oh my God."* The words fell unbidden from his lips, low and shaking with terror. The entire east side of the Chinese pagoda had exploded into flames.

"Tillie!" he screamed, and if he'd thought he was trying hard to get through the crowds before, he knew better now. He moved like a madman, knocking people over, trampling feet and elbowing ribs, shoulders, even faces, as he fought to reach the pagoda.

Around him people were laughing, pointing to the fiery pagoda, obviously thinking that it was part of the spectacle.

At last he reached the pagoda, but when he attempted to run up the steps, he was blocked by two burly guards.

"Y'can't go in there," one of them said. "Too dangerous."

"There's a woman in there," Peter snarled, struggling to free himself from their grasp.

"No, there—"

"I saw her," he nearly screamed. "Let me go!"

The two men looked at one another, and then one of them muttered, "It's yer own head," and let him go.



He burst into the building, holding a handkerchief over his mouth against the smoke. Did Tillie have a handkerchief? Was she even alive?

He searched the bottom floor; it was filling with smoke, but so far the fire seemed to be contained to the upper levels. Tillie was nowhere to be found.

The *air* was filling with crackles and pops, and beside him a piece of timber fell to the floor. Peter looked up; the ceiling seemed to be disintegrating before his eyes. Another minute and he would be dead. If he was going to save Tillie he was going to have to pray that she was conscious and hanging from an upstairs window, because he didn't think the stairs would hold him for an ascent.

Choking on the acrid smoke, he stumbled out the back door, frantically scanning the upper windows, all the while looking for a route up the west side of the building, which was still entirely intact. "Tillie!" he screamed, one last time, even though he doubted she could hear him over the roar of the flames.

"Peter!"

His heart slammed in his chest as he whirled toward the sound of her voice, only to find her standing outside, struggling against two large men who were trying to keep her from running to him.

"Tillie?" he whispered.

Somehow she broke free, and she ran to him, and it was only then that he emerged from his trance, because he was still too close to the burning building, and in about ten seconds, she would be as well.

He scooped her up before she could throw her arms around him, not breaking his stride until they were both a safe distance from the pagoda.

"What were you doing?" she cried out, still clutching his shoulders. "Why were you in the pagoda?"

"Saving you! I saw you run in—"

"But I ran right back out—"

"But I didn't know that!"

They ran out of words, and for a moment no one spoke, and then Tillie whispered, "I almost died when I saw you inside. I saw you through the window."

His eyes were still stinging and watery from the smoke, but somehow, when he looked at her, everything was crystal clear. "I have never been so scared in my entire life as when I saw that rocket hit the pagoda," he said, and he realized it was true. Two years of war, of death, of destruction, and yet nothing had had the power to terrify him like the thought of losing her.

And he knew—right then and there he knew to the tips of his toes that he could not wait a year to marry her. He had no idea how he'd make her parents agree, but he would find a way. And if he didn't . . . Well, a Scottish wedding had been good enough for plenty of couples before them.

But one thing was certain. He couldn't face the thought of a life without her.

"Tillie, I..." There were so many things he wanted to say. He didn't know where to start, how to begin. He hoped she could see it in his eyes, because the words just weren't there. The words didn't exist to express what was in his heart.

"I love you," he whispered, and even that didn't seem enough. "I love you, and—"

"Tillie!" someone shrieked, and they both turned to see her mother racing toward them with more speed than anyone—including Lady Canby herself—would have ever dreamed she possessed.

"Tillie Tillie Tillie," the countess kept repeating, once she'd reached their sides and was smothering her daughter with hugs. "Someone told me you were in the pagoda. Someone said—"

"I'm all right, Mama," Tillie assured her. "I'm fine."

Lady Canby stopped, blinked, then turned to Peter, taking in his sooty and disheveled appearance. "Did you save her?" she asked.

"She saved herself," Peter admitted.

"But he tried," Tillie said. "He went in to find me."

"I..." The countess looked lost for words and then finally she just said, "Thank you."

"I didn't do anything," Peter said.

