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Good Earl Dunting

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Suzanne Enoch

GOOD EARL HUNTING

**by
Suzanne Enoch**

“I DON'T SEE how shooting a poor animal that's been snatched out of its den, chased down by hounds, and cornered by an overwhelming number of enemies with superior weaponry is in any way sporting.” Theodora Meacham sat in the morning room of Beldath Hall and refused to join the half dozen other young ladies by the window.

“Stop attempting to sound so superior, Theo,” her older sister commented from the cluster. “I only wish they would let us ride with them. I show quite well on horseback.”

That, Annabel Meacham did. She showed well in everything, actually, Theo reflected, but today, at least, she was glad not to be her sister. Not when—

“Oh, there he is!”

The tittering at the window grew louder; they sounded like nothing so much as a flock of geese, Theodora decided, bending her head and determined to finish reading the page she'd begun several minutes ago. Generally she enjoyed Sir Walter Scott and his thinly-veiled criticisms of Society, but today it felt almost too...obvious, she supposed.

Of course she knew who the he was – Geoffrey Kerick, the Earl of Vashton, had arrived last evening well after dinner. The rest of the females present had expressed worry that he hadn't eaten and had decided that he must be doubly gallant to be willing to ride after foxes the very next morning after traveling most of the night. She was of the opinion that he'd arrived just when he did on purpose, so that he might make the most spectacular appearance, and that he'd likely stopped for dinner earlier at the Red Lion Inn just down the road and was nowhere near starvation.

She wasn't impressed. After dancing with him a grand total of twice during the entire London Season, she knew precisely what he was looking for in a female companion or a bride or whatever the girls claimed he must be seeking. Or at the least, she knew what he wasn't looking for. Her. For one thing, she didn't like the idea of grown men and large horses and large dogs chasing one poor, frightened fox who had no idea what the devil was afoot. For another, she refused to simper or claim ignorance about subjects with which she was quite familiar just so some man could step into the conversation and feel superior. Oh, she was a very poor simperer indeed, especially compared to some of the other ladies in the morning room.

Annabel called her cynical, but she preferred to think of herself as a realist. How could the younger sister of the loveliest young lady in England be anything but practical about her own appearance, anyway? At the least she knew that Vashton hadn't come to Beldath to look at her. No, her father had invited the earl to the festivities to meet a far better-suited female. Annabel Meacham. Her older sister.

“If you disapprove of the hunt so strongly, Theo, I imagine you'll be foregoing the picnic by the lake afterward,” Mary Hallsley commented, a giggle in her voice. “There's to be a special prize presented to the man who takes the tail, after all.”

Theodora sighed, closing her book and setting it aside. “As this is my father's home, you know quite well that I can't miss the picnic, Mary. But I certainly don't have to sit here and listen to the lot of you planning your weddings, all with the same man. I'm going for a walk. Would anyone care to join me?”

“No, thank you. If you want to be hot and red-faced when they return from the hunt, your own concern. Some of us care to look our best.” Rachel Henry did laugh, the others joining in.

Halfway out the door, though, Annabel took her arm. “You don't have to exile yourself, Theo,” she whispered, pulling her younger sister to a halt. “Simply because you and he didn't deal well two

months ago doesn't mean you can't be polite. He...he may very likely be a member of the family before long, after all."

Shaking her head, Theodora gave her brunette-haired sister a smile. "The pretty one," most of the acquaintances called Belle, as if it didn't signify that the comments also meant there was a second, less-pretty one. Her. But that certainly wasn't a revelation. "Everyone knows why he's here, Belle. I have nothing against him other than his general arrogance and lack of manners, but if he has the intelligence to marry you, all will be forgiven. And I'm not exiling myself; yesterday I went for a morning walk, and tomorrow I'll go for another. In fact, yesterday you and six of our friends went with me."

"Ah, but we all need to change clothes before the hunt ends, my dear. No one wants to be seen wearing the same dress at noon that she wore to breakfast. Especially not today." Annabel kissed her on the cheek. "Don't be late for luncheon; the others will think you're sulking."

The idea that she would sulk over being ignored by Vashton was silly, but she certainly didn't wish to give anyone that impression. "That's because they think we're all in competition for the earl. They don't realize he's here for you." She squeezed her sister's hand and then continued down the hallway to the front door.

