

CHAPTER 1



Tired, travel-weary, determined Augusta Hastings descended from a grueling ride on the London stage clutching all she could carry of her possessions in a single valise—and a slip of paper that she hoped would lead her to her future. She had just given her rumpled skirts a straightening twitch when a man’s voice screamed from behind her, “Out of the way, damn you!”

Two galloping horses pulling a high-perch phaeton bore down on her so fast she hardly had a moment to think. She leapt to the side just in time to avoid being run over, and—*splat!* Heart plummeting, she looked down. As she feared, she’d landed plop in the middle of an ankle-deep, foul-smelling puddle, and the moisture was fast wicking up her best fawn serge pelisse on its way to her knees. “Oh, blast your—” Augusta stopped herself before uttering the vilest curse she could think of. Which, being well born and gently bred, would not have been very vile. Not enough, anyway, to express her utter dismay at being mud-spattered and drenched when it was imperative that she look well-dressed and highly presentable.

Not the way to appear when entering on a career in fashion.

Before she could gather her wits enough to decide what to do next, a curricle wheeled around the corner nearly as fast as the phaeton had moments earlier. Augusta prepared to shrink even farther back against the brick wall of the coaching inn. This time, though, the much more skilled driver pulled his spanking pair of chestnuts to a halt in front of her. Instead of simply driving on, he touched the handle of his whip to the brim of his hat and said, "Did that rascal Lewiston nearly flatten you? He didn't mean it."

He was laughing at her. How dare he! She drew herself up, craned her neck and shielded her eyes from the bright sun behind the gentleman. A man of fashion, clearly, but the expression above the expertly tied neck cloth and many-caped drab driving coat was kind rather than haughty. A smile lifted the corners of his mouth, and he looked her over with a shake of his head. "Gudgeon!" he said.

"Sir! I—"

"Not you! The marquess!"

She pressed her lips together and lifted one eyebrow. After all, she couldn't deny the absurdity of her situation.

"But truly, have you suffered any lasting injury?"

"As you see, I am unharmed."

The gentleman's gray eyes softened, searching hers. This sudden shift caught her unawares, and she found herself struggling against the urge to cry. No one had looked at her that way since the last time she'd seen James over a year ago, resplendent in his dragoon's uniform.

"I see you're traveling, Ma'am," the gentleman said, suddenly all crisp politeness, nodding at the valise dangling from her hand. "Have you just arrived on the stage? May I direct you to your lodgings? Or better still, convey you

there? Plenty of room for you, and we could squeeze in a chaperone if need be.”

A bell of warning clanged in Augusta’s mind. She must look like a bedraggled waif, ripe for plucking and ruining, all alone without a chaperone in sight—and she was exhausted. The constant sounding of the yard of tin at numerous toll gates, the rocking of the stage coach on rutted roads, and being squeezed in among five other passengers had made it difficult to get so much as a wink of sleep. She said, with a sigh and a note of reluctance, “I thank you, no. I am traveling alone.”

“Ah. You are wary of trusting a stranger. Quite right. But truly, I would be very happy to help you on your way and lend you my paltry protection. My friend has done you a wicked turn.” The spark of amusement leapt back into his eyes. “He’s doing his best to become a top sawyer!”

She couldn’t help smiling at this and saying, “Those poor horses! But I beg you not to trouble yourself.” Then she remembered the paper she held crushed in her hand. She’d read it over at least a hundred times, hoping it would reveal a morsel of information that might help her find her way in London, but to no avail. “However, you could render me assistance by kindly informing me which way I must go to reach Madame Noelle’s establishment in Curzon Street.”

“Hah!” he said, his face brightening, “I know it well. I’ve shepherded my sister to that door more times than I can count. It’s too far to walk from here and you’ll find a hackney very uncomfortable. You might as well let me take you there. It’s the least I can do to atone for my friend’s folly.”

He reached down with one gloved hand, gazing at her with a look of entreaty. “Well, don’t leave me stopped in the middle of Piccadilly,” he said with a quick glance over his shoulder, where several carriages and barrows had stalled behind him, their drivers leaving Augusta in no doubt of

their feelings on the matter. "I'm a much better driver than the marquess, I promise."

Before she had a chance to decline the offer, the gentleman bent nearly in half so he could grasp her hand and held it too firmly for her to get out of his grip. He smoothly lifted her as she took a step onto the board, drawing her up and into the open carriage with a little too much force. As a result, Augusta landed heavily on his lap and nearly lost hold of her valise. Laughter erupted among the curious bystanders, and a little boy pointed at her and said, "Look Mama! She nearly took a toss!"

Mortified, Augusta slid herself to the seat next to the gentleman as far as she could without tumbling down into the road. What must he think of her? She straightened her back and lifted her chin, stowing the leather valise firmly between her feet. "I do beg your pardon, My Lord," she said, deciding to over rather than underestimate his rank.

