



HISTORICAL

*Jenni
Fletcher*
*The Convenient
Felstone Marriage*

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‘I have a proposal for you...’The last place respectable governess Ianthe Holt ever expected to be proposed to is in a train carriage...by a stranger...who has just accused her of trying to trap another man into marriage!Shipping magnate Robert Felstone may be dashing but he’s also insufferable, impertinent—and Ianthe’s only possible saviour from her uncertain fate. She’s hesitant to play the perfect Felstone wife, but Robert soon shows Ianthe there’s more to him than meets the eye, and more to marriage than vows...

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‘Since we’ve already established that I’m not a true gentleman, I have a proposal for you.’

‘A proposal?’ She repeated the words suspiciously.

‘A business proposition, if you prefer. Something that might benefit both of us.’

‘I’ve no interest in anything else you have to say, sir.’

‘You won’t hear me out? Shame ’ He looked nonplussed. ‘I was prepared to offer you an alternative to your current situation.’

She froze. He sounded sincere, but why would he offer to help her? Was this some kind of cruel joke or just another veiled insult?

‘What kind of alternative?’ she couldn’t resist asking.

He smiled suddenly, transforming his features from simply striking to quite devastatingly, heart-stoppingly handsome. ‘I need a wife.’

[Author Note](#)

This is the first in a series of books set in and around the ancient coastal town of Whitby. The town now tends to be associated with Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel *Dracula*, but it has a rich shipbuilding, whaling and maritime history as well. It also has one of the oldest, busiest and most decorated lifeboat stations—founded in 1802, although it didn’t join up with the National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck (now the RNLI) until the 1860s. This followed the tragic events of 9th February 1861, during which twelve out of thirteen lifeboatmen were drowned when their vessel was hit by two freak waves on their way to their fifth rescue of the day. The only survivor was wearing a sample cork lifejacket.

The shipwreck in this story is based loosely on that of the hospital ship the *Rohilla* in 1914, when a lifeboat from Whitby was carried over the cliff to Saltwick Bay by six horses before being lowered by ropes at the other side. Although I’ve simplified the details, the fact that lifeboatmen were prepared to take such extreme risks is based on real-life events—further details of which can be found at the Whitby Lifeboat Museum. For anyone interested in the area’s history, the Whitby Museum in Pannett Park is also an amazing gem and one of my all-time favourite museums. Also visit Sherlock’s Coffee House, which hasn’t changed much since the Victorian era and look out for Violet Harper’s story, coming next.

The Convenient Felstone Marriage

Jenni Fletcher



www.millsandboon.co.uk

JENNI FLETCHER was born on the north coast of Scotland, and now lives in Yorkshire with her husband and two children. She wanted to be a writer as a child, but got distracted by reading instead, finally writing down her first paragraph thirty years later. She’s had more jobs than she can remember, but has finally found one she loves. She can be contacted via Twitter, [@jenniauthor](#).

A previous book by Jenni Fletcher in

Mills & Boon Historical Romance

Married to Her Enemy

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[Chapter One](#)

North Yorkshire—July 1865

‘But I don’t want to marry him!’ Ianthe Holt felt as though she’d just been slapped in the face. ‘How could you even suggest such a thing?’

‘Because it’s a good idea, that’s why!’ Her brother, Percy, threw his head back against the carriage seat with a sigh. ‘And I didn’t say that you had to, just that you ought to consider it.’

‘He’s twenty years older than me!’

‘Thirty, more like.’

‘Then how could you... How could I...?’

Ianthe spluttered the words, barely resisting the urge to kick her brother violently in the shins. There was a great deal more about Sir Charles Lester than simply his age that bothered her, not that Percy would ever believe that. Good idea or not, the Baronet was the last man on earth she wanted to marry. Even the sight of him these days gave her goosebumps, yet here she was, trapped in a train compartment, every burst of steam and thud of the pistons taking her closer towards him.

Silently she gritted her teeth and stared out of the window, trying to soothe herself with a view of the countryside rolling past. Arguing with Percy these days was pointless, and an outright refusal

would only make him more stubborn. No, she had to try and stay calm, however much she wanted to scream.

Not that the rugged terrain was doing anything to steady her nerves. She was used to city life, to houses and shops and factories. This Yorkshire landscape was so different it felt strangely unnerving, as if the whole world had suddenly become bigger and wilder, as if she were losing control of every aspect of her life.

‘You said we were going to visit Aunt Sophoria.’

‘We are, but Charles has a house near Pickering too. I didn’t lie.’

‘You didn’t say you’d been arranging a wedding behind my back!’

‘Discussing, not arranging. Look, sis, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, but you might try to like him. He’s quite sincere, you know, asked permission for your hand and everything.’

‘He asked you?’ Ianthe swung around incredulously, calm resolve forgotten. ‘I’m twenty-one! I don’t need your permission to marry.’

‘I’m head of the family.’

‘You’re my brother, Percy, my little brother! I’m perfectly capable of making decisions on my own.’

‘I thought it very good of him to come to me first.’

‘Oh, don’t be so pompous! You never used to be. That’s his influence, too.’

‘And you never used to be such a dowdy old spinster. You know you were quite pretty before you went to Bournemouth, but now it’s impossible to tell behind that high collar and that awful hair. Do you have to scrape it back so tightly? You look such a prig.’

‘You know I don’t care for appearances.’

Ianthe twisted her face away quickly, catching an unwelcome glimpse of her reflection in the carriage window, of nondescript brown hair and matching, wide-set eyes. Doe eyes, her father had called them, though they seemed to have grown even bigger since his death. Now they looked almost unnaturally large in her narrow face, making the rest of her features appear too small by comparison.

‘And do you have to wear grey every day?’ Percy seemed to be warming to his theme. ‘It’s depressing.’

‘We’re only just out of mourning!’

‘Exactly, out of mourning. I’d have thought you’d want to wear colour again. Personally, I don’t know what Charles sees in you.’

‘I wish he wouldn’t see anything! And you needn’t be so unchivalrous. We’re not alone.’

She threw a pointed glance towards the man sitting opposite. He’d been asleep when they’d entered the compartment, his dark head resting casually against the windowpane, but Percy was doing nothing to keep his voice down and the last thing she wanted was an audience. Her situation was mortifying enough without it being aired in public.

Besides, she wasn’t at all certain that their travelling companion was quite as unconscious as he’d first appeared. During Percy’s last tirade, she thought she’d glimpsed a slight shift in his expression, an almost infinitesimal furrowing of his brows, as if he were offended on her behalf.

Had she imagined it or was he listening?

She narrowed her eyes, studying his profile as she watched for any further flicker of movement. Even asleep, he was quite strikingly handsome, with a straight nose, chiselled cheekbones and square jaw all framed by black, neatly trimmed hair. His skin was lightly tanned, as if he spent a lot of time outdoors, though judging by the expensive cut of his clothes he was also a gentleman—though surely a gentleman wouldn’t eavesdrop quite so blatantly?

She must have imagined it.

‘What?’ Percy followed the direction of her gaze. ‘Oh, he’s asleep. And I doubt he’d be very interested in our little domestic drama even if he weren’t.’

‘You should still keep your voice down.’

‘Why? If he wakes up, we can ask his opinion. I’m sure he’ll agree with me. No man wants a wife who looks like an old maid.’

‘I don’t want anyone else’s opinion. And don’t you dare ask!’

‘I’m only trying to help. If you don’t marry Charles then I’ve done my best and that’s that. You’ll have to find someone else on your own and you’ll never catch a husband looking like that. Ow!’

Ianthe shot her brother a venomous glare, slowly retracting the elbow she’d just jabbed violently into his ribs. She knew exactly how her appearance made her appear. That was the whole point. She didn’t like her grey clothes or dowdy hairstyle any more than he did, but at least she couldn’t be accused of drawing attention to herself. She couldn’t be accused of anything untoward at all. This was who she was, who she wanted to be now, whether Percy or any other man liked it or not.

But his words still hurt, especially since the old Percy would never have been so cruel as to insult her. Since their mother’s death from consumption the previous year, followed by their father’s grief-stricken demise soon after, her brother’s whole character seemed to have changed for the worse, his sunny disposition darkening the more time he spent with Sir Charles. Now she felt as though she hardly knew him at all. If she could only reach out to the old Percy, appeal to his better nature somehow...

‘I just wish you’d told me the truth about this trip.’ She tried not to sound too accusing. ‘Can’t we be honest with each other?’

Percy heaved a sigh. ‘Look, Charles asked me not to tell you he’d be here. He said he wanted to surprise you, show you his house or something before he proposed. He spends most of his time in London, but he seems very proud of the place. That’s why I didn’t say anything until we reached Malton.’

‘Because you knew I’d take the first train home, you mean.’

‘That, too. But now we’re here, can’t you just look on it as a holiday? It must be at least ten years since we last visited Aunt Sophoria.’

‘Twelve.’

Ianthe found herself relenting slightly. Their aunt hadn’t been well enough to attend either of their parents’ funerals, though her letters of condolence had been tender and thoughtful, even inviting her to move north, though Ianthe had known that her aged, impoverished relative could hardly afford to keep herself, let alone anyone else. Given what had happened afterwards, however, now she rather wished she’d accepted...

In any case, the thought of spending some time with Aunt Sophoria now was the one bright point on her horizon. Her memories of childhood holidays spent with their mother’s sister were vague, but happy. Mostly she remembered a mass of lace and blonde ringlets enveloped in a cloud of sweet-smelling perfume.

‘I’ll be glad to see her again.’

‘And she’s agreed that you can stay as long as you want.’

‘What do you mean?’ The nostalgic feeling evaporated at once. ‘I thought we were only staying a week.’

‘Well...’ Percy squirmed in his seat. ‘The truth is, London’s expensive. I can’t afford lodgings for us both any more. And Charles thinks it’s more appropriate for you to live with Aunt Sophoria anyway.’

‘Charles thinks that?’

‘Yes, but I agree. I should have seen the propriety of it sooner.’

‘So you mean this—all of this—was his idea?’

‘I suppose so, though it really just goes to show how much he cares for you. He’s a capital fellow. You know Father thought so, too.’

‘Father never suggested I marry him! And you know how Mother felt. She didn’t even like being in the same room with him if she could help it. She always took me away, too.’

‘Oh, you women and your prejudices!’ Percy rolled his eyes in exasperation. ‘All I know is that he’s been very good to me this past year. He’s helped me out a lot with expenses.’

‘You owe him money?’

‘Just a little, though you needn’t look so disapproving. It’s not easy supporting both of us. I know Father didn’t mean to leave us in such a sorry financial state, but he did. I had to pay the bills somehow.’

‘You can’t blame Father.’ Ianthe stiffened defensively. ‘You know he was heartbroken after Mother died.’

‘He was irresponsible, letting all his investments go to ruin and leaving me to carry the burden.’

