

A detailed illustration of a woman in Regency-era fashion. She wears a tall, ornate hat with a large, curly plume of feathers. Her dress is light blue with a high, ruffled collar and a dark, patterned shawl draped over her shoulders. She is holding an open book and looking down at it with a thoughtful expression. The background is a simple, light-colored wall with some faint architectural details.

*A Regency
Romance*

**“A powerful
and compelling
romance.”**
- *Romantic Times*

CANDICE HERN

**A Change
of Heart**

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by Candice Hern

A Regency Romance

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Cover art: Detail of "Walking Dress" from Ackermann's *Repository of Arts*, October 1815. Collection of the author.

Chapter 1

London, June 1813

Jack Raeburn, Marquess of Pemerton, raised his quizzing glass and studied the young girl dancing with Lord Grayston. He leaned negligently against a pillar, half hidden by an extravagant floral arrangement, as he eyed the girl up and down. Miss Pettibone was very fair with masses of blond ringlets and huge blue eyes that gazed up in awe at her noble partner. She was a pretty little thing, Jack decided, as she shyly smiled up at Grayston. He was enjoying a clear view of her full, white bosom rising up and down with the exertion of the country dance when he suddenly felt a presence at his side.

Dropping his quizzing glass, he looked over and then down at the tiny woman who stood next to him. How long had she been there, he wondered? She was also looking intently at Miss Pettibone. But then she turned to look up at Jack, wrinkled her nose behind the screen of her open fan, and shook her head. Jack glared down at her and quirked a brow.

"Too young," she whispered, still shaking her head.

Jack choked on a hastily suppressed snort of laughter as he watched her eyes move back toward the dance floor. Who was this woman? She looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn't place her. She was not young, but not precisely old either. Though small, she was nicely rounded in all the right places, he was quick to note. She had ordinary brown hair, a too wide mouth, and a slightly crooked nose; but the eyes that had looked up at him had been enormous pools of hazel. Other than the eyes, her face was quite unremarkable. That was probably why he could not place her. She was not the sort of woman who normally piqued Jack's interest

He dragged his eyes from his unknown companion and once again raised his quizzing glass as he surveyed the ballroom. This time his gaze fell upon a lovely young redhead standing along the opposite wall, flirting with a circle of admirers. She brought her fan to her lips as she giggled at some remark, then snapped it shut and slapped it down on the wrist of her nearest gallant, batting her eyes coquettishly. Her hair was absolutely glorious, with one long fiery curl hanging over a creamy white shoulder.

By God, no one was going to tell him that there was anything wrong with this young beauty. Nevertheless, tearing himself away after one last admiring gaze, he reluctantly turned his glass upon the woman at his side and raised his brows in question. She hunched a shoulder and raised her fan to partially cover her face. Jack's greater height gave him a clear view behind the fan, and he watched as her mouth twisted in distaste. She leaned toward him in a conspiratorial manner without taking her eyes off the girl.

"Too silly," she whispered.

Jack grinned down at this impertinent unknown who nevertheless intrigued him. What was her game? Well, whatever it was, he was just bored enough to play along

and find out.

This time he raised his glass to study Lady Amanda Palmer, Egerton's eldest daughter, as she was partnered by Lord Ainsley. She was a glowing beauty with glossy dark brown curls and amber-colored eyes. Her face was lit up with a spectacular smile, and her cheeks were slightly flushed from the dance. Jack's glass followed the line of her graceful neck down over the rounded shoulders to the full swell of bosom revealed by her rather daring neckline. He knew this to be at least her third Season, and her manners were open though modest. Surely there could be no objection to this young lady, he thought as he looked down at his tiny confederate.

She sighed and looked up with a resigned shake of her head.

"Of course, it is up to you, my lord," she said in a husky whisper, "but Lady Amanda has an unfortunate tendency toward plumpness. Only look at her mother." She cocked her head in the direction of the corner of the room reserved for dowagers and chaperones.

Jack's glass followed her gaze toward the sea of plumed turbans in the corner. It was hard to miss Lady Egerton whose bulk took up almost an entire settee. One of the spindly-legged chairs used by the other matrons would have surely collapsed under the woman's tremendous girth.

Jack bit back a smile.

He dropped his quizzing glass, which, attached to its black ribbon, fell against his white brocade waistcoat, and heaved a dramatic sigh.

"Well, madam," he said in a bored tone, "I seem to be foiled at every turn. Perhaps you have a candidate of your own to recommend?" Most likely the woman had a daughter or niece or some other charge under her wing, with hopes of securing an advantageous match. Well, thought Jack, so long as the chit came with a plump dowry, he was willing to entertain any and all suggestions.

"Not at the moment," the woman replied, smiling brightly up at him. "But I would be happy to help you in your search, Lord Pemerton."

Jack pulled away from the pillar, straightened up, and peered down at the woman, furrowing his brow in puzzlement. Still, he could not place her, though she obviously knew him. Of course, there was nothing particularly distinctive about her that would have kept her in his memory; although he thought he might have remembered that intriguingly husky voice, surprising in such a small woman.

"I beg your pardon, madam," he said, "but you seem to have the advantage of me. You apparently know who I am and yet I don't—"

"Oh, but we have met, my lord," she interrupted.

"Indeed? I must apologize, then, for I am afraid I don't recall—"

"No need to apologize, my lord," she interrupted again, this time with a wave of dismissal. "I do not expect you would remember since you were thoroughly foxed at the time."