"Please do not trouble yourself. As you see, I am unharmed."

A choked laugh escaped her as she recognized his teasing echo of her own words. "I am relieved to hear it!" she said.

"Now that we have established that we have both survived the hazards of London carriage travel, allow me to introduce myself," the gentleman said, bowing slightly in her direction. "George Lanyon, Earl of Bridlington, your servant. Whom do I have the pleasure of escorting? I assume you've come to order your gowns for the season?"

"Augusta Hastings, My Lord," she answered. "And I am not here as a customer of Madame Noelle but as an employee. I am a seamstress." And as a seamstress, she hoped, it was entirely expected that she would travel sans chaperone.

"Hastings—any relation to the Earl, or any of the Grantleys?"

A quick flush spread up from her neck. "Of course not! I mean, no," she stammered.

This time Lord Bridlington's appraising gaze was unmistakable. Thankfully, he was forced to look away in order to maneuver his horses through a crush of crossing traffic. That accomplished, he said, "I am sorry. From your voice and your carriage, and under the mud on your ensemble, I assumed you to be a gentlewoman."

I am a gentlewoman, more's the pity. A gentlewoman with no desire to acknowledge it. A gentlewoman with ambitions more suited to a bourgeoisie, and education appropriate to a bluestocking. A gentlewoman well aware that she should not be alone in a smart curricule with a man she does not know. "I would be grateful if you would set me down a short distance from Madame Noelle's. She has never met me, and I don't want to give her the wrong impression."

"Of course," he said.

They progressed in uncomfortable silence for a while. Augusta could hardly bring herself to look around at this hurly burly city she was hoping to make her home, afraid of accidentally meeting Lord Bridlington's disturbing eyes.

He pulled up the horses after they had traveled about a mile. "The address you seek is just there."

Augusta expected he would jump down and help her out of the carriage, but he remained seated. Perhaps the revelation of her assumed station in life had made him think he needn't treat her with further courtesy. So like a member of the *ton!* She supposed she must accustom herself to different manners in this world she was entering where, because she labored for a wage she would be beneath consideration. Yet Bridlington's expression told a different story. It was no less kind than it had been at the first. Definitely a contradiction.

Well, if he couldn't be courteous, at least she could. She stood and put out her hand for him to shake. "I can't thank

you enough, Lord Bridlington. You see, I've never been in London before."

"And look how we've welcomed you!" He shook his head and took her hand just as the horses gave a little start of impatience and the carriage rocked.

Augusta was thrown off balance and had to brace her other hand on Bridlington's shoulder to avoid once more falling into him. For a moment, they were close enough that she could see the faint lines that led from the corners of his eyes, which deepened as a smile spread across his face.

And then he frowned, and his gaze shifted from her eyes to her mouth. Before she could guess what had caused this sudden alteration, he lifted his hand and touched the corner of her lips with his index finger, wiping gently. "There," he said, and held up his glove for inspection.

A dab of mud stained it. Augusta's cheeks flamed. "Oh Sir!"

He laughed and helped her stand upright and regain her balance. "I hope you will find the metropolis more to your liking once you've found your footing."

Again, he was laughing at her. But she couldn't help laughing at herself, too. Lord Bridlington held onto her until she'd climbed down to the flagway. Augusta drew her hand out of his with a little reluctance. It had felt for a moment like an anchor, something solid in her recently tumultuous life. She curtsied without meeting his eyes, then hurried toward the elegantly painted sign up ahead that indicated she had at last arrived to face the future she had chosen for herself.

Augusta took a moment to settle her nerves. She refused to admit that she'd been the slightest bit afraid of traveling all that way alone, so far from the places she knew well. She wished she were in better fettle for announcing herself to

Madame Noelle, but it couldn't be helped. She had been presentable enough for a handsome young nobleman to come to her assistance—and he was handsome, in a quiet way, so different from James's dashing figure.

She had no choice but to brazen it out. So she marched up to the door, took hold of the handle, lifted the latch and pulled, setting a cluster of small bells tinkling.

"You should have seen the look on her face! It was pure terror!"

"But you know—"

The talking ceased. Before her on a low platform stood a striking woman of perhaps twenty years, and on the floor next to her a tall woman in black twilled silk with a tape measure around her neck. Both of them turned to stare at her. The two girls crouching at the feet of the fine lady looked up in unison, eyes widening. The entire tableau multiplied comically in the many long mirrors placed around the room, and Augusta barely suppressed a laugh. The same mirrors reflected a riot of colors and textures of gowns and draped fabrics, trailing ribbons and laces and plumes of feathers, looking for all the world like an enormous, luxurious nest.

"Madame Noelle, I presume?" Augusta said, recollecting herself and dipping a curtsy. "I am Augusta Hastings."