This had been a very nice house party, with some of her and Annabel's and her parents's closest friends enjoying the crisp autumn weather together. Yes, the men had been doing some pheasant and grouse hunting, and yes, she knew that her annoyance today wasn't about foxes. Her father, Viscount Beldath, had invited Vashton because Belle had decided that she would make the earl a good match. A hunt to disguise a hunt, when nobody was fooled by the ruse. Well, no one but her sister's friends, but it was more likely that they knew and were only hoping to swoop in and steal the earl's attention before any agreements could be made.

Trask pulled open the front door as she reached it. "I'll be back before luncheon," she told the butler, and tied on the pretty yellow bonnet that matched her yellow and green walking dress.

"Very good, Miss Theodora. Do you wish Sally to accompany you?"

So the butler knew that no one else cared to tear themselves away from a possible view of the fox hunt today, either. "Heavens, no," she replied. "Sally has enough work to do with everyone wanting new hair ribbons and piled hair today."

His lip twitched. "Enjoy your walk, Miss Theodora. We look to have rain by the weekend."

"You may be right, Trask."

With the sound of baying hounds reverberating off the hillsides toward the front of the estate, she headed through the garden on the east side of the house, deciding to follow the wooded stream beyond. Behind her a horn sounded, so evidently they'd sighted the poor fox already. Scowling, Theodora picked up a hefty stick and swished it against the tree trunks as she passed them by. A shiver of autumn leaves drifted to the ground in her wake. Her father didn't like fox hunting, either; he had always called it a sport for the unsportsmanlike. But the rumor was that the Earl of Vashton couldn't bear to pass up a good hunt, and so Lord Beldath had arranged for one.

Ten minutes later the hounds were still baying and barking, which in her opinion utterly ruined the peaceful, bird-songed, autumn-scented morning. In fact, the dogs seemed to be getting louder.

Theodora stopped, turning around just in time to see an orange blur flash through the undergrowth beside her and leap across the small stream. Oh, dear. Now the entire hunting party would be crashing through. If she'd had more than a moment she would have muddied the fox's footprints or something, but all she had time to do was gasp and duck behind the closest tree trunk before chaos and dogs and horses and riders burst onto the trail all around her in an explosion of crimson jackets and yellow and

orange leaves.

If she hadn't noticed the fox she likely would have been trampled. As it was, an off-balance horse came within two inches of stepping on her foot. Making herself as narrow as possible, she pressed against the tree while two dozen dogs and at least that many riders flung mud and shrubbery into the air as they splashed across the stream.

When the last rider had finally passed by, Theodora stumbled back to the path. Mud caked half her gown, and she plucked the petal of a purple iris from her hair. "Stupid people," she muttered, brushing at the sprigged muslin.

"You're unhurt, I hope?"

Yelping, she straightened again. Seated on a big bay gelding across the narrow stream and hands crossed negligently over the pommel, he gazed at her. "What are you doing here?" she grumbled, wiping at her now-muddy fingers and then giving up, instead stalking over to bend down at the stream's edge to wash her hands.

"Riding after a fox," the Earl of Vashton answered easily in the low drawl that could reputedly make women swoon. She felt a twinge herself, but it was certainly annoyance.

Wonderful. He was not only arrogant, but obvious, too. Though considering that Belle wasn't precisely subtle, herself, perhaps that was for the best. "Then you should be going, or you'll miss hacking off the thing's tail."

"Mm hm." Instead of galloping away, he swung out of the saddle and led his horse through the shallow stream and directly up to her. "You look a sight."

"Yes, well, so would you if you'd nearly been trampled."

"Most people would know better than to go strolling through the middle of a fox hunt." He pulled a handkerchief from a pocket of his scarlet jacket and reached out to dab at her right cheek.

If there was anything worse than being ignored and insulted by the Earl of Vashton, it was being pitied by him. He looked like a creature a painter would have imagined, tall with dark, wavy hair brushing his collar, eyes as blue as the midday sky, and a mouth that...well, that presently quirked in obvious amusement. Embarrassment biting at her, Theodora snatched the kerchief from his hand and rubbed her cheek. "Do go away. I don't require your assistance."