"I think you did," Lady Canby replied, yanking a handkerchief from her reticule and dabbing at her eyes. "I . . ." She looked back at Tillie. "I can't lose another one, Tillie. I can't lose you."

"I know, Mama," Tillie said, her voice soothing. "I'm all right. You can see that I am."

"I know, I know, I—" And then something seemed to snap in her, because she lurched back, jammed her hands on Tillie's shoulders, and started to shake. "What did you think you were doing?" she yelled. "Running off by yourself!"

"I didn't know it was going to catch fire," Tillie gasped.

"In Vauxhall Gardens! Do you know what happens to young women in places like these! I'm going to—"

"Lady Canby," Peter said, laying a calm hand on her shoulder. "Perhaps now is not the time ..."

Lady Canby stopped and nodded, glancing around them to see if anyone had witnessed her loss of composure.

Amazingly, they didn't seem to have attracted a crowd; most everyone was still too busy watching the pagoda's grand finale. And indeed, even the three of them were unable to take their eyes off the structure as it finally imploded, collapsing to the ground in a fiery inferno.

"Good God," Peter whispered, sucking in his breath.

"Peter," Tillie said, choking on his name. It was just one word, but he understood perfectly.

"You're going home," Lady Canby said sternly, yanking on Tillie's hand. "Our carriage is just through that gate."

"Mama, I need to speak with Mr.—"

"You can say whatever you need to say tomorrow." Lady Canby gave Peter a sharp look. "Isn't that true, Mr. Thompson?"

"Of course," he said. "But I will escort you to your carriage."

"That is not—"

"It's necessary," Peter stated.

Lady Canby blinked at his firm tone, and then she said, "I suppose it is." Her voice was soft, and just a little bit thoughtful, and Peter wondered if she'd only just realized how deeply he cared for her daughter.

He took them to their carriage, then watched as it rolled from sight, wondering how he would wait until the morrow. It was ludicrous, really. He'd asked Tillie to wait a year for him, maybe even two, and now he couldn't contain himself for fourteen hours.

He turned back to the Gardens, then sighed. He didn't want to go back in there, even if it meant taking the long way around to where the hackney cabs were queuing for customers.

"Mr. Thompson! Peter!"

He turned to see Tillie's father dashing through the gate. "Lord Canby," he said. "I—"

"Have you seen my wife?" the earl interrupted frantically. "Or Tillie?"

Peter quickly related the events of the evening and assured him of their safety, noting how the older man sagged with relief. "They left not two minutes ago," he told the earl.

Tillie's father smiled wryly. "Completely forgetting about me," he said. "I don't suppose you've a carriage around the corner."

Peter shook his head ruefully. "I came in a hack," he admitted. It revealed his shocking lack of funds, but if the earl wasn't already aware of the state of Peter's purse, he would be soon. No man would consider a marriage proposal for his daughter without investigating the suitor's financial situation.

The earl sighed, shaking his head at the situation. "Well," he said, planting his hands on his hips as he glanced up the street. "I suppose there's nothing for it but to walk."

"Walk, my lord?"

Lord Canby gave him an assessing sort of glance. "Are you up for it?"

"Of course," Peter said quickly. It would be a hike to Mayfair, where the Canbys lived, and then some

to his apartments in Portman Square, but it was nothing compared to what he'd done on the peninsula.

"Good. I'll put you in my carriage once we reach Canby House."

They walked quickly but quietly across the bridge, pausing only to admire the occasional firework still exploding in the sky.

"One would think they'd have shot them all off by now," Lord Canby said, leaning against the side.

"Or stopped altogether," Peter said sharply. "After what happened with the pagoda ..."

"Indeed."

Peter intended to resume walking—he was quite sure that he did—but somehow, instead, he blurted out, "I want to marry Tillie."

The earl turned and looked him squarely in the eye. "I beg your pardon?"

"I want to marry your daughter." There, he'd said it. Twice, even.

And at the very least, the earl didn't look ready to have him killed. "This isn't a surprise, I must say," the older man murmured.