Instead of giving her the polite welcome she hoped for, the proprietress swept her eyes from Augusta's head to her hem, lips pursed as if she'd tasted something sour. Her irises darkened, she drew her brows together and flared her nostrils dramatically. "You have no business in here! Pauline, show this girl to the trade entrance. She can start today."

At that, one of the girls, a pert brunette with an up-tipped nose, bustled over to Augusta, taking a firm hold of her upper arm to turn her around and head her back out through the door. Before they fully passed through and it closed

behind them, Augusta caught the tail end of a conversation between the two women in the shop. "A country bumpkin! Doesn't know any better, my Lady, but she's supposed to be good with a needle. What can one do?"

"Still, she had a bit of an air," the lady said in a voice cut from the cloth of nobility, "Under the dirt, that is!" A musical laugh followed them out the door.

"You've landed in it!" Pauline said in a hoarse whisper as she led Augusta down an alley almost too narrow to pass through without brushing against the grimy bricks. They stopped at a low door, which Pauline opened with a bit of effort, and entered a small workroom lit from above by a skylight. Three seamstresses crouched over work in their laps—sprig muslin, figured silk, and gauzy nets pooling around their feet. The floor was scrupulously clean—unlike the one window, dirty to the point of opacity. A door on one side appeared to lead to the showroom Augusta had just left, and another one bore a crude sign that said *stairs*. None of the seamstresses looked up when Augusta came in.

Pauline cleared her throat. "This is Augusta. Don't know what she'll do here, but if she's handy with a needle she'll find plenty o' work to keep 'er busy." Her voice softened as she spoke, perhaps having some sympathy for Augusta's awkward entrance into that world.

"Help, hah! Divvy up the wages even more, I don't doubt," said a woman with a thick London accent, wisps of graying hair peeking out of her widow's cap.

The other two seamstresses were younger. Much younger. One hardly more than a girl. That one looked up with frank curiosity and paused with her needle in midair to stare at her from top to toe. Then she burst out laughing.

"Shhh!" said Pauline, "Madame will hear you, and then we'll all be for it. Augusta, this is Molly, Bernadette, and Miss Carp."

They nodded in turn as they were introduced. So, these were to be her compatriots. "I should like to take my things to my room—there are lodgings with the position?" Augusta said.

"Hoity-toity!" said the old lady, the one called Miss Carp, "Lodgings is a bit rich. A shared room in the attic, and a bit of a parlor off it. But no one can take you there til the day's done, so might's well get stuck in with some work—if it ain't beneath you." She jerked her head toward an empty work table without ceasing her stitching. "You'll take Prudence's place. She didn't last long!" A silent laugh shook her.

Augusta's initial reaction of affront at being addressed in such a crude fashion gave way to curiosity. "Why didn't she last long?" No one answered. They all cast furtive glances in the direction of the showroom door.

"You can just tuck your things under the table for now," Pauline murmured.

Augusta looked down. The mud had now dried to crispness. She sighed and removed her pelisse, hanging it on a hook Molly pointed out to her. "Where shall I start?" she asked.

So it began. This was the life she had chosen, and whatever menial tasks she must perform in order to work her way up to creating her own designs she would embrace gladly.

She was aware that her learned father had been disappointed that she appeared to have more genuine interest in the *Mirror of Fashion* than in the *Iliad*. The truth was that she valued both. Every day, she sketched evening gowns and day dresses and riding habits in the little pocket book she kept in her reticule. And every day, she read something from the well-stocked library at Crossley Grange, her former home. The pocket book was easy to bring with her in her hasty flight, but she had no room in her one valise for even a

single volume from her small collection of books, the ones she'd kept when she moved in with her aunt.

She'd been forced to make a decision within hours that she'd been agonizing over for months. All the education in the world would gain her no more than a position as a harassed governess. But her skill with a needle, her eye for fabrics and style, might open a door to something more creative and sustaining, something that could support her in London. So here she was.

Besides, she possessed a magical key to thousands of volumes of all sorts, a veritable treasure trove of books to read to take her away from whatever trials and frustrations she might face in pursuit of her new life. This was her father's subscription to Hookham's, the largest lending library in London. As soon as she settled in, she would go there and select something to read in the quiet hour or so before bed. Choosing one life need not mean abandoning the other altogether, need it?

All she wished to put firmly behind her was that "respectable" future in a detestable marriage, which her aunt seemed to believe the only choice open to a penniless, well-born female.

Augusta was determined to prove her wrong.

CHAPTER 2



Bridlington drove the chestnuts into the stable yard behind Lanyon House. As soon as he pulled them up, Philpot, the head groom, bustled out to hold their heads.

“Did his lordship enjoy his drive?” Philpot said.

“I hardly noticed! I spent the time rushing around after Lewiston and mending his disasters.” A very pretty disaster, he had to admit, recalling the delicate blush that suffused the lady’s face when he’d pulled her up into the curricule.