"I've already nearly trampled you. What sort of gentleman would I be if I abandoned you here to go hacking tails off foxes?"

"Two dozen other men nearly trampled me, as well, and I don't see them anywhere."

His smile deepened. "And that makes me look all the better, wouldn't you say?"

"No."

"At least come out of the shrubbery, Miss Theodora."

So he recognized her. That was actually something of a surprise, considering how many women he'd danced with over the past Season, and how many of them had actually managed a pleasant conversation with him at the same time. She took another step back to the walking path and nearly fell over a tangle of ivy. "Don't try to make me look like a lunatic," she retorted, turning back to the house. "Because as far as I'm concerned, I'm the most sensible person in all of Devonshire today."

She heard the clump of hooves on dirt as he fell in behind her, still leading his splendid horse. "I'm all of Devonshire'?" he repeated.

"Very likely." She supposed eventually she would have to be more pleasant to him, but she preferred to wait until he'd offered for Belle – just in case it didn't happen and she didn't need to go to the effort at all. "At the least I'm not preening or charging after a defenseless animal for no good reason."

“I see. Would you feel better if I flung myself into the mud and rolled about a little?” he asked.

~~The image of such a well-sculpted...god rolling about in the mud made her snort despite herself.~~

“That would only cause all the single ladies present to run out and offer you their handkerchiefs,” she returned, realizing that she still clutched his monogrammed silk. She attempted to hand it back to him but he declined. The poor thing did look beyond redemption, so she tucked it into her gown’s single pocket. “And they might come after me with torches and pitchforks.”

He laughed. “Then for your sake we’ll spare my wardrobe.”

Vashton drew even with her and actually offered her his arm. It would have been rude to refuse him, so she wrapped her damp fingers around his crimson sleeve. It was for Belle’s sake, she told herself. “I still don’t understand why you’ve abandoned the fox hunt.”

“Ah. Do you have any idea how many fox hunts I’ve been on just since the end of the Season?”

“How would I kn—“

“Seven. Seven of the poor things have perished so that some papa or other could drag me out to see his darling daughter in the hope that our proximity and my killing that poor excuse for a dog would tempt me into marriage.”

But if he knew who she was, then he knew that her own father had invited him to Devonshire for that very same purpose. Seven fox hunts? Her cheeks heated, however much she’d protested the entire enterprise. But her objection had been more about his suitability to marry Belle than it had been concern over the fox. Then she frowned. None of it was Belle’s fault. “You might turn down the invitations, you know. Otherwise you give the impression that you are indeed willing to be swayed for the price of a fox tail.”

The earl turned his head, dark blue eyes meeting hers. “If I turned all down but one, say, then I would be accused of playing favorites, and I would very nearly be trapped into a marriage for the price of that one fox tail. This way I have at least a chance of escape. And of making my own decision as to who, when, and where I will marry.”

Why in the world would he confess such a thing to her? “Perhaps you should be having this conversation with my father. Or at the least, with my sister, Annabel. She—“

“When you and I waltzed at Lord and Lady Carmichael’s soiree you told me I had an overlarge sense of importance and an oversmall brain,” he interrupted.

So he remembered that. Theodora yanked her hand from around his arm and pushed at him. “You’ve apparently come a long way to give me an uncomfortable set of days, my lord,” she snapped, trudging along with path for the house and hoping that wasn’t the hounds she heard in the distance again. “And evidently to toy with my sister’s heart. That is indeed very small of you.”

Was that truly what she thought? Geoffrey Kerick slowed, and Titan bumped into his back. “Devon isn’t that far from West Sussex,” he commented, pacing after the petite, black-haired chit once again. “And perhaps I enjoy having people speak their minds to me.”

From the rear he had a splendid view of her swaying backside – and of her shoulders stiffening. Squaring his own in preparation for another verbal thrashing, he eyed her warily. No sense getting close enough for her to punch him in the nose. Not yet, anyway.

Light green eyes flashed as she face him again, though from the color of her cheeks she was either embarrassed or flattered. He hoped it was the latter. She opened her mouth, then snapped it shut again. Instead she stomped back up to him, lifting her chin to meet his gaze. “Are you implying that you’re here because of me?” Theodora Meacham tilted her head. “Or more likely, did you think that because I’m covered in mud and I was nearly trampled that I’m easy prey for a jest or two?”