‘Burden?’ She flinched. Was that all she was now?

‘I didn’t mean it like that.’ Percy at least had the decency to look shame-faced. ‘All I’m saying is that we need to be practical. We don’t have the income to carry on as we are. Marriage is the only solution for a woman in your position and as far as I can see you’re not overwhelmed with suitors. That’s why I brought you here to see Charles.’

Ianthe felt a roiling sensation deep in the pit of her stomach, something between fear and disgust. She’d had her suspicions about the Baronet’s intentions—had made her own feelings on the subject abundantly clear, or so she’d thought—but she still hadn’t expected him to stoop so low.

This was all a trick. No, worse than that, a trap. Sir Charles had manipulated Percy into bringing her here, cutting her off from her home and friends, isolating her in a remote northern town with only an impoverished maiden aunt for company, probably assuming that she’d be forced to marry him.

Well, she wouldn’t be manipulated so easily. There had to be another alternative.

‘I’ll find employment.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. After what happened last time?’

‘That wasn’t my fault!’

‘So you keep saying. It’s just a good job the family were discreet or your reputation would have been ruined. I’m only glad Charles didn’t hear of it.’

Ianthe folded her arms mutinously, heartily wishing the opposite. ‘It’s not likely to happen again.’

‘No.’ Percy’s gaze swept over her critically. ‘I suppose not. But if getting a job doesn’t work out, what then? You’ll have nothing to fall back on. Marrying Charles is your best option, you must see that. You’ll have money and protection and children, too, I suppose.’

‘Children?’ She spluttered the word in horror. The way Sir Charles looked at her was bad enough. The thought of him touching her made her skin crawl. As for having children...she wasn’t exactly sure what that entailed, but she definitely didn’t want to find out.

From a practical perspective, however, Percy was right—the Baronet was her best option. Life as a governess had been far more dispiriting than she’d expected and, after what had happened in Bournemouth, the thought of finding another position made her stomach twist with anxiety. If she could find another position... It had been hard enough the first time and it wasn’t as if she could ask for references! If word of what had happened there got out, she’d be lucky ever to find employment again.

Besides, no matter how hard she tried, how severely she dressed or how distantly she behaved, nothing she did ever seemed to deter Sir Charles. He’d always looked at her strangely, ever since she was a child and he’d introduced himself as an old friend of her mother’s, but since her death those looks seemed to have become more intense than ever. He’d gone abroad for a few months after the funeral, but since he’d come back, around the same time she’d returned from Bournemouth, he seemed to be always around Percy, always there, always watching her. There seemed to be no escaping him these days. She was tired of resisting, tired of trying to hide. And if Percy owed him money...surely it was her duty to help repay the debt, no matter what the cost to herself?

‘This must be Rillington.’ Percy leapt up as the train slowed to a halt. ‘I’m going to get a newspaper. All this arguing is giving me a headache.’

‘Wait!’ She grabbed his hand as he passed by, making one last desperate appeal. ‘There’s just something about him. I can’t explain it...’

‘Well, whatever it is, it shouldn’t bother you for long. Charles must be fifty at least.’

‘Percy!’ She dropped his hand at once. ‘You shouldn’t say such things! Someone might hear you.’

‘Oh, I can’t win!’ He flung the compartment door open and jumped out. ‘I won’t be long. Just promise me that you’ll think about it and be sensible.’

‘If I do, will you promise to tell me the truth from now on?’

‘Of course!’ He was already striding away. ‘Just remember, thirty years! You’ll be a rich widow soon enough.’

Ianthe glared after him, seized with the impulse to follow, to grab her bag, leap down onto the platform and run away. But where would she go? Percy and her aunt were the only relatives she had left and now it seemed even they were conspiring against her. She fell back against her seat, watching her brother’s retreating back, silently resenting his freedom. He never worried about how he behaved or how indiscreet he sounded. He never worried about censure at all. How could the rules for men and women be so different? At least no one else had been around to overhear his last remark.

She gave a sudden guilty start, sitting bolt upright again as she met the steely gaze of the man sitting opposite. He hadn’t moved, hadn’t so much as lifted his head, but he was wide awake now, looking straight at her with an expression of brooding, almost ferocious intensity. This time there was no mistaking the frown on his stern features. He looked furious.

‘You’re awake.’ She found herself stating the obvious.

‘As you can see.’

She blinked, taken aback by the scathing tone of his deep, northern-accented voice. He was leaning back in his seat without making even the slightest attempt to sit up, as if she were so far beneath his contempt that there was no need for propriety, the look in his eyes even more insulting than his manner. She felt her mouth turn dry. Besides Sir Charles, no man had looked at her so intently for a long time. In her new, drab garb she’d started to think herself almost invisible to the opposite sex, but now this stranger’s pale gaze seemed to bore straight through her.

Quickly, she glanced out of the window, but there was no sign of Percy. Typical of him to be indiscreet and then leave her to clear up the mess! Clearly this man had overheard some, if not all, of their conversation after all. Now it looked as though he were about to rebuke her for it. Well, she was in no mind for a lecture, especially not today.

‘Sir.’ She lifted her chin up defensively. ‘I beg you to forget anything you might have overheard. It was a private conversation.’

‘Then perhaps you ought not to have held it in a public carriage.’

‘A gentleman ought not to eavesdrop.’

‘I could hardly help it. I should think the whole locomotive could hear your brother’s voice.’

She felt her cheeks flush scarlet with mortification. Even if that were true, which she was afraid it might be, he ought not to mention it. What kind of a gentleman was he?

‘My brother shouldn’t have been so indiscreet. But as you doubtless heard, I already reprimanded him.’

‘Was that a reprimand?’ Grey eyes regarded her mockingly. ‘It sounded as if you were more afraid of having your little scheme overheard.’

Scheme? She opened her mouth to protest and then closed it again. Now that she thought of it, she’d only told Percy to be quiet. She hadn’t contradicted him at all. No wonder this man assumed the worst, though he still had no right to chastise her. They hadn’t been introduced and she was a lady sitting on her own. They shouldn’t even be talking, let alone arguing.

She folded her hands primly in her lap. ‘I do not have a scheme, sir.’

‘Except to marry a man you dislike for his money and then wish for his imminent demise. What would you call that but a scheme?’

‘I’d say you know nothing about it. And since you care so little for good manners, I might add that appearances can be deceptive. You, for example, look like a gentleman, yet you very clearly are not.’

‘Perhaps not, though I’ve been called far worse, I assure you.’

‘I don’t doubt it. But my affairs are none of your business.’

‘On the contrary.’ A shadow darkened his face. ‘I think it every man’s business to know that women like you exist.’

‘Women like me?’ An icy chill raced down her spine. What did that mean? How could he know what kind of woman she was? How could he possibly tell?

‘Schemers. Deceivers. Women who say one thing to a man’s face and another behind his back.’ He let his gaze drop contemptuously, as if he were studying her from head to toe and finding her wanting. ‘You don’t even have the decency to speak well of your quarry. At least I know what I am. You still think yourself a lady, I suppose?’

He turned his face away, staring out of the window as she gazed into thin air, speechless with shock. How was it possible? After everything she’d done to alter her appearance, to alter herself, how could he still look at her and call her a schemer?

She caught her breath, struggling against the old familiar feelings of shame and self-loathing. She’d been called a schemer once before, had tried to plead her innocence then, too, not that it had made any difference. Was everything they’d said about her in Bournemouth true, then? Was there something so bad, so inherently corrupt in her nature that even a stranger could see it?

No! Her mind resisted the idea. And even if there was, it wasn’t intentional. She wasn’t the one scheming against Sir Charles. She didn’t want anything to do with him at all. He was the one scheming against her! And how dare this stranger speak to her so abominably, as if she were the most shame-faced fortune-hunter he’d ever laid eyes on. Whoever he was, he had no right to judge!

‘Yes,’ she began angrily, ‘I do call myself a lady. At least as much as you’re a gentleman. And if you’d been paying closer attention or given me the slightest benefit of the doubt, you’d know that I have no desire and certainly no intention of marrying Sir Charles!’

‘Sir Charles?’ The stranger turned his head sharply at the end of her speech, having continued to stare out of the window for most of it. ‘You mean Charles Lester?’

Ianthe bit her tongue, realising her mistake a few seconds too late. Was it possible that they hadn’t mentioned his identity earlier? No, now that she thought of it, Percy always referred to him as Charles, while she avoided his name altogether. Not that there was any point in denying it now.

She nodded cautiously as the stranger ran a hand through his hair, muttering something indistinguishable under his breath.

‘Do you know him, sir?’

‘We’re acquainted.’

‘Oh.’

She waited, hardly knowing whether to feel guilty or relieved. For once, it seemed as though Percy’s behaviour would have consequences. If this man were acquainted with Sir Charles, then doubtless he’d tell him everything they’d just said. On the other hand, embarrassing as it was, it would solve her dilemma. After such a public condemnation, the Baronet would probably never want to see her again.

Perhaps it hadn’t been such a terrible mistake after all...

‘In that case...’ the stranger leaned forward suddenly, resting his forearms on his knees as he bent closer towards her ‘...I believe I ought to retract my last comments. I overheard half a conversation and reacted badly. I believe I came in somewhere around the time you were denouncing your brother as pompous and then I could hardly intrude without embarrassing you.’ He frowned, as if admitting something against his will. ‘But it was wrong of me, I ought to have announced myself. I wasn’t trying to listen, but your brother’s last words...’ He shook his head regretfully. ‘I apologise unreservedly.’

Ianthe blinked in bewilderment, stunned by such a marked transformation. The stranger's voice was still terse, but the ferocious scowl and derisive curl of his lip were gone, as if the focus of his anger had simply shifted elsewhere. What had happened? A moment ago he'd seemed to despise the very sight of her and now he was apologising? The only difference was that he'd learnt the identity of her suitor.

The realisation was distinctly unsettling.

'You have a poor opinion of Sir Charles then?' She hardly dared ask.

'None that I'd care to repeat.'

'Under the circumstances, I believe I have a right to know.'

He shook his head, looking out of the window with a brooding expression. 'As I said, we're only acquaintances. Most of what I know is second-hand and I don't care for gossip.'

'You just called me a schemer, sir,' she snapped. 'I don't see why you should start being reticent now.'

He looked back towards her then, his gaze newly appraising, and she found herself smoothing her hands over the folds of her dress self-consciously. What was he looking at? What was he thinking? Not that she cared what he thought of her, but the piercing gleam in those ironclad eyes disturbed her somehow. Still, if he thought he could avoid giving her an answer, he could think again...

She lifted her chin, determined not to yield. 'If you want me to forgive you, then you might at least have the decency to tell me the truth.'

A single black eyebrow quirked upwards. 'What does it matter if you intend to refuse him?'

'It matters because my brother spends a great deal of time in his company. If there's something unsuitable about Sir Charles, then I'd like to know about it.'