"Oh, good Lord," Jack mumbled as he raked a hand through his hair and dropped his eyes to the ground. What transgression had he committed in this lady's presence? Before he could ponder the countless possibilities, his attention was firmly snatched back to the present by the sound of a rich, throaty chuckle. He looked over to find the lady's head thrown back as she abandoned herself to laughter. The sound was so delightful, almost like a rusty gate, that he could not help but smile.

"Lady Mary Haviland," she said at last, offering her hand.

"Your servant, Lady Mary," said Jack as he took her hand and bowed ever it. "Haviland? That would make you Assheton's—"

"The late earl was my father," she said, somewhat abruptly. "You and I were introduced at Lord and Lady Bradleigh's wedding last year," she continued in a brighter tone.

"Ah," Jack said, nodding his head, "that explains why I don't remember you, Lady Mary. I don't remember much of anything about that day. I'm afraid I was too busy drowning my sorrow at losing a longtime companion in dissipation to the dreaded state of matrimony."

"And yet you are now contemplating that same dreaded state for yourself."

Jack reached once again for his quizzing glass, narrowing his eyes as he glared through it at Lady Mary. "How is it that you know so much of my business, madam?" he asked in a chilling tone. What was this tiny vixen up to? Since she was no matron after all, then she must be looking to feather her own nest. Ha! On a cold day in hell, if she was lucky. She was not at all his type.

"Oh, do put that thing down, my lord," Lady Mary said, playfully swatting away the quizzing glass with her fan. "No need to get haughty with me. The fact is, all the world knows that you are looking for a bride."

"Do they, indeed?"

"Well, of course," she continued. "It is only to be expected after—" She stopped abruptly, brought her hand to her mouth, and gave him a stricken look. "Oh, dear. Please forgive my wayward tongue, my lord," she said in a tight voice, her eyes bright with ... what? Tears?

Damnation! He was sick to death of Society's endless intrusive sympathy. It had been just a year since the tragic boating accident had claimed not only his father, but his two older brothers and his only nephew as well. That dreadful day had elevated Jack, a younger son with no expectations beyond the small estate his father had granted him upon his majority, into the unwanted position of Marquess of Pemerton and head of the family. The care-for-nothing rakehell had been thrust headlong into a mountain of unimaginable responsibilities. Having no opportunity to face his own grief, he certainly had had no time or inclination to deal with the egregious, meddlesome condolences of the *ton*.

"How awful it must have been for you," Lady Mary was saying in a low, raspy voice. "Well," she said, suddenly brightening, "let us not dwell on that painful subject. Nothing can change what has happened, after all, and so you must get on with your life. Is that not so?"

"Yes," Jack said absently as he looked at Lady Mary in astonishment. He had been attempting to live by those very sentiments for the last year, but no one seemed to understand. He was constantly made to dwell on the multiple tragedy by his grieving mother, his sisters-in-law, his nieces, and most of his acquaintances. It had been such a freak accident that everyone seemed to want to discuss it—constantly, and at length.

All he wanted to do was to forget and move on. And oddly enough, this stranger, Lady Mary, seemed to understand what most of his friends and family could not. He studied her face as she gazed up at him, an honest, open expression in her hazel eyes.

The errant thought crossed his mind that here was a woman he could trust, who could be a friend.

A friend? As Jack had never before had a woman for a friend—indeed, he had rather scorned the entire female species as being unworthy of any consideration outside the bedroom—he was at a loss to understand this entirely foreign notion.

"Am I not correct in assuming that, now you are the marquess, you must find a bride and ensure the succession?" she asked.

Jack sighed and glared at Lady Mary. "Yes."

"Well, then," she said cheerfully, "since I know you to be a rake and a rogue—and rogues are among my favorite people in the world—I would be happy to stand your friend and assist you in your search."

"You honor me, Lady Mary," Jack said as he sketched a bow.

"Only, you must promise, my lord," she said, "not to become stuffy in your new position. You must retain some measure of your roguish ways else I shall become bored and disgusted with you. I have no patience with sober, dull pattern cards of propriety. Rogues, on the other hand, I find delightfully entertaining."

Jack reached for her hand and brought it to his lips. "I shall endeavor always to keep you entertained, my lady," he said in his most seductive tone. "And since you are so fond of... rogues ... perhaps the best plan would be to marry me yourself. It would save me a great deal of trouble."

Lady Mary threw back her head and laughed. Jack was once again charmed by the husky, rusty sound of her laughter. His own laughter soon joined hers, and before long he felt several curious pairs of eyes on them. Not wishing to bring any unnecessary attention to Lady Mary, whom he decided he quite liked, he took her by the elbow and led her deeper into the shadows behind the floral arrangement. Of course, Jack thought with wicked amusement, being tugged into the shadows of a ballroom by the notorious Black Jack Raeburn could be even more damaging to her reputation. She turned to look up at him.

"You may rest easy on that score, my lord," she said, still smiling broadly, apparently unconcerned with what wagging tongues might make of her skulking in the shadows with a notorious libertine. "I am definitely not in the market for a husband. I am not at all interested in marriage. Nor," she added when Jack cast her a lecherous leer, "am I interested in dalliance, my lord."

Jack gave a sigh of mock despair.

"But I am interested in friendship," she continued. "One can never have too many friends. May I hope that we can become friends, my lord?"

"I believe we are already friends, Lady Mary," Jack said. "Indeed, I am certain we have been friends this last half hour or more."