He grinned. “You are not easy prey, Miss Meacham. Of that, I am certain.”

She continued to eye him suspiciously, but he only smiled back at her. For the moment, he had no intention of saying anything further if he could at all avoid doing so. After all, he'd attended seven damned fox hunts in six weeks. Whether they'd all left him thinking more favorably about a certain sharp-tongued, black-haired chit who hadn't bothered to simper and flirt with him or not, at this moment he refused to do more than acknowledge that he hadn't been able to stop thinking about her and that he wanted another opportunity to chat with her. He certainly couldn't admit even that much to her today. Not when she clearly would rather see him drowned than even say a polite good morning to him. Not when everyone at Beldath Hall clearly thought he was there because of the older sister.

All he could do this morning was take her verbal jabs until she decided they were even. Once the playing field was leveled, however...well, he'd never played a game to lose. Because in all his twenty-nine years, no one had ever attempted to stand toe-to-toe with him. Until Theodora Meacham.

Chapter Two

LORD HELSEY LED the parade of riders to the lake, the fox's tail lifted above his head as if he'd won the battle of Agincourt and the scruffy tuft of orange and white fur was the victory banner. The reception of young ladies likely wasn't entirely what he'd expected, though, because most of them were already gathered beneath the white cloth canopy – and attempting to chat with the Earl of Vashton. They barely noticed the arrival of the mighty hunters or their prize.

It must be nice to be so charming, Theodora decided, watching the earl hold court. An easy smile, a bit of witty conversation about the weather, the ability to make even the most desperate and self-conscious of the ladies present feel...flattered. She shook out her hands as her father dismounted from his gray hunter, Friday. This could have been another pleasant holiday. Instead, she was expected to spend her time helping Annabel to make a match with the most handsome, self-absorbed, arrogant man in England.

She blinked. Handsome? Well, that was merely a factual observation, an acknowledgment of the symmetry of his features. It didn't mean anything.

"We lost Vashton halfway through the ride," her father said in a low voice, leaning down to kiss her on one cheek. "Glad to see he didn't fall and break his neck. That would not have sat well with anyone."

"No, I don't imagine it would," she returned dryly.

The viscount looked past her. "I see Belle's in the thick of things. Good. No one can resist that smile of hers. Including me." His own smile faded, though, as he returned his attention to Theodora. "Is that mud on your ear?"

Stifling a curse, she brushed at her earlobe. "I was out walking, and some mud spattered me," she noted, deciding that he didn't need to know that he'd nearly trampled her. He had enough to keep him occupied with nearly four dozen guests in residence and a match with an evidently reluctant groom to arrange.

"Where were you that you were spattered with mud? All the other young ladies were here to watch for the end of the hunt. You know we want—"

"—for Belle to make a match with a man every other female in England is after," she finished. "I told you to leave me out of it. I'm terrible at polite conversation; you know that. And Vashton called me a cold fish at the Carmichael ball, if you'll recall. I hardly think mud on my ear will ruin Belle's prospects."

"You were being rude to him, as I recall."

She hadn't been. Not truly. It was only that Vashton had clearly asked her to dance as an afterthought, that during their waltz he kept smiling at every other girl on the floor, that he looked so...perfect, when she felt so awkward. And silly thing that she was, for a moment as she'd stepped onto the dance floor with him, she'd felt excited. Aroused at the heat of him. That, however, had evidently rendered her incapable of making polite conversation on her own behalf – much less that of her sister.

The most confusing bit was that he'd been nice to her today. After all, no one else had so much as noticed her pressed up against the oak tree, and he'd actually missed the remainder of the hunt and come back to make certain she wasn't hurt. And he'd walked her back to the house when he hadn't needed to do any such thing. Was he interested in Belle, after all, and trying to make a good impression with her sister? He didn't quite seem the sort to care what anyone else thought, or to spend his time not talking to the lady everyone – well, everyone here – thought he should marry, but she

supposed it was possible.

“Your past conversations don’t signify, I suppose,” the viscount muttered, looking past her again at the circle of females around the earl, “since he did accept my invitation to come to Beldath. But please make an attempt to be pleasant to him. I did go through a great deal to arrange all this, you know.”