He nodded his head slightly, her words seeming to convince him at last. 'Very well, then. I think he's a lecher and a gambler, though rich enough, I grant you. I wouldn't blame any woman for objecting to such an alliance.'

'Even a woman like me?'

A muscle jumped in his jaw. 'Forgive me, I misspoke. My anger was mainly directed at your brother, but when I opened my eyes, he'd already gone. I'm afraid I took my temper out on the wrong person. I beg you to forget what I said.'

'Forget?' She stared at him incredulously. 'You think it so easy to forget such words?'

'No. Perhaps not.' His gaze flickered momentarily. 'My only excuse is that I've had a difficult morning. I felt provoked.'

'And that's supposed to be an apology?' She gave a curt laugh. Difficult morning or not, he had no right to vent his bad temper on her. She already had Percy's insults to contend with. She didn't need some stranger's as well!

'It's an explanation. You have to admit your brother's words were callous in the extreme.'

'My brother is young and sometimes foolish, but he wants what's best for me.'

'By forcing you to marry a man like Lester? Yes, he sounds an ideal brother.'

'He's not forcing me to do anything! You don't know anything about it. Or us. Our financial circumstances are such that—'

She stopped mid-sentence, wondering why she was even bothering to argue. None of this was his business. There was no need to defend either herself or Percy. Except that she felt a strange desire to explain herself, if only to get the matter clear in her own mind.

'My brother wishes to see me settled and financially secure, that's all. Not that I'd expect a man of means to understand that.'

The stranger's lips twisted scornfully. 'Not all men are born with means. Some of us make our own way without selling our sisters.'

'How dare you!' She felt her temper snap, her voice rising with anger. How dare he suggest something so monstrous, as if Percy would barter her off simply to pay back his debts and free himself

from the responsibility of providing for her! Even if there was a grain of truth to the accusation, she refused to believe that her brother was so heartless! He was just young, that was all...

‘I speak as I find.’

‘Then you’re no gentleman, sir. You’re a disgrace to the word! And I’d be grateful if you’d keep the rest of your thoughts to yourself.’

She swung away, chest heaving, half-relieved, half-dismayed by her outburst. Not that he didn’t deserve such censure, but if he was no gentleman, then she was certainly no lady to behave in such an unrestrained, uncontrolled manner. Maybe what they’d said about her in Bournemouth was true after all...

‘Tell me, is it marriage itself you object to or Sir Charles in particular?’

She turned back towards him, eyes widening in disbelief. Why was he still talking? Why couldn’t he just leave her alone? He sounded infuriatingly calm, not the slightest bit offended by her insults.

‘I believe I asked you to be quiet, sir.’

‘No, you asked me to keep my thoughts to myself. Hence my interest in yours.’

‘You’re impertinent!’

A hint of sardonic amusement crossed his features. ‘I think we passed impertinent a long time ago. But since we’ve already established that I’m not a true gentleman and since I’d like to make amends for my behaviour, I have a proposal for you.’

‘A proposal?’ She repeated the word suspiciously.

‘A business proposition, if you prefer. Something that might benefit both of us.’

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of Percy strolling back along the platform towards them, whistling and swinging a newspaper in one hand. There was no time for this. Whatever the stranger’s proposal was, it was too late to hear it. She had to conclude this bizarre, indiscreet, utterly inappropriate conversation as quickly as possible.

‘I’ve no interest in anything else you have to say, sir.’

‘You won’t hear me out?’

‘My brother is returning. I beg you to say no more on the subject. On any subject.’

‘Shame.’ He looked nonplussed. ‘I was prepared to offer you an alternative to Sir Charles.’

She froze. Was he offering her employment? He sounded sincere, but why would he offer to help her? Was this some kind of cruel joke or just another veiled insult?

‘What kind of alternative?’ she couldn’t resist asking.

‘What I said, a business proposition.’

‘I know nothing of business, sir. I was a governess.’ She regarded him dubiously. ‘Do you need a governess?’

‘Yes, as it happens. Though I was thinking of something a little more permanent.’

‘A companion for your mother, perhaps?’

‘My mother is dead.’ He leaned back in his seat, adopting the same casual posture in which she’d first seen him.

‘Your sister, then?’ She glanced anxiously out of the window. Percy was only a few paces away.

‘I don’t have a sister, so far as I know anyway.’

‘Then what?’ she burst out in exasperation as Percy’s hand reached for the door handle. Why couldn’t he just get to the point? ‘What do you need, sir?’

‘The position is with me.’ He smiled suddenly, transforming his features from simply striking to quite devastatingly, heart-stoppingly handsome. ‘I need a wife.’

Chapter Two

Robert Felstone was aware that he’d been acting badly.

He’d boarded the train in a ferocious temper that had only deteriorated the further they’d travelled. He hadn’t intended to listen, had feigned sleep in order to be alone with his own troubled

thoughts, but the conversation taking place opposite had first disturbed and then enraged him. After Louisa's refusal of his marriage proposal that morning every word had felt like a fresh insult.

He'd tried his best to ignore it, but the unseen woman's antipathy towards her suitor had struck a raw nerve. Was that how Louisa had talked about him behind his back? Had she been secretly repelled by his visits even as she'd batted her eyelashes so convincingly?

The memory of their interview still made his blood boil. If it hadn't been for Louisa's flirting, he would never have even considered proposing, yet she'd had the nerve to imply—no, more than that, to actually say—he wasn't good enough. He'd thought success in business had earned him a place in society, a modicum of respect at least, but apparently that wasn't the case. He was just as disreputable now as he'd always been. He was the only fool who hadn't known it.

Back on the train, half-listening, half-fuming over his rejection, he'd become increasingly irate, interpreting every word from his own injured perspective, taking the side of the beleaguered suitor before finally venting his anger on the unfortunate would-be bride. He'd been offensive, improper and unforgivably rude, as if Louisa's comments about his past had actually stripped away the veneer of respectability he'd worked so hard to attain.

It was only when he'd learned the mysterious suitor's identity that he'd finally come to his senses, anger turning at once to agreement. Lester's name had changed everything, but by then the damage had been done. He'd done what he'd always sworn he would never do and judged a woman without knowing her whole story, as if he had any right to play judge and jury.

And then he'd proposed. What the hell was he doing?

He leaned back in his seat, folding one leg casually over the other as he watched the rapid interplay of emotions on his travelling companion's face. Judging by the combination of shock and outrage, a passer-by might reasonably assume he'd just propositioned rather than proposed to her. Which in one sense, he supposed, he had. They hadn't even been introduced and here he was suggesting a far more intimate relationship. No wonder she looked so appalled. He didn't even know her name.

'Just in time.' The brother bounded back into the carriage just as the stationmaster's whistle blew. 'I say, sis, are you hot? You look like a beetroot.'

'I...'. She looked vaguely surprised to see him. 'A little warm, that's all.'

She raised both hands to her cheeks, still peering warily through her fingers as if afraid they were trapped in a carriage with a madman. Robert felt tempted to laugh. Given his recent behaviour, it was a reasonable assumption. He was almost starting to question his sanity himself. He'd spent twenty-six years specifically not thinking about marriage and now he'd made two proposals in one day.

Was he out of his mind?

He frowned, seriously considering the question. Had his pride been so badly injured by Louisa that he'd felt the need to propose to the very next woman he met? Or was he so unaccustomed to hearing the word no that he'd had to keep going until he got the answer he wanted? It was just the kind of reckless, impulsive behaviour he might have expected from his younger self, not the sensible, respectable man of business he was today. After all the time and thought he'd put into deciding whether or not to ask Louisa, was he really prepared to jump to the furthest extreme and marry a complete stranger?

What if she said yes?

The brother dropped into the seat opposite and Robert gave a polite nod, wishing he could throw a fist at his jaw instead. Now that the woman's situation was clearer he felt angrier towards the youth than ever. If he were really friends with Lester, then surely he knew what kind of a man he was, especially where women were concerned. What kind of brother actively encouraged his sister to marry such a reprobate?

The idea of offering her an alternative had come to him out of the blue, somewhere around the time she'd demanded to know his real opinion of Charles Lester. It had been an impulse, a desire to make amends for his insulting behaviour, combined with a determination to put Louisa behind him and get his affairs settled once and for all, but then he was accustomed to trusting his impulses. His business instincts had never steered him wrong before, and wasn't marriage a business? When one deal didn't work out, he moved on to another.

It wasn't as if he'd ever expected to marry for love. Growing up with his mother had taught him the folly of that particular emotion. He'd done his best to act the lovesick swain for Louisa, though in truth he'd found the pretence as tedious as the rest of their courtship. Perhaps that had been his mistake, trying to speak a language he didn't understand. Business, he did understand. Business, he was good at it. In his domain, no one could ever accuse him of not being good enough.

In which case, why not take emotion out of the equation and treat marriage strictly as a business arrangement? He had neither the time nor inclination for a new courtship, and this woman seemed more than a little reluctant to wed Sir Charles. It was the perfect business proposal, a mutually beneficial arrangement for them both. He was in the market for a wife, she for a husband. He'd thought to make a society match, but since Louisa had made it abundantly clear that no lady of any social standing would have him, asking this stranger had seemed the obvious thing to do.

Somehow, insanely, it still did.

Even if she was the strangest-looking damsel in distress he'd ever seen. With his eyes closed, he'd assumed the brother's insults had been exaggerated to hurt her feelings, but first impressions made it difficult to argue. It was hard to imagine what Sir Charles saw in her. Her clothes were so old-fashioned they seemed to belong to another era, every item a drab, uniform grey that did nothing for her wan complexion. Her collar was so high it looked as if it must surely constrict her breathing, while the rest of her gown was completely shapeless, hanging loose around her waist with almost no definition at all. Combined with an ancient-looking poke bonnet, woollen gloves, a shawl that might better serve as a dishcloth and a pair of heavy lace-up boots, she seemed determined to look as severe and dowdy as possible.

Ungallant as it sounded, she wasn't exactly the bride he'd envisaged when he'd set out that morning. Louisa, with her golden curls and indigo-blue eyes, was the most exquisitely beautiful creature he'd ever laid eyes on. This woman looked as though she never even glanced in a mirror. Side by side they might resemble an old crow next to a glamorous swan.

After Louisa's rejection, on the other hand, the very contrast was appealing. Besides which, there was no trace of meanness in her face, no hint of Louisa's sulkiness or petulance. It was a pleasant face, albeit a trifle too thin, a fact accentuated by the severity of her hairstyle, scraped back so tightly that he could hardly distinguish the colour, a nondescript shade somewhere between blonde and brown. But her skin was clear, her lips full and wide, and there were even faint lines curving upwards from the corners of her eyes as if, difficult though it was to imagine, she was accustomed to laughter. Overall, she might be quite pretty, if she hadn't clearly resolved to be otherwise.