A stable boy came and took charge of the horses from Philpot, who approached the carriage and reached up to help the earl descend. George said, “Not necessary! I can manage.” He stood with the help of an ebony cane tucked next to the carriage seat and stepped down, his weight fully on his left foot, with as much as he could bear on the side of his right foot. Once planted on the ground, he stood tall—and at over six feet, he was tall by any standard. “I take it Lewiston is here?”

“Yes, My Lord. That’s his phaeton there and this time

only one bit of damage to a spoke." Philpot's eyes twinkled. "Pity he's not the whip you are, My Lord."

"He doesn't need to be," Bridlington said with a wry smile, and set off toward the back entrance of the house putting weight on the cane with each step of his right foot.

That was the truth of it, he thought as his valet, Craggins, opened the door before he reached it, then helped him out of his coat and relieved him of his hat and gloves. "The marquess is changing, and said he would meet you in the yellow saloon before dinner," said Craggins.

As Bridlington climbed the stairs to his dressing room, his adventure earlier that day was still fresh in his mind. The young lady, Miss Hastings. Funny coincidence about the name, but he supposed it wasn't an uncommon one. He'd easily pulled her into the curricule, thanks partly to hours of training at Gentleman Jackson's boxing saloon, partly to the lady's slender frame.

Only one thing disturbed him about that episode. He should have jumped down to hand her out of the carriage when they arrived at her destination. Although he might have done so, the climb in and out was awkward for him, and so he had decided not to in that instant. He could see in her steady, golden-brown eyes that she half expected him to behave as any gentleman would, and was likely insulted that he hadn't.

What was done was done. Better she should simply think him rude than pity him.

An hour later, Bridlington met Lewiston in the saloon as planned. His oldest friend had spent his childhood at the neighboring estate to Bridlington Priory and they'd been at Eton together. He was among the few boys in school who hadn't made George the butt of cruel jokes. The ease of their

friendship meant that the marquess hardly noticed Bridlington's decided limp and never offered to help him.

"What took you so long, old man?" Lewiston said, gazing out of one of the long windows to the street—still sunlit at that time of day.

Bridlington took a seat on a jonquil-silk-covered divan near the fireplace where a roaring blaze warmed a room so large that it was apt to be chilly at any time of year. "Unlike you, I take care not to terrorize pedestrians and chairmen by racing everywhere."

Lewiston flashed him a rueful grin. "I've decided I'll never really get the hang of it. Mostly because I'm not sure I want to. Better not to try than to come up so utterly unfit."

"You have other talents, Lewiston. It isn't necessary to aspire to the Four Horse Club."

Lewiston sighed. "If only the things I valued weighed at all with ladies in the *ton*." He sat himself in a chair opposite Bridlington, the twist of a smile lighting his face. "Still, you didn't simply lag behind me. I waited a full half hour for you before I went up to change. Did you stop at Brooks's on the way?"

"No. As I said, I had to do a little mending after your dash through town!"

The saloon door opened to admit Allsop, the butler, bearing a tray with a decanter and three glasses.

"Ah, you see, I'm truly not cut out to be a whip. I'm much better at wielding a bow than the ribbons," Lewiston said, having poured them each out a glass of Madeira and brought one over to Bridlington.

It was hard not to like Lewiston, however badly he drove his teams. A friendship like theirs was rare enough. "In actuality I took my time. The day was fine." He had no intention of recounting his episode of gallantry. His friend would doubtless

tease him about it. What could he say, after all? The lady had said she was going to work for the modiste, which puzzled him. She certainly didn't have the air of someone accustomed to laboring for a wage. But it was her eyes that had impressed him the most. A warm brown color that came alight in the sun. Something hidden in them, though. Sorrow? She hadn't been cowed by his notice, although her discomfiture when he mentioned the Earl of Hastings and the Grantley name struck him as odd.

When he'd pulled her up into the curricle with a little too much force for her delicate frame, the weight of her body on his lap had surprised a response deep in his gut. And when she moved off and sat on the seat as far away from him as possible and so upright, he had to suppress the highly inappropriate urge to draw her back toward him. What was it about her?

"... and what a turnout! That blackguard trying to poison the horses at Newmarket. Think we need to go and stand buff, so I propose a jaunt there together for the next subscription race. I may not be much of a sawyer, but I can stand and watch with the best of them!"

Bridlington hadn't been listening, but quickly caught the gist of Lewiston's one-sided conversation. "If you wish," he said, without much enthusiasm. He sighed. Why could he not stop thinking about a lady he was unlikely ever to see on again? Although he occasionally drove his sister to Madame Noelle's if he happened to be going in that direction for a purpose of his own, of course he never went inside. Besides, she likely only tolerated his light flirtation because she had no idea he was a cripple.

"What's got into you, Bridlington?" Lewiston asked. "You look positively pudding headed!"