Again she merely nodded, rather than informing him about what she’d learned earlier, that at least six other papas had had the same idea and had arranged the very same sort of house party in order to lure the Earl of Vashton to join their family. And that Vashton had left all six parties an unmarried man and a half dozen foxes short.

She hated the idea of telling her father he’d erred; he would much rather have been reading or fishing, and yet there he was galloping through fields after a fox, just so Belle could make not merely a good match, but the best match possible. And then he would still have the much more difficult task of finding someone for his younger daughter. She glanced over her shoulder at the flock of females, each one prettier than the last, all clustered around Geoffrey Kerick. Perhaps they should have flushed two foxes for the chase.

“I know you did,” she said aloud. “Just think how much more charming Belle will look when compared to me.”

The viscount shook his head, which he kept close-cropped now that his hair had begun to thin. “I know you can be charming. And this is important to your sister. So try, for Belle’s sake.”

“I shall be charming.” Or as charming as she could manage, anyway. Why was it that no one else flustered her, but in Vashton’s presence she felt like a one-legged chicken?

Her father kissed her on the other cheek. “When Annabel is settled with the future Marquis of Haithe, we’ll find a man for you. So yes, please practice being pleasant, and try to avoid insulting everyone who isn’t as bookish as you.”

She didn’t do that. Well, perhaps she did, but only if someone went about spouting facts she knew to be blatantly untrue. But this was for Belle’s sake, so she would be good. Even if she found Vashton...unsettling. Even if she wasn’t quite relieved to know there were other, less troubling men who would likely make perfectly acceptable – and simpler – husbands for her when her turn came.

Her mother had begun fluttering on the far side of the pavilion, gesturing everyone to take their seats at the quartet of banquet tables. If they were going to bother with an al fresco luncheon they should all likely be sitting on blankets on the ground, but there was no way that Lady Bresch or her sister Miss Mary would ever be able to rise again if they attempted such a thing. One or both of them might well roll into the pond. And of course if only the Jameson sisters were allowed a table, Lady Harriet Ithing would refuse to dine at all, and from there the entire house of cards would collapse.

“Please, take seats where you will,” Lady Beldath called, smiling. “You know we don’t stand on formality out of doors.”

Theodora squared her shoulders and walked forward. She would rather have been chatting with Belle and her friends, but a member of the Meacham family at each of the tables would ensure that no one felt slighted. Theoretically, at least.

As she started to pull out a chair, a hand closed over hers and did it for her. “Thank y...” she started, then looked up to see deep blue eyes, one of them beneath a lifted eyebrow, gazing down at her.

“You’re welcome,” Vashton returned, standing patiently while she decided she’d best take the seat he offered or risk a riot as other young ladies rushed to fill the vacancy.

The moment she seated herself, he sat directly beside her. Several of her friends – and those who

called themselves her friends but seemed to have come visiting mostly in hopes of netting the earl – were glaring at her, but she ignored them. At the same time she could almost feel the disbelieving stare from Belle behind her and her parents on either side, and that was worse. Heaven knew she was near enough to having an apoplexy all on her own without adding anyone else's ire. "What the devil are you doing?" she whispered.

"Chatting with you," he replied, handing her the salt.

She didn't need salt, but it took her a moment to realize that and pass it on to Mr. Francis Henning on her other side. "You already chatted with me, and rescued me from...well, from walking back to the house alone, I suppose. I have an older and more pleasant sister. Talk to her."

"Pleasantness if overrated," he returned. "And I'm occupied with talking to you."

That stopped her. Theodora looked at him all over again, from his mud-spattered riding boots he hadn't bothered to change to his crisp crimson jacket to his dark, unruly hair and those...compelling eyes that were still gazing at her. "I don't understand," she finally admitted, her voice not quite steady. "I'm not the one to whom you need to pay attention. Aside from that, we didn't manage a single civil conversation in London, out of the two I attempted."

He laughed, the sound low and musical. It began something fluttery low in her stomach that didn't leave her feeling the least bit calmer. "If those were your best attempts at civil conversation," he returned, "I shall wear armor when you're annoyed."

Theodora scowled. "You made me nervous."