"In that case," she said, "I am ready to help you find an appropriate bride. Although it is somewhat late in the Season and certain young ladies have already formed attachments, I believe there are still many admirable ladies available. I can think of several off the top of my head. But we must find someone who will appreciate your ... er ... more interesting qualities. And of course, a man in your position must always be mindful of the honor and dignity due his title. Unfortunately," she said, tapping her closed fan absently against her cheek, "that title will have the matchmakers beating a path to your door with their daughters in tow."

Jack gave a resigned shrug. "Yes," he said, "I have already had some experience in that respect. 'Tis a curious thing. A year ago most of those women would drag their precious daughters from the room in a panic if I so much as showed my face. Now, they dog my tail at every turn."

Lady Mary nodded in understanding. "All the more reason to accept my assistance," she said. "I can help you to sort out the eligible misses thrown in your path. Though I have no doubt your experience with females is vast," she said as a huge grin split her face, "unless I am much mistaken, I suspect that none of those females is precisely the sort you would want as your bride."

"N-no, not exactly," Jack sputtered. Was he truly having such a conversation with a gently bred, unmarried female? He shook his head in disbelief and grinned. He could not remember when he had been so vastly entertained by a woman—outside of the usual ways, of course—and such a plain little thing at that. And to think he had actually considered not coming to Lady Pigeon's ball!

"As it happens," Lady Mary continued, "I have been about a great deal these last few years and have, I am happy to say, a very wide acquaintance among respectable Society. I can easily introduce you to dozens of perfectly delightful, eminently acceptable young women. I will also be able to warn you against those who ought to be avoided for various reasons. Fortune hunters, for example."

"I begin to understand," Jack said. "I can see where your superior knowledge might be useful."

"Well, of course!" she said with an exasperated wave of her hands. "But first, you must give me your list of requirements."

"My what?"

"You know," she said with some impatience, "those qualities you are searching for in a bride. It will help me to identify the proper candidate."

"I haven't given it much thought," Jack lied. He would be damned before he would enlighten this perfect stranger, delightful though she may be, to his true motives.

"Don't be ridiculous! Of course you have. Let us start with the obvious. I presume she must be a beauty?"

Jack shrugged. He really would prefer to change the subject.

"Well, naturally she must be beautiful," Lady Mary said. "She will be your marchioness, after all. And it is only fitting, since you are quite good-looking yourself." She flashed him a teasing grin.

"Are you flirting with me, Lady Mary?"

"Don't be absurd," she said and then once again gave that throaty chuckle. "And so what else, my lord? Besides beauty?"

"You have already warned me against the too young, the too silly, and the too plump. I obviously do not have your discriminating tastes, my lady. I shall leave the choice to your better judgment."

"Good heavens, Lord Pemerton, I did not mean to make the selection *for* you. Only to help steer you through the rocky shoals of the Marriage Mart. To help you from running aground upon the first sandbar you encounter. 'Tis a tricky business, you know. Dangerous waters, indeed."

"Since you seem to know so much about it," Jack said, arching a significant brow, "then why, if I may ask, have you never married, Lady Mary?"

The husky laugh once again disarmed him.

"As I have said, it is tricky business," she said. "Too tricky to be of interest to me. Besides, I am much too old for such nonsense."

"Too old for games of the heart?" Jack said, lowering his voice seductively. "Come now, my lady. Where is your sense of adventure?"

"Let us just say, my lord," she replied, matching Jack's tone with her own hoarse whisper, "that I am content to be a spectator in this particular game. I am quite happily and comfortably on the shelf, if you must know."

"Then why are you so anxious to thrust me into the dangerous waters of the Marriage Mart?"

"I believe I shall find it excessively diverting, my lord!" The broad grin once again split her face, and her eyes twinkled with merriment. "Besides, you have already plunged into the water. I am merely offering to help you stay afloat. Anyway, now that we are friends, I want you to be happy. I want all my friends to be happy."

"You are very generous, my lady. And do you make yourself happy by ensuring the happiness of your friends?"

"I do indeed. It gives me a great deal of satisfaction. But in your case, I believe I shall find a great deal of amusement as well. I do so hate to be bored."

"So you have said," Jack replied. "Well, Lady Mary, during the last year I have been, if not precisely bored, then certainly not entertained. Like you, my dear, I detest boredom and have in fact spent most of my life in search of diversion. It shall give me the greatest pleasure to have you transform my current task into something more amusing."

"Ha!" she shouted, clapping her hands together and practically bouncing with glee. "I knew I would like you!"

"Well, then," he said spreading his arms wide, "what are you waiting for? Let the parade begin!"

Chapter 2

"Lord Pemerton? Good heavens, Mary, have you lost your mind?"

Mary could not hold back her smile, despite the look of horror on her companion's face. Olivia Bannister, hands frozen in mid-stitch as she looked up from her embroidery, had been in Mary's employ for over three years now, and yet apparently Mary still had the ability to shock the woman. Poor dear, Mary thought as she considered that she had likely been responsible for more than a few of those gray hairs sprinkled among Olivia's auburn curls. But she really ought to be accustomed to Mary's somewhat unconventional ways by now.

"Come now, Olivia." Mary swung her feet up onto the sofa, tucking them under her in an unladylike position, which had more than once brought a disapproving frown to her companion's face. "There is no need to get into such a pelter. I assure you, the situation is quite harmless."