'It's only twenty minutes to Pickering.' The brother seemed blithely unaware of any tension in the compartment. 'So the porter says.'

'A little longer.' Robert interrupted smoothly, glad of the chance to prove his respectability, if not his sanity, at least. 'Forgive my intrusion, but the new deviation line to Whitby has only just opened. It's a longer route so it's caused a few delays along the branch line, but some of the porters still forget.'

'The new line takes longer than the old one?' The youth sounded scornful. 'That doesn't sound like progress.'

Robert allowed himself a cynical half-smile. What was it the sister had called him? Pompous. The word seemed particularly apt.

‘It’s much safer than the old rope-worked system at Beckhole. It’s a steep hill and there have been several bad accidents there over the years. The new route is safer.’

‘Ah...well, when you put it like that.’ The youth nodded sagely. ‘Are you connected to the railway, sir?’

‘I’m on the board of directors.’ Robert smiled, gratified to see the woman’s head twist slightly towards him, as if she were reviewing an earlier opinion.

‘Indeed? Then I’m glad to meet you. My name’s Percy Holt.’

‘Robert Felstone, delighted to meet you.’

‘Felstone? Have we met before, sir? Your name seems familiar, but I can’t place it.’

‘I don’t think so. Unless...perhaps you visit the area often?’

‘No, not for a long time, though we used to come every summer as children. Our mother was from Pickering. We’re going to stay with our aunt there now.’ The youth gestured towards the woman almost as an afterthought. ‘This is my sister, Miss Ianthe Holt.’

‘A pleasure, Miss Holt.’

He offered a hand, wondering if she would take it. She could hardly refuse to acknowledge him without telling her brother what had just happened and, from what he’d observed of their relationship, he didn’t think she was about to do that. Besides, for some strange reason he found himself actually wanting to touch her, to find out if she were really as buttoned-up as she seemed. She looked so strait-laced that he felt an unexpected desire to ruffle her up.

‘Mr Felstone.’ She extended a hand, letting it drift vaguely in his direction before retracting it again quickly.

Robert felt a powerful urge to laugh. He wasn’t accustomed to women expressing anything other than gratitude for his attention. Even Louisa, insincere as she’d apparently been, had seemed flattered by it. This woman looked as though she wanted to throw him from the train. Was she still angry over his earlier comments or did she simply doubt the sincerity of his proposal? he wondered. And in the latter case...how could he convince her?

‘Ianthe. That’s an unusual name.’

He flashed his most charming smile. Even during his penniless youth, he’d quickly discovered the disarming effects of his good looks upon women. Since earning his fortune, these seemed to have increased tenfold, though he suspected this woman might prove more of a challenge.

‘It’s from a poem.’ Her expression didn’t alter.

‘Ah. There are gaps in my education, I’m afraid. I never studied poetry.’

‘You amaze me.’ She didn’t bother to hide the sarcasm. ‘It teaches men refinement, I think. Or at least how to speak to a lady.’

‘Ianthe!’ Percy sounded shocked. ‘Forgive my sister, Mr Felstone. We’ve travelled all the way from London today. She must be tired.’

‘On the contrary—’ she glared at her brother acerbically ‘—I’m feeling quite fresh. There’s no need to speak for me.’

Robert bit back a smile. No, it seemed the prim and proper Miss Holt—he was glad to know her name at last—wouldn’t be so easy to charm at all. Somehow the thought made her all the more appealing. But the train was already slowing into Pickering station. If he was going to convince her, he didn’t have much time.

‘Wait a minute!’ The brother held up his newspaper suddenly, pointing to the headline. “‘Felstone’s of Whitby awarded new naval contract.’” I knew I recognised your name from somewhere! Are you connected to the shipbuilding family, sir?’

‘I am that family, I’m afraid. All there is of it anyway.’

‘So you’re on your way to Whitby?’

‘Eventually, though I’m staying in Pickering for a few days. There’s to be a public gala and private ball celebrating the official opening of the new railway line tomorrow. I’d be happy to add your names to the invitation list if you wish?’

‘I don’t travel with a ball gown, sir.’ Miss Holt sounded distinctly unimpressed.

‘Well, I’d be delighted.’ The youth threw her an icy look. ‘I’m afraid my sister prefers books to dancing these days. I expect she’d rather visit the castle.’

‘Indeed?’ An image of Sir Charles flashed into Robert’s mind. ‘You like old things, then?’

Doe eyes flashed back. ‘I enjoy history, Mr Felstone. I don’t enjoy being mocked.’

‘I’m quite serious, I assure you, Miss Holt. I’m rarely anything but.’

She made a scornful sound. ‘I find that hard to believe from a man whose manner can change so completely. Just now, for example, I had the impression that you were angry and yet here we all are, the best of friends.’

‘Make enquiries in the town about me if you wish.’

‘You overestimate my interest, sir.’

‘Anthe!’ The brother’s mouth dropped open. ‘What’s the matter with you?’

‘With me?’ She swung towards him, two crimson spots appearing high up on her cheekbones. ‘You’re the one who can’t keep his thoughts to himself! This is all your fault.’

‘My fault? I apologise, Mr Felstone, I don’t know what she’s talking about, but I’m sure she meant no offence.’

‘I’m sure she did not.’ Robert waved his apology away as the train gave a final burst of steam and shuddered to a halt.

‘And I’m sure I did!’

She stood up abruptly, grabbing a carpet bag from the rail above her head and swinging it in front of her like a shield. ‘Good day, Mr Felstone. I doubt our paths will meet again. Our stay is of only a very short duration and our diary is fully engaged.’

‘Ah.’ Robert bent his head in acknowledgement. She could hardly have made her answer any clearer. ‘In that case I wish you well. Whatever you decide.’

She didn’t reply, flinging open the compartment door and storming furiously away.

‘I say...’ The brother jumped down after her, turning at the last moment with a look of apology. ‘Sorry about that. Women, you know. But if you’re serious about the ball, I’d be very grateful.’

Robert nodded absently, a faint smile playing around his lips as he watched her grey dress disappear into the crowd. Common sense told him he ought to feel relieved by her refusal. He knew almost nothing about her, and hadn’t the brother mentioned some impropriety? Still, it was hard to imagine anything too shocking about her, nothing scandalous for certain. And there was definitely something about her, something that grabbed and held his attention. He wasn’t sure—couldn’t even imagine—what it was, but it made him reluctant to concede defeat so easily. She was... He strove for the right word... Interesting.

He picked up his top hat and suitcase and stepped down from the carriage. The platform was crowded, heaving with passengers and luggage, the walls and metal-beamed ceiling decorated with banners for the approaching gala. He made his way steadily through the throng, nodding to various acquaintances without stopping to speak, his mind preoccupied with the image of a woman in a grey dress.

‘Ah, Felstone, you’re here at last!’ A cheerful-looking man with a shock of unruly blond hair accosted him the moment he stepped into the station office. ‘Come and read this speech, will you?’

Robert smiled and put down his case, leaning against a desk as he scanned quickly through a sheath of papers. ‘It’s good, Giles. Just don’t forget to thank us all for our patience.’

‘Too long, then?’

‘Maybe a page or two, but I’m sure you’ll do a splendid job.’

The other man made a harrumphing noise. 'I wish I shared your confidence. Couldn't you do it instead? You're far better at public speaking than I am.'

'You're the engineer.'

'Exactly. I'd rather be working on the line than talking about it. Why does everything we do have to be celebrated with banners and bunting?'

'Not to mention a ball.'

Giles groaned aloud. 'Don't remind me. Kitty's been talking about it non-stop all week. By the by, she told me something very interesting about you at breakfast.'

'Really?' Robert kept his gaze fixed on the papers.

'Seemed to think you were on the verge of matrimony with Louisa Allendon.'

'Trust me, Giles, if I were you'd be the first to know.'

'So it's not true, then? Pity. Kitty was quite excited. Thought we could have dinner parties or something.'

'Then I'm sorry to disappoint her, though as it happens, she was half-right. The lady simply decided against me.'

'She refused you?' Giles's eyebrows almost vanished into his hairline. 'But she's been flirting with you for months!'

'I had that impression, too, but it appears I'm not quite respectable enough. Not respectable at all, apparently. Certain things about my past—my parentage—were disagreeable to her.'

'Ridiculous!' Giles looked outraged on his behalf. 'It's not as if any of it was your fault!'

Robert smiled and put a hand on his friend's shoulder. 'It was foolish of me to think anyone had forgotten. It seems wealth and success allow access to society, not acceptance.'

'The woman's a fool!'

'In any case, I'm sure Kitty will be able to tell you everything in a few days, probably more than I know myself. In the meantime, we have a gala and ball to endure.'

He strode across to the window, putting the subject firmly behind him, searching the street below for any sign of a grey dress. Where had Miss Holt been going when she'd stormed away? The brother had mentioned an aunt...

'Is that Charles Lester?' His gaze sharpened suddenly.

'Mmm?' Giles came to stand at his side. 'Oh, yes, he arrived in town yesterday. I played cards with him in the Swan last night. Seemed very pleased with himself despite the fact he was losing.'

'What about?'

'Didn't say. Something about a woman, most likely.' Giles did an abrupt double take. 'I say, don't be too bothered.'

'What?'

'You were scowling. I said, don't be too bothered about Louisa.'

'Oh. No, I wasn't thinking about her.'

He moved away from the window, turning his back firmly on Charles Lester. The Baronet represented the very worst of his class. Arrogant, entitled, not to mention a notorious womaniser. His reputation was near legendary, almost as much as his own father's had been, his conquests usually women without protectors or ones poor enough to be paid off afterwards. The orphaned, impoverished Miss Holt seemed to fit the bill exactly, though the brother had definitely said he wanted to marry her. Not that she seemed like his usual type of woman. Like anyone's type, for that matter.

Still, the thought of the strait-laced Miss Holt in Sir Charles's clutches made him feel inexplicably angry. After his own behaviour that morning, he felt strangely protective towards her, as if he'd somehow become responsible for her well-being. Not that he could help her if she wouldn't let him. He'd asked her to marry him, for pity's sake! He could hardly make any more amends than that...

'I say, are you sure you're all right?' Giles peered at him thoughtfully. 'You seem preoccupied. Nothing wrong at the shipyard, I hope?'

‘No, they don’t need me for a few days.’ His lips curved wryly. ‘It’s just a new proposal I’m working on.’

‘Need any help?’

‘No, though there is something Kitty could do.’

‘Whatever you need. You know she’s half-smitten with you.’

‘Only half?’

‘Very funny. It’s not fair that some men have good looks and fortune.’

‘Not enough for Louisa Allendon, apparently.’

‘I always thought she was flighty. What did you see in her anyway? Besides her more obvious attractions, I wouldn’t have thought the two of you well suited.’