Slowly the smile faded from his expression. "Why?"

"Why?" she repeated, keeping her voice quiet. "Have you looked at you? You're handsome, witty, fabulously wealthy, and the heir to the Marquis of Haithe. Every father wants to claim you as his son-in-law, and every mother wants you to marry her daughter." Theodora frowned. "Her eldest daughter," she amended.

For a moment he fiddled with his utensils. "So I'm too good for you," he finally said.

Oh, the arrogance. She opened her mouth to correct his misapprehension then saw a muscle in his lean jaw twitch. He was teasing. Him. With her. "You're bamming me!" she stated.

"Of course I'm bamming you."

"But why?" she asked, less annoyed than she likely should have been.

"Go for a walk with me this afternoon, and I'll enlighten you."

"A group of us generally go for a stroll before dinner," she said desperately, beginning to feel as if the earth was shifting beneath her feet. Was she misunderstanding his suggestion? It made no sense. And worse, even this little public chat could be hurting Belle's feelings.

"Not 'we'," he countered. "You. And me. A walk. At three o'clock. We'll meet behind the stable."

Theodora cleared her throat, lifting her napkin and setting it back in her lap as her stomach fluttered nervously. "No. You need to go walking with Annabel. I won't be seen as competing with my sister – which would be a ridiculous failure even if I wasn't supremely aware of how I present myself."

"Y—"

Luckily on her other side sat Francis Henning, a friend of her cousin Robert and a tireless – if unintentionally amusing – conversationalist. She seized his hand. "I heard that you are an acquaintance of Lord Dare, Mr. Henning. You must share some gossip about him."

Surprise crossed Henning's round face, but as he seemed to be at least a passing acquaintance with nearly everyone in Mayfair, he did have several amusing stories. Behind her she heard Rachel Henry attempting to regale Vashton with the state of the weather, and that was fine with her. Rachel was

nowhere near as charming as Belle.

“Why the fascination with Dare?” Vashton cut into her conversation. “The man’s a fortune hunter.”

Theodora caught her breath, something she couldn’t put a name to making her pulse speed. Annoyance. It had to be annoyance. “And I have a fortune,” she returned, though the money was of course her father’s. “Why the fascination with my conversation?”

He met her gaze levelly. “You are not the means to a prize, Theodora Meacham. You are the prize.”

Oh, dear. He couldn’t be serious. Not when her lovely, well-spoken sister sat one table away. “I was under the distinct impression that previous to today you didn’t like me, Lord Vashton, so I don’t understand your sudden...concern over the topic of my conversation. Two months ago you couldn’t be bothered to look me in the eye while we danced.”

“Two months ago you began pummeling me with cross words before we’d taken three steps onto the dance floor.”

So he at least remembered their...confrontation. She couldn’t truly call it a conversation. “What has changed, then?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“I’ve had an additional two months to realize that no other young lady has spoken crossly to me since – or even before – I inherited the earldom. Not even when I was rude to her and not paying sufficient attention.”

This didn’t make any sense at all. “But you called me a cold fish.”

Vashton grimaced. “A poor choice of words, and an inaccurate one. I apologize.”

“Why? Why now?”

“You spoke your mind,” he countered. “And you have a mind. At the very least I find that worth a second attempt at an acquaintance, Miss Theodora.”

Well, this was utterly...stunning. A shiver ran down her spine to her fingertips. He found her interesting? Aside from the fact that Vashton was meant for Belle, Theodora knew for a fact that she’d been a complete halfwit at that London soiree, annoyed to be pushed at him as the less obvious choice to chat about her sister and hating the way everyone – except him – looked at her when they’d danced as if they knew she couldn’t possibly be dancing with him on her own merits. “If you are attempting to embarrass me, you will find that I am not above returning the favor.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Threats, now? Very well. If you want to get to the bottom of my evidently diabolical plan, you’ll simply have to go walking with me.” Vashton leaned a breath closer and lowered his voice. “That was teasing. I’ll inform you in the future so you don’t mistake my intent.”

“I assure you that I’m not that thick, my lord.”

The earl nodded. “Good. Neither am I. Three o’clock. Behind the stable.”