"And I want you to have her dowry."

"That, however, is."

"I'm not a fortune hunter," Peter said.

One corner of the earl's lips curved—not exactly a smile, but something at least similar. "If you're so intent to prove it, why not eliminate the dowry altogether?"

"That wouldn't be fair to Tillie," Peter said, standing stiffly. "My pride isn't worth her comfort."

Lord Canby paused for what had to be the longest three seconds in eternity, then asked, "Do you love her?"

"With everything I am."

"Good." The earl nodded approvingly. "She's yours. Provided that you take the entire dowry. *And* that she says yes."

Peter couldn't move. He'd never dreamed it could be this easy. He'd braced for a fight, resigned himself to a possible elopement.

"Don't look so surprised," the earl said with a laugh. "Do you know how many times Harry wrote home of you? For all his rascalion ways, Harry was a shrewd judge of character, and if he said there was no one he'd rather see married to Tillie, I'm inclined to believe it."

"He wrote that?" Peter whispered. His eyes were stinging, but this time there was no smoke to take the blame. Only the memory of Harry, in one of his rare serious moments. Harry, as he'd asked for Peter's promise to look after Tillie. Peter had never interpreted that to mean marriage, but maybe that was what Harry had had in mind all along.

"Harry loved you, son," Lord Canby said.

"I loved him as well. Like a brother."

The earl smiled. "Well, then. This all seems rather fitting, don't you think?"

They turned and began to walk again.

"You will call upon Tillie in the morning?" Lord Canby asked as they stepped off the bridge onto the north bank of the Thames.

"First thing," Peter assured him. "The very first thing."

## Chapter 7

*Last night's reenactment of the Battle of Waterloo was, in Prinnys words, a "splendid success," leading one to wonder if our Regent simply did not notice that a Chinese pagoda (of which we have few in London) burned to the ground.*

*It is rumored that Lady Mathilda Howard and Mr. Peter Thompson were both trapped inside, although not (rather astonishingly, in This Author's opinion) at the same time.*

*Neither was injured, and in an intriguing turn of events, Lady Mathilda departed with her mother, and Mr. Thompson left with Lord Canby.*

*Could they be welcoming him into their fold? This Author does not dare to speculate but instead promises to report only the truth, just as soon as it becomes available.*

#### *LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS, 19 JUNE 1816*

There were many interpretations of "first thing," and Peter had decided to go with the one that meant three in the morning.

He'd accepted Lord Canby's offer of a carriage, and he'd ridden home much earlier, but once there, all he could do was pace restlessly, counting the minutes until he could present himself once again upon the Canby doorstep and formally ask Tillie to marry him.

He wasn't nervous; he knew she would accept. But he was excited—too excited to sleep, too excited to eat, too excited to do anything but wander around his small abode, every now and then thrusting his fist in the air with a triumphant, "Yes!"

It was silly, and it was juvenile, but he couldn't stop himself.

And it was for much the same reason he found himself standing below Tillie's window in the middle of the night, expertly lobbing pebbles at her window.

*Thwap. Thwap.*

He'd always had good aim.

*Thwap. Thunk.*

Whoops. That one was probably too large.

*Thw*— "Ow!"

Ooops. "Tillie?"

"Peter?"

"Did I hit you?"

"Was that a rock?" She was rubbing her shoulder.

"A pebble, really," he clarified.

"What are you doing?"

He grinned. "Courting you."

She looked around, as if someone might suddenly materialize to have him carted off to Bedlam. "Now?"

"So it seems."

"Are you mad?"

He looked around for a trellis, a tree—anything to climb. "Come down and let me in," he said.

"Now I know you're mad."

"Not mad enough to try to scale the wall," he said. "Come to the servants' entrance and let me in."

"Peter, I won't—"

"Tillie."

"Peter, you need to go home."

He cocked his head to the side. "I do believe I'll stay here until the entire house wakes up."

"You wouldn't."

"I would," he assured her.



Something about his tone must have impressed her, because she paused to consider that.