Olivia glared at her with a look of such outrage that Mary burst out laughing. At last, Olivia cast her eyes toward the heavens, as if seeking guidance from Above, bundled her embroidery into her sewing bag, heaved a resigned sigh, and fixed Mary with a stern look.

"My dear," she said, "as long as we have been acquainted, have you ever known me to cavil at any behavior of yours?"

"Well, you do have a certain look—the one you are giving me just now, in fact—which can quite put one off. But, no, Olivia, you have never to my knowledge openly questioned any action of mine."

"As is only proper," Olivia said with a sniff. "As your employee I am not in a position to object. But... as a friend ..."

"A very dear friend."

"As your friend," Olivia continued, "I believe I must take exception this time." She rose from her chair and joined Mary on the sofa. "My dear, I sometimes think you forget that you are an unmarried woman and therefore bound by certain rules of Society."

"Fustian!" Mary said, brushing away those concerns with a wave of her hand. "Those rules were made for the protection of pretty young innocents straight out of the schoolroom. I am neither pretty nor young, and have no one to answer to but myself. And I have never done anything of which I am ashamed. I do have some scruples, you must know."

"I know, Mary. But—"

"And I would never do anything to hurt another human soul."

"No, of course you would not," Olivia said as she reached out to lay her hand over Mary's. "You are the kindest, most generous person I have every known."

"Thank you, my dear. Well then, what have I ever done, after all, that was so very shocking?"

"Well," Olivia said as the corners of her mouth began to curl almost imperceptibly upward, "there was the time you disappeared at Lady Dunholm's rout for over an hour

with Lord Erskine."

"We were playing a private game of piquet in one of the back parlors, as you well know. Anyone could have found us if they had wanted to."

"And there was the time you blithely waltzed into Harriet Wilson's box at the opera."

"I simply wanted to meet her," Mary said, shrugging her shoulders nonchalantly. "And she was every bit as fascinating as I had expected. Well, she would have to be, would she not? I found her quite charming."

"And there was the time you went strolling in the gardens at Hatfield on a moonless night with that rake, Sir Rodney Lattimer. And returned with a very interesting tear in your dress."

It was Mary's turn to roll her eyes heavenward. "Sir Rodney and I were having a very interesting discussion about modern composers," she said in an exasperated tone. "I simply was not paying attention to my surroundings and happened to catch my sleeve on one of the holly bushes. Perfectly harmless."

"Except," Olivia said in a tone worthy of a starched governess, "to your reputation."

"Olivia! When will you get it through your head that people like me do not have reputations? No one cares what a twenty- nine-year-old, ugly, insignificant, unmarried woman does. No one pays me the least attention, I assure you. Society does not care tuppence for women like me. I am perfectly safe, Olivia, even if I do prefer to associate with rakes, rogues, and the occasional courtesan. I only want to make interesting new friends, you know."

"But you already have so many friends, my dear ..."

"Yes," Mary said wistfully. "It is quite wonderful, is it not? How fortunate I am!"

"Yes, but... Lord Pemerton, Mary?"

"Oh!" Mary said, excited to discuss her newest friend. "Wait 'til you meet him, Olivia. I am persuaded you cannot dislike him. He is most amusing—and quite handsome."

"Mary!"

"Well, one can look, cannot one?"

As long as one doesn't dream, thought Mary as she recalled the darkly handsome marquess. He did not have the fresh good looks of youth, nor the classical perfection of someone like Lord Bradleigh, the stunningly handsome husband of her friend Emily. And, to be sure, there were certain signs of dissipation in the lines about Lord Pemerton's mouth and eyes. But for all that, his face had a character that appealed to Mary more than many others. Yes, she could look. But she must take care that the piercing blue eyes, unruly black hair, and sensuous smile of the marquess did not too often invade her thoughts.

But then, Mary had always been very sensible about such matters. She accepted her situation without complaint, and almost never dared to cherish foolish dreams. She had certainly been around her fair share of attractive men, and even called some of them friend. Why, then, should this particular man give her cause to worry?

"But he is a rake!" Olivia exclaimed, drawing Mary's attention back to their conversation.

"So I am told," Mary said as she arched a teasing brow.

"But, my dear, I am sure you know that he is quite ... well.. . notorious. A shameless womanizer. Why, I believe I have heard that he has fought several duels. The man is dangerous, Mary!"

"I promise you," Mary said with a grin, "that Lord Pemerton and I will not resort to pistols at dawn."

"But—"

"Olivia, I *like* him," Mary said. And she meant it. She really did like him. Quite a lot, actually. "You know that I have a soft spot in my heart for rogues," she continued. "They are so much more honest in their approach to life than the usual paragons of propriety. Those sober, proper gentlemen more often than not harbor cold hearts and dark secrets."

Only consider my own father, Mary added silently to herself.

"And most of those fine, upstanding fellows," she continued, "routinely deceive their wives with a string of ladybirds on the sly. I have no patience with such hypocrisy, Olivia. I much prefer the man who is open and straightforward in his dealings with people, even if he does not often stay strictly within the rules of Society. You can trust a man like that."

"That is all well and good," Olivia said, "and might have something to say to the matter ... *if* you were another man. But as an unmarried female—"

"Oh, bother!" Mary said. "Must we go over this again and again? I hold no interest in that way for such a man. They can be comfortable with me. That is why we can be friends. And I am convinced Lord Pemerton and I will become great friends. I liked him at once. He has such a way with a quizzing glass! I wonder if he could teach me how to wield one with such aplomb?"