Chapter Three

THEODORA GLANCED OVER her shoulder, but Annabel and she were seated back to back. For a dark moment Geoffrey thought she would refuse again, but finally she returned her gaze to him and nodded. "If no one else knows."

It was hardly an auspicious beginning, but at least it was a beginning. "Agreed."

With that Geoffrey turned his attention to the eye-fluttering girl seated on his other side. He remembered calling Miss Meacham a cold fish, but for God's sake, she'd lambasted him for nodding politely at other people while they danced. Though truthfully it had been several other people. Or more than several. But he didn't entirely blame himself; she'd spent the first two minutes of their first waltz chatting breathlessly about her apparently perfect sister. It was only when she'd gotten mad at him that things had gotten interesting. Had he been so arrogant then, though, that he would never manage a simple conversation with her now? All the more fool him, if that was so.

She was most definitely not a cold fish. No, Theodora Meacham practically crackled with fire, and he wanted to taste her. She was not the sort of lady, however, that one trifled with. Especially when she – and everyone else – thought he was there after a fox and her sister. If he began a pursuit in earnest and then changed his mind, they would both pay for it. So first he needed a private conversation to determine for himself that his interest was more than a lust-tinged curiosity. He'd already made his one mistake where she was concerned, and before he'd even realized it would matter.

"You must tell me about Vashton Hall," the lady on his left was cooing, her lips forming a circle that was no doubt meant to remind him of kissing. His first thought was that she actually looked like a water spigot. Lucifer's balls, he couldn't even remember her name, so many women had been flung at him in the past months.

"It's a house," he said, half his attention on the conversation that had resumed between Theodora and Francis Henning. He remembered her name, damn it all. "With windows, doors, and a roof."

"But I've heard that you have a splendid pond with fish, and a garden with a magnificent temple to Athena at the edge of the water."

"You seem to know more about it than I do," he returned, summoning a half smile. "No need, thank you, for me to describe it at all."

The pretty brunette blushed. "But the — what of the weather there? Is it pleasant? I find today to be a bit chill, don't you? And the clouds are moving quite swiftly."

He reflected that in the battle he'd seemed to have begun with Theodora Meacham, neither one of them had yet seen the necessity of discussing the weather, or the speed of clouds. Inwardly sighing, he nodded again. After all, he'd been accused of being arrogant; if she overheard him being brusque with this chit, she would slam him over the head with it later. "The weather is a bit cooler overall here than it is in London, I believe, and there seems to be more rain. And yes, with the state of the clouds I've begun to wonder if we might be in for a wet evening."

She smiled hugely. "Oh, yes, I agree."

That seemed to satisfy her for long enough that he managed to finish his baked ham. Then, after a round of discussing how well he sat on a horse and the craftsmanship of his saddle, the luncheon began to break up and he made his escape. What seemed like half the female contingent present followed him into the house, chattering and hopping about like birds attempting to gain a mate by fluffing their feathers. Good God.

The moment he could manage it, Geoffrey retreated to his borrowed bed chamber and summoned Grosvenor, his valet. "Find me something understated," he said, shedding the crimson fox hunting

coat and dropping it onto the back of a chair.

“Understated, my lord?” the valet repeated. “Do you mean dark, or plain?” His lip curled as he spoke the last word; Grosvenor didn’t approve of simplicity.

“Both,” Geoffrey returned. “The jacket I wore to the museum dedication in Surrey will suffice.”

“The brown one? Then I suppose you’ll wish the gray waistcoat and the buckskin trousers.”

“You suppose correctly. And be quick about it. I need to be somewhere at three o’clock.”

“Three... I’ll never have the mud off your boots by then, my lord.”

“Then I’ll wear the Wellingtons.”

“But—”

“Tick tock, Grosvenor.”

Practically wringing his hands, the valet fetched the plain black boots and the plain, unornamented jacket and even tied Geoffrey’s cravat in what he termed a “damnably simple” knot. It had to be done; he’d offended a lady, and the more overstuffed he appeared, the less likely she would be ever to forgive him. And the more plainly he dressed, the better chance he had of going unnoticed.

Once he’d finished dressing, he angled his chin toward the door. “See who’s lurking in the hallway, will you?”

Grosvenor cracked open the door and leaned out, then retreated and shut it again. “Three young ladies, one mama, and one papa.”