"Nothing! Just thinking about those races you mentioned. We should engage rooms early. All the inns are

likely to be booked up for a race with such a handsome purse.”

The two friends conversed lightly on the merits of different carriage horses, the best racing stables, and who had the best-matched teams and drove them with the softest hands. Lewiston, as Bridlington knew, appreciated the finer points of driving, even if he could not master them for himself.

“I say, where’s your sister?” Lewiston said, nodding toward the third, unused glass on the tray.

“I haven’t the least notion,” Bridlington said. “Perhaps at one of her charitable enterprises. She does as she pleases, and no doubt will breeze in just in time to change before the Skinley’s rout party, having already taken her dinner elsewhere without informing any of us.”

At that moment, Allsop announced dinner and they both stood. Bridlington could easily read Lewiston’s disappointed look. He knew his friend harbored hopes of winning Mari’s affections. But although Mari had a decided fondness for the marquess, she had made it clear that she had no intention of becoming his marchioness. *He’s too dull*, she’d told her brother. *We have no interests in common*. Besides, they’d known each other so long and had settled into easy bantering more like siblings than lovers. Mariana’s fortune, as well as her inclination, entitled her to be selective about a husband.

And selective she certainly was.

Despite a plethora of eligible offers, Mariana had not settled on a match. Something was holding her back. Bridlington believed she wished to marry, not remain an eccentric spinster—like the middle-aged Lady Elkinson who raced around the park in a high-perch phaeton and hosted a faro bank in her own house. When he asked Mariana why she had refused everyone, what it was that she truly wanted,

she evaded the question. As children, they had told each other everything. Now that they were adults, she had become closed off to him, full of secrets.

But he, too, had secrets. Secrets he did not want to divulge to Mariana. At least, not until he was ready. Everyone would think him mad, and perhaps they'd be right. Not for him the hands-off world of politics. Not for him the superficial society of the *ton*. Noble or not, he had chosen to get his hands dirty grappling with the reality of a world that had been unkind to him when he was at his most vulnerable. He had a plan, ideas, and the means to carry them out.

What he didn't have was the certainty that he could make any difference at all, and so he would keep his counsel until such time as he was ready to bring others into his schemes.

CHAPTER 3



Lady Mariana was an accomplished liar. Oh, she told the truth about the little things. She only lied about what mattered.

To be fair to herself, Mariana thought, the fact was not so much that she lied as that she carefully selected the truths she would tell. Although her mother regularly lectured her about accepting one of the several eligible proposals she had received, convinced that a good marriage would ultimately lead to happiness, Mariana had learned to smile sweetly and let the torrent of words glance off her, responding with an inane comment about a new parasol, or the need for another visit to Madame Noelle's, or deprecating some new mode in the latest number of the *La Belle Assemblée*.

These thoughts playing through her mind, her expression was fixed in a distracted scowl when she alighted from the town carriage and climbed the steps to Lanyon House not long after midnight, having made her obligatory appearance at yet another rout party.

"The earl is in the small saloon," Allsop told her after relieving her of her evening cape and muff.

This surprised her. George did not normally feel he must wait up for her. So rather than go immediately to her room and let Jennings, her abigail, divest her of her finery, Mariana joined her brother as he sat nursing a brandy, his bad foot resting on a gout stool. "So, here you are," Mariana said, taking a seat in the chair opposite.

Both siblings stared into the flickering fire and maintained a desultory conversation consisting of pleasantries for a few minutes. When it dwindled, George cleared his throat and said, "Bainbridge came to talk to me this morning."

Mariana screwed up her face in distaste. Viscount Bainbridge had plagued her all last season. She'd done everything in her power to prevent him offering for her, short of being rude. "What on earth can that have to do with me?"

"Don't be obtuse. Of course he asked my permission—again—to make you an offer. He's a good match, Sister. A splendid fellow, not at all high minded. A member of the Four Horse Club, you might be interested to know."

"Really! You think his being a decent judge of horseflesh and a skilled whip can atone for his appalling sense of humor, his unbearable high laugh, and his jowls? Not to mention his odious politics. And what makes him think I have changed my mind in a year?"

"He is an intelligent man—"

"Not if he believes all women are fickle and one might as well ignore what they say and assume they will merely assert the opposite the next time they're asked! Really, George, you know you dislike the man as much as I do!"

"That is unfair. He is not someone I would choose to number among my close acquaintances, but that does not mean I dislike him. He could well be in line for a ministerial post, if he stays in with the Tories. Oh I know you'd rather he were some radical Whig—as would I—but you would make a dashed brilliant political wife and you know it. You

could have much more influence than you think in that capacity.”

I could do better as a politician, Mariana thought, but knew better than to say. If only the estate *had* been entailed, enabling a distant cousin to inherit so she would no longer be pressed to fulfill not just her own role in the family but that of her brother, she could attach herself to someone less high born, someone who might not expect her to merely act as hostess. Someone willing to consider her a true partner. Someone she could all too easily picture, having met him last season. “I still don’t see why I have to hear him out. Couldn’t you just refuse for me?”