Robert drew his brows together, surprised by his friend’s acuity. Now that he thought about it, it was hard to remember what his exact motives had been. He’d simply had the feeling that it was time to marry and Louisa had been beautiful, charming and accomplished, not to mention well connected.

‘It seemed a good match, socially. She’s from an old family and you know her father was close friends with mine...’

His voice trailed away as he realised what he was saying. Was that the real reason he’d proposed to her, then, to prove a point to his dead father? Fool. It was too late for that, five years too late. The very idea was ludicrous. Not to mention grossly unfair on Louisa. If it hadn’t been for the manner of her refusal, he might have owed her an apology, too.

How could he have been so blind?

‘Ah.’ Giles sounded sympathetic. ‘Well, she couldn’t have done any better, if you ask me.’

‘You’re a good friend.’ Robert pushed the memory of his father aside, burying it along with any thought of Louisa. As for what she’d said, what the whole of society apparently said about him behind his back, he wasn’t going to accept that so lightly. He wasn’t going to accept it at all.

‘Did you know that old Harper’s thinking of selling?’

‘Eh?’ Giles looked startled by the sudden change of subject. ‘You mean his shipyard?’

‘So I hear.’

‘Well, I never. I thought the old boy would go on for ever. Though you know what he’s like. He’ll never find a buyer he approves of. No one’s ever going to be good enough.’

‘Especially not me.’

‘He’s traditional. He definitely won’t sell to a bachelor, I’m afraid. Family values and all that.’

‘That’s what I thought.’

Robert rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He already owned the largest shipyard in Whitby. If he bought Harper’s, then he’d have one of the largest on the east coast, in the country even. It was doable, not to mention a way of proving his worth without society’s help. He smiled slowly. If Louisa and society didn’t think he was good enough to join them, then he’d demand their respect instead—show them all just what an illegitimate upstart son could achieve without their help. He’d be the perfect model of respectability, with more power and influence than his father had ever had.

And he’d start by marrying the most sensible, respectable-looking woman he could find, one that Harper would definitely approve of.

Miss Holt. He’d never seen a woman less likely to cause scandal. She was exactly the sort of wife he needed, a helpmeet, not an ornament, one who could fit unobtrusively into his busy life with the minimum of fuss or distraction, leaving him free to deal with his expanding business concerns. She wasn’t flirtatious or hysterical or highly strung, hadn’t burst into tears or tried to ingratiate herself with him when he’d accused her of being a schemer. On the contrary, she’d given as good as she’d got, had a mind of her own and no fear of speaking it. No, the more he thought of it, the more the strait-laced, straight-talking Miss Holt seemed to be just what he needed, a far more suitable bride than Louisa had ever been.

But she'd said no. As proposals went, it was hard to imagine one going much worse. He could hardly blame her for refusing him. No reasonable woman would accept such a proposal from a stranger who'd just insulted her to her face.

On the other hand, a desperate one might. Just how desperate to avoid marrying Lester was she? he wondered. He had a day to find out. Time enough to convince her to reconsider. And he knew exactly how to start.

'I'll see you tonight.' He clapped a hand on Giles's shoulder, already making for the exit. 'Is Kitty at home?'

'I think so, but what about the speech?'

'We'll discuss it at dinner. I have something important to do first.'

Giles looked taken aback. 'With my wife?'

'I need some information.' Robert threw a grin over his shoulder. 'Then I need to take her shopping.'

Chapter Three

'Are you awake, dear?'

Ianthe opened her eyes, momentarily blinded by the expanse of colour that greeted her. Where was she? In a bedroom she didn't recognise, daubed and draped in such an overwhelming shade of rose-petal pink that she could hardly distinguish one object from another. With the sun streaming in through open curtains, the whole room seemed to be blushing.

'Ianthe?'

She rubbed her eyes, disoriented after such a deep sleep. She had the vague impression that the curtains had been closed only a moment before, but who had opened them? Who was that calling her name? The voice seemed to come from close by...

She yelped, catching sight of a small face, half-hidden beneath a huge frilly nightcap, peering down at her.

'Aunt Sophoria!'

'Oh, good, you're awake.' The face beamed. 'I didn't mean to startle you, but I was starting to worry.'

Ianthe put a hand to her chest, trying to calm her now frantically pounding heartbeat. 'How long have I been asleep?'

'Almost since you arrived.'

Her aunt bustled across the room and then back again, bearing a cup of tea in one hand and a plate of macarons in the other, before perching precariously on the side of the bed.

'Here we are. I bought these as a treat for us last night, but since you were indisposed, we'll have them for breakfast instead.'

'Thank you.' Ianthe accepted the tea gratefully. 'I'm sorry I ruined our arrival, Aunt, but Percy and I had the most dreadful quarrel.'

'So I gathered. You were quite overwrought when you got here.'

'Oh...'. Her cheeks flushed as memories of the day before came flooding back. She'd collapsed into her aunt's arms on the doorstep, still reeling from the shock of Percy's deception and Mr Felstone's so-called proposal. 'I'm sorry.'

'Nonsense! You've given the neighbours something to talk about. They'll be thrilled.' Hazel eyes twinkled mischievously. 'So I sent you off to bed and Percy to stay at the Swan. I had intended for him to use this room while you shared with me, but it seemed like you needed some peace. Besides, I didn't like the way he was talking to you. Takes after your father's side of the family, that one.'

Ianthe smiled, trying to imagine her brother in such a vibrantly pink bedroom. Now that she was getting used to the colour, she was starting to like it, as if she were a little girl back in the nursery. It felt like a safe haven, a space of her own again—a home. That was all she wanted in life now, a

place to hide from the world. But she still owed her aunt an explanation for her behaviour. If only she knew where to begin...

‘It wasn’t entirely Percy’s fault, Aunt. I behaved very badly.’

‘Oh, I doubt that. Have a macaroon.’

‘You don’t understand.’ She took a deep, faltering breath. ‘He wants me to marry Charles Lester.’

‘Lester?’ Aunt Sophoria paused with a biscuit halfway to her lips. ‘That vain old buffoon? Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘You don’t like him?’

‘Never have, never could. He used to hang around your mother when she was a girl, too. I used to chase him away then. What on earth is Percy thinking?’

‘They’ve become close this past year. That’s why Percy brought me here. They arranged it together.’

‘Ah. I did wonder about your brother’s sudden enthusiasm for visiting me after ten years. So Lester’s in on it, then?’

Ianthe lifted her shoulders and then dropped them again despairingly. ‘Percy says he’s going to propose, but I don’t understand it. I’ve done nothing to encourage him and it’s not as if I have money or connections. It can’t be love, I’m sure of it.’

‘Love?’ Her aunt chewed on a macaroon thoughtfully. ‘No, love isn’t a sentiment I’d associate with Charles Lester.’

‘He scares me, Aunt.’ She gave an involuntary shudder, trying to put all the things she’d scarcely dared think about into words. ‘He watches me so intently all the time, like he’s hungry, but as if it’s not really me he’s looking at either. It’s like it’s me, but not me that he wants. I don’t know how else to explain it.’

Aunt Sophoria screwed up her mouth for a moment before patting her hand reassuringly. ‘Well, if you don’t like him then that’s an end to it and we’ll tell your brother so together. As for Lester, don’t worry, I know how to handle him.’

Ianthe put down her tea, flinging her arms around her aunt’s neck with a sob of relief. ‘Oh, thank you, Aunt. I was so afraid you’d agree with Percy.’

‘As if I ever could!’ Aunt Sophoria gave her a tight squeeze. ‘Honestly, men! I ought to box both their ears.’

Ianthe laughed before sitting back again with a guilty expression. ‘That wasn’t all I was upset about, I’m afraid. You see, there was another man on the train.’

An image of Mr Felstone’s sternly handsome features flashed before her eyes, making her hesitate. Perhaps it was better not to tell her aunt about him. In the cold light of day the whole thing sounded ridiculous, as if she’d simply imagined it. Was it possible that she’d somehow misunderstood his proposal? That she’d been so angry that she’d somehow...misheard?

She frowned, thinking over their argument. No, he’d definitely called her a schemer before he’d asked her to marry him. A business proposal, he’d called it, though surely he couldn’t have been serious. No sane man would suggest such a thing to a woman he’d only just met, no gentleman certainly. And yet...he’d seemed sane. He’d even seemed like a gentleman. So why had he said it? At the time she’d assumed that he’d been mocking her, taking advantage of their isolated situation to make fun of her dowdy appearance. Now, after a solid night’s sleep, she felt more confused than ever.

‘You mean Mr Felstone?’ Aunt Sophoria picked up the last macaroon and popped it between her lips.

Ianthe’s mouth dropped open. ‘How do you know that?’

‘Percy told me that part.’

‘So you know I quarrelled with him, too?’

‘Oh, yes, but I wouldn’t worry about it. Mr Felstone’s very civil, nothing if not a gentleman. I’m sure he won’t hold it against you.’

‘Civil?’

‘A bit stern, perhaps, but charming when he wants to be. The older I get, the more invisible I seem to become, especially to men, but Mr Felstone’s always very attentive. He’s considered quite the catch around here despite his background, not that anyone’s managed to land him just yet.’

Ianthe gaped at her aunt, slack-jawed in disbelief. Civil and charming were the last words she would have used to describe him. Did the man have an evil twin, perhaps? If he were even half the gentleman her aunt seemed to think, then surely he wouldn’t have made fun of her so callously, not unless...

She shook her head, resisting the idea. It was impossible. His proposal couldn’t have been genuine...could it?

She racked her brains, searching for another alternative. ‘But is he quite sane, do you think?’

‘Sane? I should think so. He’s a self-made man, owns the biggest shipyard in Whitby, not to mention a whole fleet of merchant vessels. I think he might have something to do with the new ironworks, too, not to mention the railway. I don’t suppose one can be mad and achieve all that.’

‘Oh.’ She didn’t know what else to say, relieved that she hadn’t mentioned his proposal after all. She had the distinct impression that her aunt wouldn’t be quite so sympathetic if she denounced him, too. Though if all of that were true, why on earth had he proposed to her? Surely such an eligible bachelor could have his pick of available women. She felt a stab of resentment. He must have been mocking her after all. As if insulting her weren’t bad enough...

‘You know, his birth caused quite the scandal,’ Aunt Sophoria continued blithely. ‘His father was Lord Theakston.’

‘What’s so scandalous about that?’

‘Nothing at all,’ her aunt chuckled, ‘except that his mother wasn’t Lady Theakston. She never had any children, poor woman. They might have made up for being married to him, the old rogue.’

Ianthe leaned forward, intrigued despite herself. ‘So who was his mother?’

‘One of the housemaids. Not the first he dallied with either, nor the last, but once Lady Theakston found out she was having a baby, she turned her out on to the street.’

‘But that’s awful!’