Olivia let out a long, slow breath and gazed at Mary with furrowed brows. "And so you are to help him find a bride?" she asked.

"Yes! Imagine, helping to select a bride for a notorious rake! This will be such fun!"

"But why you? Why can he not find his own bride?"

"Because the poor man has no idea how to go about it properly," Mary said. "He would settle for just about anyone, you must know, just to get the thing over with. I could not stand by and watch such a fascinating man tie himself to some giggly young fool, just for the sake of the succession. She would either lead him a merry dance or bore him to death. In either case, he would probably ignore her completely or abandon her at the first opportunity, and then two lives would have been made miserable. How much more preferable to find a woman who could accept him for what he is, and with whom he could be comfortable. I can think of many such women. In fact, I have been making a list."

"You haven't!"

"I have." Mary pulled a folded piece of foolscap out of her pocket. "Perhaps you would like to review it with me? I might have overlooked someone."

"Good heavens," Olivia groaned as she reached for the list.

* * *

Jack was stretched out comfortably on the bed. Hands propped behind his head, he stared up at the elaborate tented canopy while running numbers through his brain. He was mentally calculating how the rents from Pemworth might be used to offset the cost of draining the west pasture at Crutchley. Such thoughts were never far from his mind at any time these days. Was it only a year ago that his only concern, aside from the constant search for new pleasures to be experienced, had been the smooth running of his small estate in Herefordshire? Indeed, Broadhurst had never been a cause for much concern, as Jack had a very competent steward who ensured that the estate was run efficiently and profitably.

Yet now, here he was, saddled with no fewer than six large estates inherited from his father and brothers, and not a one of them profitable. In fact, not a one of them was free of debt. Jack had always understood that his father, though a charming raconteur and sportsman, had no head for business. Never, however, in his wildest imaginings would he have expected the man's affairs—now Jack's affairs—to be in such disarray. And all a result, as far as Jack was able to determine, of gross mismanagement.

He mentally ticked off rows of figures until he was convinced that by taking a bit from here and putting a bit over there that he could somehow finance the required drainage project. He breathed a sigh of relief. He must remember to contact Godolphin, his man of business, first thing in the morning to review the plan.

Good Lord, but he seemed to be spending all his waking hours dealing with his blasted, unwanted, unsought inheritance. Well, maybe not *all* his waking hours, he thought as his eyes drifted to the soft, white, naked body curled up at his side. As he watched her sleep, Jack decided that although Phoebe was deliciously voluptuous and incredibly responsive—but of course she was an actress, so one could never be sure about those things—that he really ought to let her go. She was already an expense he could ill afford; and lately she had been tossing out hints about diamond bracelets and high-perch phaetons that caused him to break out in a cold sweat.

Perhaps tomorrow he would buy her some small bauble as a parting gift, and give her her *congé*. He doubted she would have difficulty finding another protector. Dalrymple had frequently shown an interest. Perhaps he would take her on.

Jack wasn't going to waste any time worrying about her. Phoebe, he thought as he brushed a hand lightly along her hip, would take care of herself. She made a small purring sound and curled up closer against his side. He never gave a second thought to what became of women such as Phoebe.

The sounds of movement in the adjoining dressing room alerted him to the presence of Jessop, his valet. For a moment he had forgotten that he was not comfortably ensconced in his love nest on Half Moon Street. The small town house—the scene of many wild and passionate evenings over the years—had been sold some months ago. He could no longer afford the luxury of a separate house kept solely for the purpose of assignations. It galled him to have to bring his ladybirds to his own town house. It was simply not done. The fourth marquess, his grandfather, who had built the spacious Hanover Square house, was probably turning over in his grave at the thought of such women being brought into his home.

Jack gave Phoebe one last lingering look and slipped carefully out of bed. She stirred and made a soft whimpering sound before curling more tightly around the down pillow. He padded across the room and silently entered the dressing room,

leaving the bedroom door slightly ajar. Jessop was busy tidying up the various garments strewn about the room. He looked up when he heard Jack enter, stopped what he was doing, and quickly retrieved a dressing gown from a hook on the wardrobe door. He held it out for Jack, who shrugged into it and sank down into a nearby wing chair.

"I will need you in a few hours, Jessop, to get Phoebe out of here before the household wakens."

"Of course, my lord."

"God, how I hate bringing them here." Jack nestled his head back into a corner of the chair and sighed deeply. He had no qualms about speaking so frankly to Jessop. They had known one another for years. Jessop was the son of the head gamekeeper at Pemworth, the seat of the Marquess of Pemerton. Less than a year separated them in age, and as a somewhat ignored younger son, Jack had found a friend in the young Tom Jessop. The two boys had spent many years romping the grounds and shoreline of Pemworth together, getting into all manner of scrapes.

Jack had lost touch with his young friend when he had left home to attend Eton and then Cambridge. It wasn't until many years later that their boyhood bond had been resurrected. Jack had returned to Pemworth for a visit when, one evening, the local prevention men showed up at the Hall looking for Jessop, whom they claimed had been involved that evening with a group of smugglers who had received a shipment of illegal goods in one of the nearby sheltered coves. Jack's father had begun to make some concerned remark when, almost without thinking, Jack had piped up, "Not Tom Jessop."