"Very well," she said in a rather school teacherish voice. "I'm coming down. But *don't* think you're coming in."

Peter just saluted her before she disappeared into her room, jamming his hands into his pockets and whistling as he ambled over to the servants' door.

Life was good. No, it was more than that.

Life was spectacular.

Tillie had almost perished with surprise when she'd seen Peter standing in her back garden. Well, perhaps that was overstating it a bit, but good heavens! What did he think he was doing?

And yet, even as she'd scolded him, even as she'd told him to go home, she hadn't been able to quell the giddy glee she'd felt upon seeing him there. Peter was proper and conventional; he didn't *do* things like this.

Except maybe for her. He did it for her. Could anything have been more perfect?

She pulled on a robe but left her feet bare. She wanted to move as quickly and silently as possible. Most of the servants slept in the upper reaches of the house, but the hall boy was down near the kitchens, and Tillie would have to pass directly by the housekeeper's suite as well.

After a couple minutes of scurrying, she reached the back door and carefully turned the key. Peter was standing just outside.

"Tillie," he said with a smile, and then, before she had the chance to even say his name, he swept her into his arms and captured her mouth with his.

"Peter," she gasped, when he finally let her, "what are you doing here?"

His lips moved to her neck. "Telling you I love you."

Her entire body tingled. He'd said it earlier that evening, but she still thrilled as if it were the first time.

And then he pulled back, his eyes serious as he said, "And hoping you will say the same."

"I love you," she whispered. "I do, I do. But I need to—"

"You need me to explain," he finished for her, "why I didn't tell you about Harry."

It wasn't what she'd been about to say; amazingly, she hadn't been thinking of Harry. She hadn't thought of him all night, not since she'd seen Peter inside the burning pagoda.

"I wish I had a better answer," he said, "but the truth is, I don't know why I never told you. The time was never right, I suppose."

"We can't talk here," she said, suddenly aware that they were still standing in the doorway. Anyone might hear them and wake up. "Come with me," she said, taking his hand and tugging him inside. She couldn't take him to her room—that would never do. But there was a small salon one flight up that was far from anyone's sleeping quarters. No one would ever hear them there.

Once they'd reached their new location, she turned to him and said, "It doesn't matter. I understand about Harry. I overreacted."

"No," he said, taking her hands in his, "you didn't."

"I did. It was the shock of it, I suppose."

He lifted her hands to his lips.

"But I have to ask," she whispered. "Would you have told me?"

He stilled, her hands still in his, hovering between their bodies. "I don't know," he said quietly.

"I suppose I would have had to, eventually."

Had to. It wasn't quite the wording she'd thought to hear.

"Fifty years is a long time to keep a secret," he added.

Fifty years? She looked up. He was smiling.

"Peter?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"Will you marry me?"

Her lips parted. She tried to nod, but she couldn't seem to make anything work.

"I already asked your father."

"You—"

Peter tugged her closer. "He said yes."

"People will call you a fortune hunter," she whispered. She had to say it; she knew it was important to him.

"Will you?"

She shook her head.

He shrugged. "Then nothing else matters." And then, as if the moment weren't perfect enough, he dropped to one knee, never letting go of her hands. "Tillie Howard," he said, his voice solemn and true, "will you marry me?"

She nodded. Through her tears, she nodded, and somehow she managed to say, "Yes. Oh, yes!"

His hands tightened on hers, and then he stood, and then she was in his arms. "Tillie," he murmured, his lips warm against her ears, "I will make you happy. I promise you, with everything I am, I will make you happy."

"You already do." She smiled, gazing up at his face, wondering how it had become so familiar, so precious. "Kiss me," she said impulsively.

He leaned down, dropping a light kiss on her lips. "I should go," he said.

"No, *kiss* me."

He drew a haggard breath. "You don't know what you ask."

"Kiss me," she said again. "Please."

And he did. He didn't think he should; she saw that in his eyes. But he couldn't help himself. Tillie shivered with a thrill of feminine power as his lips found hers, hungry and possessive, promising love, promising passion.