‘It was, not that Theakston himself did anything to stop it. No one knew where she went after that. Then twelve years later, she and the boy popped up out of the blue in Whitby, he gets himself a job at old Masham’s shipyard, the old man takes a shine to him and before anyone knows it, he owns the whole place. The mother died soon afterward, and there was some kind of reconciliation with his father, but something must have gone wrong. I know they quarrelled before the old man died anyway.’

‘Oh.’ She still didn’t know what to say.

‘Do you know...?’ Aunt Sophoria tilted her head to one side suddenly. ‘You look so much like your mother this morning. I couldn’t see the resemblance last night, but now it’s quite uncanny. I could almost believe you were her again.’

Ianthe smiled, relieved at the change in subject. ‘My father always said we were doubles.’

‘So you are. My poor girl, this past year must have been very hard for you, losing your parents so close together.’

She bit her lip, trying to stop it from trembling. ‘He just seemed to give up without her.’

‘They always had too much romantic sensibility, the pair of them.’

‘Aunt!’

‘They did. He ought to have pulled himself together.’

‘Surely you don’t blame him for dying?’

Aunt Sophoria screwed up her mouth as if torn between two conflicting opinions. ‘No. I suppose not.’

Ianthe stared at her in shocked silence for a moment before bursting into peals of laughter. 'Father always said you were wicked.'

'Did he? How wonderful. I'm the black sheep of the family, you know.' Her aunt smiled mischievously before heaving herself back to her feet. 'But now I think it's time to get up. I unpacked your bag, I hope you don't mind, though there wasn't much there. It's all very respectable, but...' Her face fell and then lit up again suddenly. 'Would you like to borrow something of mine? I have a pink taffeta that would suit you perfectly. I could do your hair, too, if you like. I do so hate these new flat styles.'

Ianthe bit her tongue. The idea of wearing something belonging to her aunt was more than a little alarming. On the other hand, Percy would doubtless waste no time in bringing Sir Charles to call and, if her drab, old-fashioned attire didn't deter him, Aunt Sophoria's wardrobe just might...

'That sounds like a wonderful idea.' She wrenched the bedcovers back with a smile. 'Perhaps I could do with some colour.'

* * *

It didn't take long for Ianthe to regret her decision. Descending the stairs in her aunt's idea of a day gown was far more problematic than she'd imagined. There were so many layers and decorative flounces she had to keep a tight hold on the banister to stop herself from falling and breaking her neck.

She stopped on the landing halfway, studying her reflection in a heavy gilt-framed mirror, wondering whether to burst into laughter or tears. Her aunt's old, steel-rimmed crinoline made her look as if she were wearing several dresses at once, while her puffed sleeves were embellished with enough lace to make a whole other skirt. Her hair, meanwhile, was piled so high on her head that she looked as if she had a bird's nest sitting on top—the whole frizzy arrangement held in place with an oversized day-cap, fastened beneath her chin with an elaborate bow. She looked like some kind of confection, a pink cake topped with white frothy icing.

For a meeting with Sir Charles, she looked perfect.

'Ah, there you are!' Aunt Sophoria met her in the hallway as she finally reached the bottom of the stairs. 'You have a visitor.'

'Already?' Ianthe's heart sank. Apparently Sir Charles wasn't wasting any time.

'He's been waiting ten minutes. And of course Betsy isn't here this morning. I'll have to make the tea myself. Will he want cake, do you think?'

'No! I mean, I'm sure he won't be staying long.'

'We still have to be courteous, dear.' Her aunt squeezed her hand reassuringly. 'Didn't I tell you it would be all right? Now, run along in. You can't keep a man like that waiting.'

'But you said...'

Ianthe felt a twinge of resentment as her aunt vanished through a side door. So much for promising to help her—she'd left her to face Sir Charles alone! On the other hand, at least this would get the interview over with. The events of the day before, upsetting though they'd been, had at least clarified her feelings. She wouldn't marry him, not for money, not for protection, not even for Percy. She had to make that clear once and for all.

She gave the door a firm push, sweeping into the parlour with a determined flourish.

'Good morning, S—'

She stopped short as she caught sight of the man standing with his back towards her. He was taller and more imposing than Sir Charles, his broad shoulders encased in a smart, three-quarter-length navy coat trimmed with royal-blue velvet, the crisp white collar of his shirt contrasting vividly with his thick, black hair.

'Mr Felstone?' she gasped, annoyed by the catch in her own voice.

'I'm afraid so.' He turned around, his expression flitting between surprise and amusement before he seemed to master himself. 'Thank you for seeing me, Miss Holt. Under the circumstances, I would have understood if you'd refused.'

Ianthe stiffened, fighting the urge to turn tail and run. As if everything that had happened yesterday wasn't bad enough, now he had to see her like this? In her aunt's cluttered parlour he looked even more handsome than she remembered, while she looked like some kind of doily! Well, there was no point in trying to hide her outlandish appearance now. He'd already seen the worst. She had to brazen it out, no matter how embarrassing.

'I didn't expect to see you here, Mr Felstone.'

'Ah.' He seemed to guess the truth. 'You were expecting Sir Charles perhaps?'

'Yes.' She regarded him warily. 'How did you find me? I don't think I told you where I was staying.'

'You didn't, but I have a friend whose wife is fortunate enough to know everything that happens in Pickering.' He raised an eyebrow inquiringly. 'But I can leave if you prefer?'

For a moment, she was tempted to agree. After yesterday, he was the last man—almost the last man, she corrected herself—that she wanted to see. On the other hand, her aunt clearly held a very different opinion. She wouldn't appreciate her throwing him out, no matter how much she wanted to.

'It's not my house.' She shrugged. 'You may do as you please.'

'You're very kind.'

She glanced at him suspiciously, but he looked utterly calm and contained, a whole different man to the one who'd insulted her just yesterday, in complete control of his words and temper. If only she could say the same about herself.

She pressed her lips together, trying to decide what to do next. The polite thing would be to ask him to sit down, but she was in no mood to be polite. Under the circumstances, it seemed ludicrous to resort to conventionalities. Besides, the room itself made it difficult to concentrate. After her monochromatic bedroom, the parlour was a tumultuous riot of colour, crammed with enough furniture for a room twice the size. A cursory glance revealed at least twelve different places to sit. Even the wallpaper was cluttered, decorated with sprigs of cherry blossom interlaced with tendrils of crimson fruit. Combined with a flower-patterned carpet it gave the distinct impression that her aunt was trying to establish a garden indoors. The effect would have been overpowering even without Mr Felstone standing in the middle.

What was he doing there? She felt a fresh burst of exasperation. After she'd bade him goodbye so definitively on the train—or thought she had—she hadn't expected to see him again at all. If he'd come to mock her again then she'd have no compunction about picking up the nearest ornament and flinging it at his head.

She glanced around the room, searching for suitable weapons, her gaze settling finally on a large box on the table.

'What's that?'

'A peace offering. You said you didn't have a gown for the ball.'

'So you brought me one?' She frowned, surprise vying with irritation. Peace offering or not, the gesture was hardly appropriate. She didn't want anything from him—nothing except his departure.

'Forgive the impertinence, but I mentioned your situation to my friend's wife, who was happy to offer a loan. You're around the same size so I believe it should fit. If you wish to borrow it, that is.'

Ianthe made her way warily across the parlour, lifting the lid and trying not to gasp as she caught a glimpse of the satin fabric inside. The dress was beautiful, a silvery light grey, simply cut with a round neckline and not so much as a flounce or ruffle in sight. She ran her fingers over the sumptuous material, resisting the urge to press it against her cheek. Such a gown would be a joy to wear. It also looked suspiciously new.

'I recall your brother mentioning that you like grey.'

'It's lovely.' She tore her fingers away reluctantly. 'Your friend's wife is very generous, but I can't possibly accept.'

He ignored her objection. 'I also managed to procure an invitation for your aunt. I noticed her name wasn't on the guest list.'

'For Aunt Sophoria?' She spun around eagerly. That was an even better present than the dress, though she'd no intention of forgiving him so easily, no matter how churlish she sounded. 'That was very thoughtful. My aunt will enjoy herself, I'm sure, though she hardly needs me to chaperon her.'

'What don't I need, dear?' Aunt Sophoria bustled into the room at that moment, barely visible behind a giant tea tray.

'Allow me.' Mr Felstone stooped to relieve her at once. 'I was just telling your niece that I've arranged invitations for you both to the ball this evening. If you care to attend, that is.'

'The ball?' Aunt Sophoria's face lit up instantly. 'Well, we'd be delighted, wouldn't we, Ianthe? Do take a seat, Mr Felstone.'

'Thank you, Miss Gibbs.'

He looked around as if searching for an available seat, and Ianthe felt a smug sense of triumph, pleased for once to see him at a disadvantage. Despite the preponderance of furniture, nearly every chair was hidden beneath some form of lace-based frippery.

'Allow me.' She smiled condescendingly, uncovering a small sofa beneath a pile of cushions.

'My thanks.' He caught her eye with a flash of amusement in his own. 'Won't you join me?'

The smile dropped from her face at once. Getting dressed, the thought of sitting down had somehow never occurred to her. She'd worn hoops in the past, of course, but never such a vast crinoline. Now she wondered how her aunt managed. Awkwardly, she reversed towards the opposite sofa, bending her knees slowly as she tried to make her progress look as natural as possible.

'Sugar lumps!' Her aunt's sudden cry made her freeze halfway down.

'What's the matter, Aunt?'

'I forgot the sugar lumps.' Aunt Sophoria was already back on her feet. 'Do pour Mr Felstone some tea, dear. I won't be long.'

Ianthe stared at the teapot in horror. If she offered him tea then she'd have to stand up again! She cast an anxious glance towards him, but he seemed oblivious to her distress, apparently engrossed in the porcelain figure of a small dog at his feet.

She cleared her throat. 'Would you care for some tea, Mr Felstone?'

He glanced up, the shadow of a smile passing his lips. 'I think perhaps we ought to wait for your aunt.'

She dropped the rest of the way into her seat with an unladylike thud. What was he still doing there? He'd made his peace offering, as he called it. If he was waiting for her to forgive and forget, he could wait all day. Silently, she stared down at her hands, her fingerless, crocheted gloves folded neatly in her lap. Why couldn't he just put her out of her misery and leave?

'Miss Holt.' His deep voice broke the silence at last. 'Yesterday I behaved in an appalling manner. I'm afraid that my temper has a tendency to get the better of me. My apology was churlish and my proposal somewhat less than chivalrous. I beg you to forgive me.'

She looked up again quickly, glancing towards the parlour door in alarm. She didn't want her aunt to overhear that!

'Very well. We'll say no more about it.'

'Just one more thing and I'll be silent. Before you left, you accused me of mocking you. I assure you that I wasn't.'

'No?' She couldn't keep the scepticism out of her voice.

'No. You may not think me a gentleman, but I do have some sense of decency. Why would I joke about such a thing?'