Suddenly, all eyes had turned to him. Remembering how many times young Tom had taken the blame for some mischief or other, Jack quickly equivocated that Jessop had been with him all evening, playing cards. Jack's father's steely glare had dared the prevention men to question the word of his son, and they had been forced to leave. Later that evening Jessop had presented himself to Jack, pledging his eternal thanks and placing himself entirely at Jack's service. As it happened, Jack had been in need of a valet, and thus a new chapter of their strange companionship had begun.

It had not been long before Jack had discovered that his boyhood friend had become an equally mischievous young man, always game for new adventures, new schemes, or new women. Since Jack had himself, by then, already fallen into a somewhat dissipated way of life, Jessop suited his needs precisely. Yet, through all the years of fast living, gaming, drinking, and womanizing, Jessop had remained steadfast, loyal—and extremely useful.

Jack stretched his arms and shoulders like a cat and burrowed deeper into the chair. "After I let this one go," he said, arching a thumb in the direction of the bedroom door, "perhaps I should take to patronizing Covent Garden nunneries instead of bringing them home."

Jessop, who had resumed brushing and folding the discarded clothing, stopped in midfold and raised his brows in question.

"I know, I know," Jack said. "It has been years since I have frequented such places. I honestly do not think I am up to it. I much prefer to be in full control of the situation—the surroundings, the timing, everything. Can't do that in someone else's establishment."

"That's a fact, my lord."

"Nevertheless, I cannot go on like this forever. And I do not even want to think about what I will do after I am married. I cannot exactly sneak girls up the back stairs with my wife in the next room."

"It wouldn't be right, my lord," Jessop said, shaking his head.

Jack laughed at his valet's serious expression. "No, it would not" He stretched his legs out in front of him and slid down further in the chair. "But perhaps if I find the right sort of bride ..."

"If you find the right sort of bride, you will be able to buy another place like the one on Half Moon Street."

"Right you are, Jessop." Jack flashed a grin at his altogether too clever valet. "By the way, did you have any luck this evening?"

"Depends on your point of view, my lord. Daisy, that sweet little housemaid over at Lord Fairfax's, was most accommodating. Only she didn't seem to have any of the information you requested."

"Damn!" Jack slapped his hand on the arm of the chair.

"Sorry, my lord."

"Oh, it's all right, Jessop. Something, or someone, else will turn up. Speaking of which," Jack said as he made to rise from the chair, "I am shortly to have a whole new group of candidates to choose from. I met the most unusual woman, Lady Mary Haviland, who has taken a liking to me and is determined to help find me a suitable bride."

"A matchmaker?" He looked at Jack with an expression of wide-eyed horror.

"No," Jack said, laughing, "I don't think so. I don't believe this is her usual game. She is merely looking for some new kind of amusement. In any case, she could prove to be useful," he said as he walked toward the bedroom door.

"I hope so," Jessop said, though he sounded doubtful.

"Go on to bed, Jessop. I will wake you when it's time for Phoebe to leave."

"Yes, my lord."

Jack entered the bedroom once again and closed the door behind him. He tossed his dressing gown on a chair and slid between the sheets, gathering the sleeping Phoebe close to his side. His thoughts were still on Lady Mary. She was a curious little thing, but really quite delightful. He could certainly understand her search for new amusements. And although it was unlikely he and Lady Mary sought out diversion in precisely the same ways, he thought as he buried his nose in the sweetness of Phoebe's hair, he nevertheless felt she was in some ways a kindred spirit. He liked her.

They had agreed to meet once again at Lady Kenilworth's rout tomorrow evening, at which time Lady Mary promised to bring along her first candidates. He was curious to see what type of woman she thought would suit him. He seriously doubted that she had any understanding of his particular tastes. He nuzzled Phoebe's neck as he felt her foot inching its way up his leg. Perhaps he ought to have been more specific in providing Lady Mary with his requirements, he thought wickedly as he pulled Phoebe on top of him.

Chapter 3

"What do you think, Olivia? Do they not look well together?"

Mary and her companion had paused in their perambulation of the ballroom to watch as Lord Pemerton danced a cotillion with Miss Lillian Carstairs. The dark good looks of the marquess contrasted nicely with the blond prettiness of Miss Carstairs. Mary was quite proud of this particular candidate, the third she had presented to Lord Pemerton this evening. Miss Carstairs, the granddaughter of an earl, was a particular favorite of Mary's. Though already three and twenty, this was only her second Season—her debut having been delayed first by illness and then by consecutive years of mourning. But her maturity was a mark in her favor in regard to Lord Pemerton. A blushing schoolgirl miss would never do for such a man.

"Hmph!" Olivia snorted and then tugged on Mary's arm to continue their stroll. "I do not understand how you could have presented that sweet young woman to that scoundrel."

"Yes, she is sweet, is she not?" Mary ignored Olivia's aspersion on Lord Pemerton's character. "It is most unfortunate that some have taken exception—quite wrongly!—to her passion for antiquities and labeled her a bluestocking. I am of the opinion that it enhances her character and conversation to have interests outside the latest fashions or the current *on-dits*. I am certain Lord Pemerton will also appreciate her wit and cleverness." She turned once again to watch the couple as they moved through the intricate steps of the dance. Lord Pemerton was smiling at something Miss Carstairs was saying.

"Oh, do look at them, Olivia," Mary said, smiling and squeezing her companion's arm. "I tell you, this could be the one! And to think, we are not yet even halfway down my list."