Promising everything.

There was no turning back now; she knew this. He was like a man possessed, his hands roaming over her with breathtaking intimacy. There was little between her skin and his; she was clad only in her silk nightdress and robe, and every touch brought thrilling pressure and heat.

"Turn me away now," Peter begged. "Turn me away now and make me do the right thing." But his grip tightened as he said it, and his hands found the curve of her bottom and pressed her shockingly against him.

Tillie just shook her head. She wanted this too much. She wanted him. He'd awakened something within her, something powerful and primitive, a need that was impossible to explain or deny.

"Kiss me, Peter," she whispered. "And more."

He did, with a passion that stole her very soul. But when he pulled away, he said, "I won't take you now. Not here. Not like this."

"I don't care," she nearly wailed.

"Not until you're my wife," he vowed.

"Then for God's sake, get a special license *tomorrow*," she snapped.

He pressed one finger to her lips, and when she looked at his face, she realized he was smiling. Quite devilishly. "I won't make love to you," he reiterated, his eyes turning wicked. "But I'll do everything else."

"Peter?" she whispered.

He swept her into his arms and deposited her on the sofa.

"Peter, what are you—?"

"Nothing you've ever heard of," he said with a chuckle.

"But—" She gasped. "Oh my heavens! What are you doing?"

His lips were on the inside of her knee, and they were moving up.

"Rather what you think, I imagine," he murmured, his mouth hot against her thigh.

"But—"

He looked up suddenly, and the loss of his lips on her skin was devastating. "Will anyone notice if I ruin this gown?"

"My ... no," she said, too dazed to put together anything more complete.

"Good," he said, and then he gave it a yank, ignoring Tillie's gasp when the left strap separated from the bodice.

"Do you have any idea how long I've been dreaming of this moment?" he murmured, moving his body up along hers until his mouth found her breast.

"I... ah ... ah ..." She hoped he didn't really expect an answer. His lips had found her nipple, and she had no idea how it was possible, but she swore she felt it between her legs.

Or maybe that was his hand, which was tickling her in the most wicked way possible. "Peter?" she gasped.

He lifted his head, just long enough to look at her face and drawl, "I've been distracted."

"You've..."

If she'd meant to say more, it was lost as he moved back down, his lips replacing his fingers in her most intimate place. Dozens of words flooded her mind, most involving his name and phrases like *You shouldn't*, *You can't*, but she could seem to do was moan and mewl and let out the "Oh!" of delight.

"Oh!"

"Oh!"

And then once, when his tongue did something particularly wicked, "Oh, Peter!"

He must have heard the squeak in her voice, because he did it again. And then again and again until something very strange happened, and she quite simply exploded beneath him. She gasped, she arched, she saw stars.

And as for Peter, he just lifted himself up and smiled down at her face, licked his lips, and said,  
"Oh, Tillie."

## Epilogue

*Triumph!*

*For This Author, that is.*

*Was it not hinted right in these pages that a match might be made between Lady Mathilda Howard and Mr. Thompson?*

*A notice appeared in yesterday's Times, announcing their betrothal. And at last night's*

*Frobisher Ball, Lord and Lady Canby declared themselves delighted with the match. Lady Mathilda was positively radiant, and as for Mr. Thompson— This Author is gleefully pleased to report that he was heard to mutter, "It shall be a short engagement."*

*Now then, if only This Author could solve the Neeley mystery. . .*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When Julia Quinn created Lady Whistledown in her groundbreaking novel, *The Duke and I*, she never dreamed that the character would take on a life of her own. Readers everywhere were fascinated by the mystery of her identity, and Julia's Korean publisher was even forced to put up an internet bulletin board so that her fans in that country could discuss her books.

The author of twelve novels and four novellas for Avon Books, she is a graduate of Harvard and Radcliffe Colleges and lives with her family in the Pacific Northwest. Her next novel, *When He Was Wicked*, will be published in July 2004.

Please visit her on the web at [www.juliaquinn.com](http://www.juliaquinn.com).