'Because, as my brother so delicately observed, I'm not the kind of woman men generally propose to.'

'None the less, I was quite sincere.'

Ianthe curled her hands into fists. He sounded genuine, but he couldn't be. More likely he was simply regretting his behaviour and attempting to cover his tracks, pretending that his proposal had been real in order to protect his reputation. It would serve him right if she said yes!

'Mr Felstone...' she pulled herself up haughtily '...if you're afraid of me spreading gossip about you then I can relieve your worries at once. I assure you, I have no intention of telling anyone else about your proposal.'

'I'm not worried at all. I'm quite accustomed to being talked about.'

'Then if you think you've compromised me...'

'I don't.'

'Then I don't understand you, sir! Why would a man of fortune, apparently in full possession of his faculties, make such an offer? Unless it's your custom to propose to complete strangers?'

'It's not my custom, as you say, to propose at all. Up until a few months ago, I'd never given the matter any thought.'

'Then why...?'

'I'll be blunt, Miss Holt, since you seem to favour that approach. I'm a busy man. I like business and I like my work, but I don't enjoy the social obligations that come with it. Lately, I've felt I might be better placed if I had a wife to assist me.'

'So naturally you asked me?'

'Naturally, I asked a woman of my acquaintance who I was led to believe would favour my suit. She didn't. When we met on the train, I was returning from that interview. I won't deny that injured pride played a part in my proposal to you, but I was perfectly serious. I still am. When I learned of your predicament in regard to Sir Charles, I saw an arrangement that might suit us both.'

'My predicament, as you call it, is none of your business!' she snapped. How dare he talk about her private affairs so familiarly, never mind the arrogant presumption that she needed his help! She didn't need him or any other man to save her! She could save herself from the Baronet...just as soon as she figured out how.

'I do not need rescuing, sir.'

'I never said that you did.' He sounded infuriatingly calm. 'I'm simply offering you a solution.'

'But you don't know me!' She sprang back to her feet, crinoline forgotten. Where was Aunt Sophoria? Surely it wasn't so hard to find sugar lumps!

'How well do any couple know each other before they marry?'

'Better than this!'

He shrugged. 'I'm sure over time we would develop a regard for each other. You strike me as a sensible, respectable woman, and I want a respectable wife. My life has been more than eventful enough.'

'Oh.' She flinched inwardly. Sensible and respectable were good. They were what she wanted, how she strove to appear, yet somehow the words still felt like an insult. Besides, he didn't know her at all if he thought she was sensible. Sensible women didn't elope with their employer's sons!

'You cannot hear yourself, sir. You say that you want a sensible wife and yet your proposal is quite the opposite. Forgive me for thinking there must be some other reason behind it.'

His lips curved in an appreciative smile. 'It seems that I've underestimated you, Miss Holt. The truth is that I'm an ambitious man. Yesterday I was forced to confront certain facts about my position, or lack of it, in society. And since I cannot progress in that direction, I've decided to progress in another. I want my shipyard to be the biggest and best on the east coast. To achieve that, I need to buy out one of my neighbours, a certain Mr Harper. He's an old man and willing to sell, but he's somewhat...traditional. He doesn't approve of me or my background, and he definitely won't sell to a bachelor. Hence my need for a bride.'

'Any bride?'

'Not any, but one he'll approve of, yes.'

‘How flattering. What if he hears that you proposed to someone else yesterday?’

‘He might hear rumours, but if I announce our engagement before they reach him, he’ll dismiss them as just that—rumours.’

‘And you don’t think he’ll be suspicious if I simply appear out of the blue?’ She shook her head incredulously. ‘Why not ask someone else you already know?’

‘Because I need an engagement to be convincing. I go away on business often enough to make a long-distance courtship plausible. He won’t know that we’ve only just met.’

Ianthe drew her brows together thoughtfully. Put like that, it sounded almost convincing. It would put an end to Percy and Sir Charles’s plotting, not to mention give her a new start, a new home, somewhere to call her own again. And she was a new woman after all. Perhaps she could be the sensible bride he wanted. It might be tempting, if it weren’t so preposterous.

‘Unless you have some personal objection to me?’ His face darkened abruptly. ‘Perhaps you’ve heard of my background? My parentage?’

She blinked, taken aback by the flash of steel in his grey eyes. ‘Your parentage is irrelevant, sir. If I thought that birth were any indication of breeding then I’d have married Sir Charles already.’

‘Then perhaps you dislike me personally?’

‘I think you’re moody and ill-mannered. Other than that, I’ve no objection to your character.’

‘I might have used the same words to describe you this morning. With the addition of stubborn, that is.’

‘I am not st—!’ She stopped mid-word, gritting her teeth at the irony.

‘Quite.’

‘What about love then?’ She inched her chin up. ‘Or do you think that doesn’t matter in marriage?’

‘I believe that’s your poetry speaking again.’

She felt a stab of bitterness. Did any man think of love? Not Percy or Sir Charles or this man either, apparently.

‘I assure you, it’s quite possible to marry for love. My parents did.’

‘That was fortunate for them, though for my own part, I’ve never had the benefit of any such example. My father wasn’t known for his finer feelings and my mother only came to regret them. I’ve seen the effects of your so-called love, Miss Holt. I’m not capable of forming such an attachment myself. If that’s what you’re waiting for, then I’m afraid I can’t help you. What I’m proposing is a practical arrangement, not a romantic one.’

‘Practical?’ She gave a sceptical laugh. ‘Yesterday you condemned me as a schemer and yet today you tell me I ought to be practical? Make up your mind, Mr Felstone.’

‘There’s a great deal of difference between marrying a man you despise and simply being practical.’

‘You’ve given me every reason to dislike you.’

‘True, but at least we know where we stand.’ He gave a wry smile. ‘Things can only get better.’

Ianthe bit her lip. That was definitely true. Unconventional as his arrangement sounded, it did make a kind of sense. But how could she possibly agree to marry a man she’d known for less than a day? He didn’t scare her like Sir Charles, but she knew even less about him. At least with the Baronet she already expected the worst. This man was an unknown quantity, more attractive and yet potentially even more dangerous.

Besides, the thought of marrying without love went against all of her old cherished ideals and dreams. Even if she didn’t expect it for herself any more, she hadn’t changed so completely. She still believed in the possibility of love, even if not for herself...

‘Mr Felstone...’ She started to speak and then stopped, disturbed by a knock on the front door, by the sound of her aunt’s voice followed by Percy’s, then another man’s... She caught her breath in panic.

‘Sir Charles, I presume?’ Mr Felstone looked utterly unperturbed, pulling himself casually to his feet. ‘In that case, I’ll take my leave. I’ll be staying at the Swan until Thursday. If you wish to discuss any part of my offer, I’m more than happy to do so. If not, I promise never to mention it again.’

‘Wait!’ She swung around, as panicked now by the thought of him leaving as she’d been by his presence half an hour before. She’d been prepared to face Sir Charles then, but now she needed time to recompose herself. As if such a thing were possible with Mr Felstone’s proposal still ringing in her ears! Her head was still spinning from the fact that he actually meant it. How could he throw her into such confusion and then abandon her now?

Besides, it occurred to her that his presence there might actually be useful. Even if she had no intention of accepting him, Sir Charles wasn’t to know that. If he found them together, alone and unchaperoned, the situation might look just compromising enough to deter him. And if not... Mr Felstone would make an intimidating rival, even to a baronet. If anyone could scare him off, surely it would be him.

If she could persuade him to stay. Which meant changing everything about her behaviour so far.

‘I mean, please wait!’ She stepped in front of him, effectively blocking the way. ‘I’ll think about your offer, but don’t go!’

Chapter Four

‘You want me to stay?’

Robert studied her face, trying to understand what she was really asking him. Her expression had just run the gamut of emotions from dismissive to panicked to imploring in less than thirty seconds. He’d been about to quit the field, certain that she’d been about to reject him—again—but now she was actually pleading with him to stay.

Why?

‘There’s no need to leave on Sir Charles’s account.’ Her voice quavered slightly. ‘You haven’t had tea yet.’

He knit his brows suspiciously. She was trying to smile and failing, her strained features barely concealing an undercurrent of fear. Clearly she hadn’t been exaggerating when she’d said she didn’t want to marry Sir Charles, but fear? Aversion was one thing, but this...this was something else entirely. Was she afraid of him, then?

‘Please.’ She threw a nervous glance over her shoulder when he still didn’t answer. ‘Just for a few minutes.’

‘You don’t want to be alone with him?’ He felt vaguely disturbed by the idea. ‘Your aunt and brother are here.’

‘It’s not that...’

‘You want to make him jealous?’

Her eyes flew to his. ‘Yes. If he sees us alone together...’

‘He might not like the competition?’

She held his gaze in guilty silence for a few moments before shaking her head. ‘I shouldn’t have asked. I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be. I’m flattered.’

‘Then you don’t object?’

He gave a small shrug, surprised to find that he didn’t object at all.

‘Not if you think it might help, though it might not be the wisest course of action. Some men like a challenge.’

‘I don’t know what he likes!’ Brown eyes flashed tempestuously. ‘But I’ve tried everything else!’

Robert cocked an eyebrow, surprised as much by her vehemence as by the words themselves. What did that mean? That she’d tried ‘everything else’? What else?

His gaze dropped to her extravagant pink dress, so wildly different to her sensible grey outfit from the day before. She seemed to have gone from one extreme to the other. There was nothing

remotely sensible about her appearance now. When she'd entered the room he'd thought he'd made a mistake and had the wrong woman. She looked like a younger version of her flamboyant aunt, the ridiculous lace cap on her head framing her face like the petals of a huge flower. Not that there weren't still points to admire. The tight bodice accentuated curves that had been largely hidden the day before, revealing a surprisingly statuesque figure, shapely waist and ample, round breasts...

He forced his attention back to her words. I've tried everything else. Was her outlandish appearance all a façade then, some kind of bizarre attempt to repel Sir Charles? That would explain why she'd looked so embarrassed to see him instead. After charging into the parlour so defiantly, her cheeks had turned almost the same colour as her dress, though he had to admit the effect had been unexpectedly alluring.

'I'm more than happy to play the rival suitor, Miss Holt.' He made an ironic bow. 'Shall I stand here or languish at your feet?'

She shot him a cutting look, opening her mouth to retort before clamping it firmly shut again as the tall, suavely dressed figure of Sir Charles Lester appeared in the doorway.

'Ivanthe.' The Baronet strode forward at once, grasping her hands and raising them both to his lips, seemingly oblivious to anything unusual in her appearance. 'You look just as lovely as ever.'

Robert regarded the other man critically. In his mid-fifties, the Baronet had an air of casual, confident authority, with a strong athletic figure and abundance of silver-blond hair. There was nothing obviously untoward or overtly threatening about his appearance, but the hard edge to his features gave him away. It was the same edge he recognised from his father's face, the same look of a man accustomed to wanting—and getting—his own way.