"Oh, but you are wicked, Mary," Olivia said in a hoarse whisper. "To act as accomplice to that... that *libertine*. Actually providing him with a list of potential victims! It has pained me to watch you these past few evenings, using your influence to convince decent, gently bred young women to be presented to that man. Marquess or no, the man is a cad!"

Mary laughed, amused as always by her companion's righteous outrage. "Victims, Olivia? Miss Carstairs appears as unlikely a victim as I have ever seen. Just look at her. She seems to be thoroughly enjoying herself." It was true. As she watched, Miss Carstairs was now laughing at something Lord Pemerton had said. This was indeed promising.

"I do not like it," Olivia said, tugging Mary along once again. "What possible interest can he have in a decent young woman like that, except... well, except... you know."

"Olivia!"

"Well, it is true. Only consider what happened to that poor Miss Kingston."

"It was never proved that Lord Pemerton was the father, Olivia. And you know as well as I do that Miss Kingston was no better than she should be. Besides, Lord

Pemerton told me himself that the girl had to have been increasing before he even met her. He can count as well as the next person, you know."

Mary stumbled when her companion came to an abrupt halt.

"He *told* you?" Olivia's eyes grew wide with disbelief.

"Yes, of course."

Olivia stared at Mary in openmouthed astonishment. Mary chuckled and took her friend's arm once again and led her forward.

"I asked him," she said. Olivia's jaw dropped even further, if that was possible. "Well, I was curious" Mary shrugged nonchalantly. She wondered why this should be a matter of such concern. She and Lord Pemerton were friends, after all, and she had always felt that one should be able to speak openly with one's friends. Because Lord Pemerton had such an outrageous notoriety, she was sure most of the tales associated with him must be apocryphal. So she had asked, and had been shocked and delighted with the candor of his response.

Olivia's head snapped forward, and the rustle of stiff bombazine increased as she set a new pace to their leisurely stroll. Mary knew without looking that her friend's pleasant countenance was distorted by the tart pucker that had become more and more common since Mary's association with Lord Pemerton. For some reason, of all her supposedly unsuitable friends, Olivia had taken a particular dislike to Lord Pemerton. It was really most peculiar for Mary found him to be quite the most likable gentleman of her acquaintance.

Mary trailed along in silence, the polished wood floor echoing the fast clicking of her raised heels—always worn, though unfashionable, to provide her with extra height. The slightly narrow skirt of her pale blue silk gown—not to mention her shorter legs—caused some difficulty in keeping up with Olivia's long stride. After a few moments Olivia began to speak again and at the same time moderated her pace, to Mary's great relief.

"I know you say he is looking for a bride," Olivia said, "and for some unexplainable reason you have agreed to help him find one. But you know as well as I do that a man of his rank and fortune— despite his unspeakable reputation—can have his pick of Society misses. He does not need your help. I do not trust the man, and I believe he is simply using you and your list to add to his own list of conquests. Besides, he is well known for favoring more ... more ... well, more full-blown beauties than Miss Carstairs. Why should he single her out, if not for some illicit purpose?"

"I think she is quite pretty," Mary said. "She has a lovely, sweet face and all those glorious blond curls."

"Yes, a lovely, sweet and very round face," Olivia said. "Honestly, Mary, that man could not possibly favor her. Why, she is as plump as a guinea hen."

"Now, Olivia, I would not say she is precisely plump."

"Well, on her way there, in any case."

Mary cocked a brow at her elegantly slender companion, who ate like a bird because that was what ladies were supposed to do. Many a time Mary had noted Olivia's furrowed brow as she finished off a cream cake or other such delicacy, while Olivia left all but a single bite on her plate. And yet Mary's own tendency toward plumpness had never elicited a single disparaging remark from her companion. Mary knew that Olivia would rather cut out her tongue than criticize the physical

imperfections of her employer. She knew that Olivia, like most people, felt sorry for her, for her plainness. She wished they would not. Mary did not feel sorry for herself, so why should anyone else?

Olivia caught Mary's eyes, blushed, and flashed a contrite look at her employer before lowering her eyes. "I beg your pardon, Mary," she said softly. "It is really none of my business why that man chooses to single out Miss Carstairs."

"He does it," Mary said, smiling and squeezing Olivia's hand, "because I asked him to." Their progress was interrupted by a sudden onrush of people—the music had ended and dancers were making their way from the dance floor. Unable for the moment to continue their stroll, Mary stopped and turned toward Olivia. "I told him that I thought they might suit, and he trusts my judgment."

"Well," Olivia said, "I hope you know what you are doing. But I still do not like it!"

"Do not like what, Mrs. Bannister?"

The deep voice coming suddenly from behind her caused Olivia to jump.

"I beg your pardon ladies," Lord Pemerton said, smiling wickedly and looking terribly elegant in his all-black evening clothes. "I did not mean to startle you."

"I thought you were with Miss Carstairs, my lord," Mary said.

Lord Pemerton extended his hand, and Mary placed her own in it and allowed him to tuck it into the crook of his arm. It was amazing how comfortable they had become with one another after so short an acquaintance.

Olivia did not accept the support of his other arm.

"I deposited Miss Carstairs with her chaperone," Lord Pemerton said, guiding Mary toward the refreshment table. "After such a lively dance I am feeling quite parched. Will you ladies join me in a glass of champagne?"

"That would be lovely," Mary said, smiling up at the marquess.

"Mrs. Bannister?"

"I would prefer punch, my lord."