George grimaced. “I’d offered to do that, but Mama wouldn’t hear of it. You know what she’s like. ‘At least she should give him a chance. It takes courage to make an offer.’”

He mimicked the dowager’s voice so exactly that Mariana erupted in a peal of laughter.

Once both of them had wiped the tears of mirth out of their eyes, George said, “For me, I don’t see that there’s any hurry for you to marry.”

“So why didn’t you stand up to Mama?” she said, exasperated, and stood and paced across the luxuriant carpet in front of her brother.

“I assure you it wouldn’t sway her. Besides, you can refuse him yourself. You know she’d never force you into a match you didn’t want.”

Yes, Mariana thought, *but she’d never approve the match I do want*. “That may be true. But why does it have to be I who marries into an exalted position and adds more shine to the Bridlington coronet? Can I not persuade you to let go of this ridiculous notion that you are ineligible for marriage? Your bad foot in no way disqualifies you for producing an heir!”

George couldn’t help laughing at this. “A hit. But how do you know? How does anyone know that a son of mine

wouldn't be similarly afflicted, or that I wouldn't end up being just as cruel and abusive as our father was?"

"You speak as though you had no will of your own, which I know is not the case. Won't you at least take the chance?" Although they'd had this conversation many times before, Mariana dearly hoped she could get George to see reason. He needn't condemn himself to a lonely life, with his only relief what could be got from casual, meaningless flirtations or seductions. She couldn't entirely blame George for feeling as he did, whatever the consequences for her own life. He had indeed suffered because of his foot, and not just physically.

She stood behind him so she could rest her hands on his strong shoulders. "Think about it," she said in soothing accents. "I know I won't be able to persuade you to act against your will, especially at this time of night. But I beg you to consider it."

"Wise girl," George said, "All the same, you will be at home to the viscount the next time he comes."

"You can't force me!"

"No. Nor would I try to. But I know you wouldn't be so rude as to go out when a visitor is expected. Do it for mother's sake, at least. And for his. Although he may not deserve to be successful, he deserves to be heard."



THE NEXT NIGHT, GEORGE WAS OBLIGED TO MAKE HIS ONCE-A-season appearance at Almack's to reassure his mother that he was at least trying to find a suitable companion for his future life. Lewiston accompanied him up the back stairs, saw that he stood comfortably out of the way but with a good view over the guests in the ballroom, and went off in search of dance partners. Poor Harry—once on the floor, his feet refused to obey the dictates of his head, and debutantes scat-

tered when he approached, fearing for their toes. It made no sense, though, because the marquess was a true connoisseur of music and had a remarkably acute ear. George suspected it had something to do with his lack of self-regard. In boxing terms, he did not display well. One had to come to know him before his real value could be discerned.

Once he was alone, George sighed. *The same old crowd.* At least the same types, if a few new faces intermingled. Yet without even speaking to the ladies, he knew exactly what they would say, the flirtatious manipulation of their fans, the shade of their becoming flushes. That the ever-hopeful Lewiston still found entertainment among such unpromising company was a matter of wonder to him.

George shifted to place his weight more comfortably on his good leg and repositioned his cane—the ebony one with a chased gold handle that looked as if it could be an elegant accessory rather than a necessity. Not that it fooled anyone.

Before he had time for any further reflection, Mariana's voice sailed over the ever-surging crowd of bachelors, come-outs, and duennas. "Brother dear!" she said, waving to him indelicately and threading her way through the chaperones and their charges. When she arrived at his side, she gave him an appreciative glance up and down. "You look quite the thing! Is that a new knot? The waterfall, or some such?" She did not wait for his response but said, "I must introduce you to some of my new friends."

"You mean, there are ladies here I don't already know?" He lowered his voice so as not to insult anyone nearby.

Mariana squeezed his arm, not altogether gently. "You are too cynical, Georgie. I will see you settled if it's the last thing I do!"

He cast a skeptical look in her direction. Her zeal, he knew, was an attempt to save herself the same trouble. "It's a hopeless case, as you well know! Unless they're teaching

more than embroidery and bad singing in the nursery these days."

"Pity me if you must pity anyone. I swear most of the gentlemen of the *ton* have more hair than wit. I half expect their brains to rattle in their heads like dried nuts if shaken!"

George quickly turned his laugh into a cough. "A leveler! But I wish you'd stop trying to get me riveted."

"Nonsense. One of us must take up the challenge. Look, here's Lady Mack with her niece, Lucy." She lifted her chin in the direction of a matron who had just entered the ballroom in the company of a pretty young girl in pale blue figured muslin, her head crowned with a cascade of golden curls.

"She's just out of the schoolroom!" Bridlington whispered in his sister's ear.