And in this particular case what the Baronet wanted was obvious. The way he was clutching Ivanthe's wrists put him in mind of a falcon digging its talons into a small bird. As for her... She was standing completely immobile, her whole body stiff and rigid, as if simply awaiting an opportunity to get away.

He tensed, seized by an instantaneous rush of dislike, barely resisting a compulsion to grab the other man by the collar and throw him out on to the street.

'Felstone.' Sir Charles addressed him without turning his head. 'I didn't think you were the type to make calls on ladies.'

Robert held his temper with an effort. The Baronet's tone was dismissive, though if he thought he could be chased away so easily, he could think again.

'I make the occasional exception. When the company's so pleasant, that is.'

'Indeed?' Sir Charles dragged his gaze away from Ivanthe's face at last. 'Percy told me you met on the train yesterday.'

'That was my good fortune, yes.'

'And here you are again today.' Green eyes narrowed unpleasantly. 'Isn't there any work to be done for the gala?'

'Plenty, I should imagine.'

Robert flung himself back down on the sofa, throwing one leg casually over the other with the air of a man determined to stay put. Antagonising a man with the Baronet's influence didn't make particularly good business sense, but then his behaviour seemed to have become increasingly reckless since meeting Miss Holt. Good business or not, he wasn't going to abandon her now, not when she'd just begged him to stay. As for the man's ill manners, he'd be more than happy to take issue with those...

'And we're quite delighted that you called, Mr Felstone.'

Sophoria Gibbs pushed past the Baronet so roughly that Robert almost laughed out loud. He'd always suspected that the old woman's eccentricities belied a sharp mind, but he'd never been so certain of it until that moment. It seemed he wouldn't have much work to do to get her on side. If he asked, she'd probably help him haul Sir Charles out on to the street.

‘Let me do the tea, Aunt.’ Miss Holt extricated herself from the Baronet’s clutches at last, rubbing her wrists together as she moved towards the table.

Robert’s eyes narrowed. Even from where he was sitting, he could see faint red marks, indentations left by Sir Charles’s fingers. How hard had he been holding her? His gaze shifted towards the Baronet, but the other man looked completely absorbed, his eyes following her every movement around the room with a look of alarming intensity.

‘Mr Felstone, how d’ye do?’ The brother strode into the room finally, throwing himself into a chair without waiting for a reply. ‘I hope you’re in a better mood today, sis.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with my mood, Percy,’ she answered stiffly, pointedly handing Robert the first cup of tea.

‘No? You were in a fearsome temper yesterday.’

‘Well, I’m not now.’

‘In that case, I hope you’ll permit me to escort you to the ball tonight?’ Sir Charles threw Robert a sharp look. ‘Percy told me about your offer, Felstone, but I’d already arranged invitations for both himself and Miss Holt.’

‘And their aunt, no doubt?’

Robert smiled benignly as the Baronet’s smug expression faltered. ‘I’m afraid not. I thought the evening might be too much for Miss Gibbs.’

‘I can still out-dance you, Charles.’ The old woman made a cackling sound. ‘It’s just a good thing Mr Felstone thought of me.’

‘In any case—’ Sir Charles ignored her ‘—I’ve also taken the liberty of arranging a gown for you, Ianthe. White Parisian silk. Your mother had one just like it. I think it should look very fetching on you.’

Robert watched as she came to a sudden stop in the centre of the room. Moving around the small space distributing tea, she’d put him in mind of a tennis ball, being batted about between players. Now she seemed to be hovering over the net, trying to decide which way to fall or whether to abandon the court altogether.

For a tense moment she didn’t answer, smoothing her hands over the front of her pink taffeta as if trying to make up her mind about something. Then she pulled her shoulders back and lifted her head all of a sudden, meeting the Baronet’s gaze squarely.

‘Thank you for the offer, but I already have a gown.’

‘Since when?’ Percy sounded indignant.

‘Since Mr Felstone was good enough to bring me one.’

Robert smiled innocently, leaning back in his chair as four sets of eyes swivelled towards him.

‘Well, how kind of you!’ The aunt was the first to speak.

‘Very.’ Sir Charles sounded less than pleased.

‘It was my pleasure, though the credit really belongs to Kitty Loveday. She offered the loan. I’m simply the delivery boy.’

‘Her husband works for the railway, doesn’t he?’ The Baronet’s tone was scathing.

‘He’s an engineer, yes. As well as a good friend and one of the cleverest men I know.’

‘Why, Katherine Loveday!’ Aunt Sophoria’s face broke into a wide smile. ‘You used to play with her when you were children, Ianthe. She never stopped talking even then, but she was always a kind girl.’

‘She still is.’ Robert gave an approving smile. ‘I’d be glad to reintroduce you tonight, Miss Holt.’

‘Isn’t a ball a bit frivolous for you, Felstone?’ Sir Charles’s expression was now openly antagonistic. ‘I thought you lived to work. Or are you trying to distance yourself from business at last?’

‘I’ve no intention of doing anything of the kind. I’m fortunate enough to enjoy what I do. But I can have an evening off occasionally.’

‘Will Louisa Allendon be attending, then?’ Sir Charles gave a look of feigned innocence. ‘I thought you were spending all your spare time with her.’

Robert clenched his jaw, tipping his head slightly to acknowledge the hit. ‘I’ve no idea where Miss Allendon intends to spend her evening.’

‘No? What a shame. Though I did hear she didn’t like the smell of the shipyard. Too close to the fish market, perhaps. You must be feeling quite let down there.’

‘Would you care for something to eat, Mr Felstone?’

Ianthe’s voice prevented him from answering. He looked up to find her standing beside him, holding out a plate of miniature cakes with a distinctly apologetic expression, as if she were worried about the impact of the Baronet’s words. He raised an eyebrow, strangely touched by her intervention, though on the other hand, perhaps she was right to be worried. If he stayed another minute, he might make even more of a scene than he had yesterday.

Besides, he decided, he’d already done what she’d asked him. He’d definitely succeeded in making Sir Charles jealous. What she did next was up to her...

‘No, thank you.’ He swallowed the rest of his tea and stood up. ‘I’m afraid Sir Charles is right and I have work to do. The gala will be starting shortly.’

‘Of course, we mustn’t keep you any longer.’ She gave what looked like a genuine smile. ‘Thank you for calling.’

‘Miss Holt.’ He held out his hand and she took it, willingly this time, placing her smooth hand in his rough one with a smile that faded the instant their fingers touched.

He felt a jolt, as if someone had just shoved him hard in the chest, accompanied by a strange scorching sensation that seemed to pass through her fingers and up his arm, rendering him speechless. He saw her eyes widen in response, heard her sudden intake of breath, though somehow he couldn’t release her. He didn’t want to release her. He wanted to pull her closer. As close as he could...

‘Mr Felstone.’ She found her voice first, averting her gaze as she slowly tugged her hand away.

He cleared his throat, hardly trusting himself to speak as he made a formal bow to her aunt and then strode determinedly out of the parlour, barely pausing to scoop up his hat before charging out on to the street and almost slamming the door behind him.

What the hell had just happened?

He stopped on the doorstep to take a deep breath. One moment he’d been thinking about dragging the Baronet outside by the scruff of his expensive collar, the next he’d felt an almost visceral shock as his fingers had touched Ianthe’s. How could simply touching her hand have had such a powerful effect? She wasn’t unattractive, despite her unusual fashion sense, but he wasn’t attracted to her...was he? He frowned, alarmed by the possibility. That wasn’t what he wanted, wasn’t part of the business arrangement that he’d proposed. He wanted sensible and respectable. He had a business to build, not to mention a shipyard to run. The last thing he needed was a woman to distract him. Louisa had taken up enough of his time already.

But then he’d been angry, after all. He’d been tense, his blood fired up by Sir Charles’s comments about Louisa. Whatever he’d felt had probably just been temper, nothing to do with her at all...

He clamped his hat on his head and turned his steps in the direction of the station, walking so fast that he almost bumped into a couple walking arm in arm in the other direction.

‘Why, Robert!’ A pair of inquisitive blue eyes framed with dark curls peeped up at him from beneath an elaborate spoon bonnet. ‘Fancy meeting you here!’

‘Kitty.’ He forced a smile, still wrestling with his bad temper. In truth, he should have expected this, should have known he couldn’t enlist Kitty’s help with the gown and then expect her to keep away. Clearly his edited account of meeting Miss Holt on the train wasn’t enough to satiate her curiosity. ‘And Giles, too. What a coincidence. I thought you’d be on your way to the gala by now.’

‘So did I.’ Giles rolled his eyes.

‘Bit of an odd route you’re taking, then. You do remember that the station’s at the bottom of the hill, not the top?’

‘Quite.’

‘We’re taking a stroll to calm Giles’s nerves.’ Kitty fluttered her eyelashes innocently. ‘Though we’re heading back down now if you’d care to join us?’

‘With pleasure. If you’re sure that Giles has walked enough, that is?’ he couldn’t resist teasing, extending an arm to let Kitty hook her spare hand around it. After two years, he’d learned that there was no point trying to keep secrets from his friend’s wife—all but a few important ones, anyway—though he still had no intention of making her interrogation easy.

‘So?’ They’d only gone a couple of steps before she started. ‘Did Miss Holt like the dress?’

‘I think so.’

‘And?’

‘And what?’

‘Was your visit a success?’

‘In what way?’

‘Was she pleased to see you?’

His lips twitched. ‘That remains to be seen.’

‘She wasn’t too tired from her journey?’

‘Apparently not.’

‘Oh, for pity’s sake!’ Giles burst out impatiently. ‘Just tell her what happened and have done with it. You know we’ll never have any peace until you do.’

‘Giles!’ Kitty looked aggrieved. ‘You know I don’t want to pry.’

‘And you know perfectly well that you do. Just ask him.’

‘I’ll do no such thing.’ Kitty lifted her button nose in the air. ‘Since you both think so ill of me.’

‘I assure you that we think nothing of the kind.’ Robert shared a conspiratorial look with his friend. ‘But as I told you, it only was a brief visit to deliver the dress.’

And to ask her to marry me, he added silently. Not that he was about to tell Kitty that. He might as well take out an advert in the local paper. As to how it had gone... Honestly, he had no idea. Miss Holt might prefer him to Sir Charles, but that wasn’t saying much. That moment when their fingers had touched had seemed to affect her, too, but then she’d been the one to pull away. She hadn’t even looked at him when he’d left, had seemed no closer to accepting his proposal, though after the way his own body had reacted, he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted her to any more. That had definitely not been part of his proposal. On the other hand, the thought of leaving her at the mercy of Sir Charles made his fists curl instinctively. No matter how unnerved he’d been by their exchange, he couldn’t do that...

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