"Of course." Lord Pemerton's eye caught Mary's, and he gave her a roguish wink. "If you will sit here," he said, indicating a recently vacated gilt bench, "I will only be a moment."

Mary and Olivia seated themselves and only had time to arrange their skirts before Lord Pemerton had returned. He handed a glass of chilled champagne to Mary and a cup of arrack punch to Olivia. He leaned negligently against the arm of the bench, supporting himself with a hand on its back. Mary could feel his hand brush against the curls at the nape of her neck as she turned to speak to him, causing a momentary tingle that she was quick to ignore.

"I was pleased to see you and Miss Carstairs getting along so well," she said. "You made a very handsome couple on the dance floor. She is quite lovely, is she not?"

"Miss Carstairs is all that is pleasing, my dear," he said, "but none can hold a candle to you this evening in that frothy blue confection." His fingers softly dragged along the neck of her gown for the briefest instant.

Mary was fascinated at how many ways he could touch a woman without anyone noticing. He was always doing it. Even Olivia was unaware of it, so adept was he at surreptitious contact. But then, he was a rake of some renown, after all. Such behavior was no doubt second nature to him, even with a woman such as herself. She grinned up at him, and he leered in return. Mary threw back her head and laughed.

* * *

Jack held his arms out for Jessop to remove his evening coat. He looked toward the door to his bedroom, standing slightly ajar, and caught a brief glimpse of ankle as Monique undressed. She was new to Drury Lane, and Jack had wasted no time in engaging her for the evening. He had settled with Phoebe a few nights earlier.

But there was business to attend to before pleasure.

"I need you to do another special job for me, Jessop," he said as the valet brushed out the evening coat.

"Yes, my lord?"

"Do you know anyone in the Carstairs household?"

"Carstairs ... Carstairs ... let me think," Jessop said as he hung up the coat in the open wardrobe. "Over on Portman Square?"

"Yes, I believe so," Jack said.

"I think I can manage something. The usual information?"

"Yes, yes," Jack said, impatiently eyeing the bedroom door as he heard the unmistakable creaking of his bed. "Miss Lillian Carstairs. How much will she bring? Cash, mind you. No restrictions. No protected trust funds out of reach of a future husband. And not tied up in property or other investments that would need to be disposed of."

"I know the routine, my lord," Jessop said with no little indignation.

It was not the first time Jack had used his resourceful valet to unearth pertinent information about a prospective bride. Jessop, too handsome for his own good, was able to charm his way into almost any housemaid's affections. It was never long before he knew all there was to know about the private lives of his paramour's employers. In fact, it had often occurred to Jack that he had enough salacious information to blackmail more than a few members of the *ton*, if it ever came to that. But even Jack would never sink to such tactics. After all, it would certainly be a case of the pot calling the kettle black.

No, he was more inclined to repair his miserable fortune in the time-honored manner: by marrying a rich woman. But he would be damned before he made his motives known. He could not bear the notion of being labeled a fortune hunter—the sort of pitiful, contemptible creature he and his friends had often made fun of over the years. He would rather die than know he was the object of such ridicule. The very idea sent an involuntary shudder through his body. So he used the wily Jessop to ferret out the information he needed. He did not have time to waste courting the wrong woman.

"I know I can trust you to do the job," Jack said, clapping his valet on the back. "Heaven help us both if anything ever happens to that pretty face of yours."

Jessop snorted with such disgust that Jack burst out laughing. The poor man hated to be reminded of his almost feminine looks. His pale skin and fair curly hair gave him a cherubic quality that women found irresistible. The face of an angel and the heart of a scoundrel, thought Jack. Much like himself—though he was, of course, no longer as handsome as he had once been. Nevertheless, that Jessop was cut from the same cloth as Jack had made him the perfect valet. They understood one another.

"There is also a Miss Dorothea Langley-Howe I would be interested in knowing a bit more about," Jack said in an offhanded way as he removed his brocaded waistcoat.

"Oh, I've heard of her, my lord," Jessop said. "Quite a beauty, I'm told. You'll have a bit of competition for that one."

"No doubt. All the more reason to determine the lay of the land before I waste any time on her."

"I'll see what I can do," Jessop said as he picked up the waistcoat that Jack had tossed on the floor.

"Thank you" A look of understanding passed between Jack and his valet. Jessop gave a nod and returned to his work.

"I'll just be off to the King's Head, then," Jessop said as he hung Jack's waistcoat in the wardrobe. "One of m' chums in Portman Square owes me a favor. I assume you won't be needing me any longer this evening?" He cocked his head toward the bedroom door.

"Go on, Jessop," Jack said as he sat down to remove his stockings. "Get out of here."

"Yes, my lord. But I'll be back before dawn to escort the lady out." Jessop carefully folded the hastily discarded satin breeches and placed them in a drawer. In addition to his other useful qualities, the man was obsessively neat, a convenient counterpoint to his employer's somewhat untidy nature. Apparently satisfied that all was in order, he closed the wardrobe door, gave a sharp nod to Jack, and left the dressing room.

"At last!" Jack muttered as he turned toward the bedroom. Standing in the middle of the dressing room, wearing only his shirt, he yawned hugely and stretched like a cat. He wondered if he could pretend that the voluptuous, red-haired Monique was the very rich (he hoped), very plump Miss Carstairs.

He sighed. Not a chance.

He pulled his shirt over his head, tossed it in a corner, and flung open the bedroom door.