"I prefer to call it unspoiled." Mariana gave his arm a vicious pinch. "Besides, perhaps you would be happy with someone who believed all your utterances unquestioningly and busied herself only with running a home and pushing out brats at regular intervals."

Bridlington raised his eyebrows. "I thought that's what mother hoped that you would do?"

In the time it took for them to exchange these biting remarks, the formidable duenna had made her stately way to them, carving a wide path through the company, her determined expression scattering those in her way. When she and her niece arrived before them, Bridlington extended his hand in greeting, lifting hers and bowing over it at exactly the right angle to indicate respect but not subordination. A waft of powdery scent threatened to make him sneeze, but he mastered the impulse and avoided looking at Mariana, knowing he would laugh if he did.

To his relief, Lady Mack turned her attentions to his sister. "Lady Mariana! So good of you to take an interest in dear Lucy. This is her first season, and she is quite anxious to

make the best of it." Bridlington was not insensible to the veiled dig at Mariana, still no accepted offer in her second season. As she spoke, the elderly lady's several chins wagged in a way that reminded George of a jelly. Once again, it was all he could do to resist the chuckle that threatened to burst out of his throat.

Poor Lucy still hung a little behind her aunt, smiling and blushing shyly. "Come forward, girl!" Lady Mack said, a little brusquely, and all but thrust her in front of Bridlington.

"Your most obedient," Bridlington said as he greeted the girl. When he looked up from his bow, he caught her gaze fixed on his cane, and then watched as her eyes traveled down to the leg that ended in a shoe at an awkward angle to the floor. When she managed to tear her gaze away from this disconcerting sight and meet his, the maidenly pink of her cheeks bloomed into blotchy crimson. *Next she'll look sorry*, Bridlington thought. It was a progression he had become all too familiar with over the years. "I would ask to lead you out in the quadrille, but as you see, I do not care to dance." He'd found that such disconcerting frankness usually sent girls like Lucy scurrying away.

"Of-of course, My Lord," Lucy stammered. "Might I help you—"

The poor creature had said the one thing guaranteed to set George against any possibility of further acquaintance. He turned to Mariana, pretending he had not heard Lucy, and said, "There's Lewiston, making up to Miss Jameson. Her fifty-thousand would go a long way toward repairing the marquise's damaged fortunes."

"Was it the Peninsula?" Lucy said, surprising Bridlington by addressing him directly and daring to lay a hand on his arm. "Did you receive a bullet? In a battle?" Her hopeful eyes betrayed her ignorance and inexperience.

"It was not, and I did not," said George, without offering

any other explanation. Her eyes registered hurt. She lifted her chin and looked away.

George knew he'd been unpardonably rude. But the one advantage to his disability was that allowances were made. He wished they weren't, in fact. As that evening, when he wanted nothing more than to have his behavior send Lady Mack and her niece far away, and yet they remained. He feared they were discouraged, but not altogether deterred.



GEORGE WAS RIGHT, MARIANA THOUGHT AS SHE WAITED FOR her chaise the morning after the Almack's assembly. It would have been crueler not to face Bainbridge than to send him away in no doubt of her feelings—as she had done earlier that morning. She knew what she wanted and who she wanted. And although the dowager would never force her to a match she abhorred, having had a miserable marriage of her own, it was a far cry from that to approving what she would see as a truly unsuitable husband for her only daughter. Her mother, Mariana honestly believed, wanted her children to be happy—within the confines of the society she knew. Unlike the late earl, she treasured her daughter and worshiped her imperfect son.

All at once, a memory flashed into Mariana's mind, of screams echoing in the night through Lanyon House during what must have been the long vac. She was still in the nursery, a room on the third floor of the mansion, and distant sounds of discord sometimes filtered up to her there. But these had been different. She'd leapt out of bed and run to the door, only to be stopped by the nurse who would not let her go no matter how she squirmed and fought.

The next morning, her brother was confined to his room. He had a fever, she was told, and on no account should she

disturb him. He'd remained there for weeks, and when he finally emerged, he was no longer the mischievous, lively older brother she adored. He also wore a contraption of leather and steel that encased his foot. Even through his stockings, she could see the swelling, and his face had been streaked with pain.

Mariana shuddered and shook the memory away. Much had changed since then. George was now the head of the family, and respected throughout the *ton*—if accused of being a bit of a misanthrope with a tongue that could cut mercilessly.

He would not be so forever, if Mariana had anything to do with it. Finding a way to push him into the world where he belonged was a mission second only to her own desire to be allowed to follow her heart and her mind. He might satisfy his cravings with light dalliances, flirt outrageously with married women, even take an opera dancer under his protection—although to her knowledge he had not done so. But she knew he had more heart and soul than that. He deserved more. Just as she deserved a husband who would appreciate everything she had to offer, inside and out. Who didn't see her as a means to social acceptance and wealth. Who wanted a true connection. A meeting of hearts, minds, and souls.

Such a person didn't exist in the closed circle of the *ton*. She had met him, however, quite by chance. He had no rank, no fortune, no great position, only brilliance, integrity, and a warm heart. Who was this unicorn? He was Jeremy Thorne, private secretary to Prime Minister Spencer Perceval. And he was tall, handsome, witty, but most of all, incredibly smart. He approved of her ambitions and principles. Such she had learned through their secret meetings, which had started last season. Secret, but not private. She sighed.

One of the drawbacks of being in London for the season

was her mother's insistence she be chaperoned when she went out into the town, no matter the reason. It was a bit of a challenge, but she'd managed to find ways to trick the young maid, Maddy, who willingly came with her to shop or visit. One of her principal subterfuges was convincing Maddy that she had no need to follow her into Hookham's library, because no one expected ladies to be accompanied by a chaperone in that staid location.

The chaise pulled up at the front steps, and the footman handed Mariana into it, her two borrowed volumes in her hands, followed by Maddy. Although it would be an easy walk, Maddy vastly preferred riding in a handsome, crested barouche to navigating the busy flagways. Once they arrived, she suggested Maddy stroll along Bond Street while she exchanged her books, nodded to the officious porter, and entered the library.

As was her usual practice, Mariana ambled aimlessly at first, perusing the shelves, catalogue in hand, until she judged that no one was paying any attention to her. This was the most difficult part of the operation because, like it or not, she attracted notice wherever she went.

Thankfully, at that time of day Hookham's was not very crowded, and she soon made her way to the shelf on which she knew she would find the missive from Jeremy, having sent a note around to his lodgings in Duke Street the day before telling him to leave the document inside a copy of Fordyce's Sermons. She took down the volume and casually flipped through the pages. A single sheet of paper fluttered to the ground, and she swiftly bent to pick it up and read it.

All it bore were three words: *I am here.*

Warmth spread from her middle up into her cheeks. That meant he had managed to get away from the House and time his visit to the library so that they could meet, rather than having to simply trade letters. Keeping herself to a languid

pace, she walked on to the alcove between two shelves where she knew she would find him.

Her heart always jumped a little when she caught sight of his tall, elegant form, dressed fashionably but not fussily. He reached out his hand to grasp hers and pull her a little into the shadows. They were careful not to stand too close together, in case a passing patron caught sight of them.

“Have you got what I asked?” Mariana whispered, trying hard not to respond too obviously to the melting look in his limpid dark eyes.

He reached into the inside pocket of his coat and drew out a sealed bundle of papers. “Not even the newspapers have this information yet, although there’s nothing secret in it. It’s just the debate about punishment for Luddite rebels.”

She took the sheaf from him, their gloved hands touching momentarily and sending a tiny shock up her arm. No doubt she would find herself livid when she read how the Tory government was planning to deal with the weavers in the north, who saw their jobs being eradicated by machine-powered looms that produced an inferior product. But that would be later. For right now, she must take advantage of the few minutes to simply be in Jeremy’s company.

“My Lady,” Jeremy began, and stopped.

“What?” Mariana asked, wishing he would call her by her name and drop this formal nonsense.

“It’s nothing,” he said, and she saw the flicker of something in his eyes withdraw, a barrier go up between them.

How vexing it was! She didn’t care about the difference in their stations, but he did. He’d never openly declared himself to her, and unless he did so, she could not speak. At least in this she felt constrained by the rules of propriety. Realizing that whatever he’d meant to say would remain unspoken between them, she said, “I shall read this and write to you again. I wish you didn’t have to work for Perceval.”

They shared a zeal for reform, and that had been what initially drew them to each other. Thus Jeremy's position with the Tory prime minister conflicted with his own beliefs. It had been too lucrative and influential for him to turn down, as he'd explained to her when they first met at an evening of cards at Lord Lister's house. His advancement would depend on impressing powerful politicians of whichever party.

The attraction had been instant and powerful then. At least on Mariana's part. And she couldn't believe in her heart that Jeremy felt any different. Still they danced around each other, meeting out of sight and by chance, making their mutual interest in liberal politics the excuse for it all.

"I'd better get back," Jeremy said, and took her hand, pressing it and lifting it to kiss.

Even through her kid glove, Mariana could feel the warmth of his shapely lips. "Yes. Until next time," she said, reluctantly drawing her hand out of his, turning and wandering away, feeling his gaze like a ray of sunshine against her back.

She had a scheme in view that would enable them to come into closer contact, and for him to believe that an offer for her would not meet with opposition, if she could carry it off. It was bold to the point of insanity. But if she wasn't to spend her life bored and unfulfilled, now was the time to take a chance.

Her thoughts were so disordered after their meeting that she completely forgot to change her books. Maddy, too busy gazing at the parade of pinks and elegantly dressed ladies, did not appear to notice.