Cursing, Geoffrey turned around and walked to the tall window that overlooked the garden. Unless he was mistaken it had the finest view of any room in the house, and luckily for him also featured a trellis of vines running up the wall directly beside it. Well, Theodora didn’t want anyone to know they were meeting. This would suffice. “Stay in here, Grosvenor,” he ordered, pushing open the window and sitting to swing his legs over the sill, “and converse with yourself.”

“About what, my lord?”

“I give you leave to disparage my choice of wardrobe. If anyone knocks, I’m tired from my journey yesterday, and I’m resting.”

The valet sighed. “And if you fall and break your neck attempting to climb to the ground, my lord?”

“Then you may also disparage my athletic abilities.”

“Very good, my lord.”

Not even bothering a glance at his valet, Geoffrey reached for the trellis, swung out to the latticed wood, and clambered down to the Beldath garden. He supposed he had no right to complain about his circumstances; after all, he was an earl – a wealthy one – with several large properties to his name and the future Marquisdom of Haithe before him. No one else wanted to hear that he was the younger brother, or that until two years ago he was contentedly Lord Geoffrey Kerick. They didn’t want to know that he’d loved his older brother, or that Timothy had been stupidly patriotic enough to take up arms and ride for England against Bonaparte. They both had been, but only one of them had made it home.

Shaking himself loose of the maudlins, he set off at a crouching run through the stands of roses from the carriage path and the stable yard. The barrage of eligible females had stunned him at first; yes, he’d been a popular dance partner and lover before the war, but back then he wouldn’t have given a wife a title or pin money worthy of an empress. Now he could scarcely turn around without having to dodge an engagement. For his own sanity he needed to marry, but the idea of taking up with one of the hounds pursuing him didn’t sit well at all.

And then there was Theodora Meacham. Yes, her parents had pushed her into his path, but that had

clearly been done with the idea that she would mention her more charming sister, and he would be caught. Certainly he'd never met a chit less accomplished at flirting or seduction. And yet... And yet

She was definitely pretty, with her coal black hair and slender, petite figure, even if those direct green eyes were more striking than seductive. And she gave at least as good as she got. For damned certain she kept him on his toes both on and off the dance floor, which in and of itself made her the most interesting young lady he'd met all Season. It was only a shame he hadn't been looking for her the time they'd met. If he'd been nicer, if he hadn't dismissed her as simply another of the herd before he'd spoken a word to her, any pursuit would undoubtedly have been much simpler.

As he turned the corner of the stable, he straightened and slowed his undignified scuttle. She stood leaning against the wall, her arms crossed and her chin up. A wave of warmth passed beneath his skin. There was something to be said for the pursuit. And she was no fox, outnumbered and running for her life. She'd clearly come to fight. Geoffrey felt his mouth curve in a slow smile he couldn't have stopped if his life depended on it.

"You accepted my challenge," he said aloud, resuming his approach.

Theodora started. "I admit to a certain curiosity," she conceded with clear reluctance as she straightened, "as to your motives and intentions. Please know, however, that I am not some silly little lamb you can tease until someone more interesting catches your eye. I am twenty years old, my lord, and men do not walk up and announce that they find me interesting. Not when they've been invited to court my sister. And not after I call them names and step on their toes."

"No, you're not a silly lamb," he returned, ignoring the rest of her protest. "From what I've seen, you're a lioness."

She liked that; he could see the swift upturn of her lips, swiftly flattened back into a firm line. "And which animal are you then, sir?"

If he said he was a lion she would only comment that at least he had quite a roar. Geoffrey tilted his head. "I'm a man."

Her pretty green eyes briefly widened, in appreciation he hoped. "You began the game, and now you refuse to play?" she countered.

"No. I named the animal you play, so you must name me." There. Let her decide where the game would begin.

For a long moment she contemplated him. "A wolf, perhaps," she finally mused, "away from his pack and on the lookout for easy prey."

"If that were so, a lioness would have little trouble trouncing me."

"True enough. You do seem a bit more formidable than that."

Ah, was that a compliment? He didn't dare say that aloud, or she might kick him. Instead he remained where he was, close enough to touch without doing so. He wanted to kiss her, he realized, his gaze on her thoughtfully-pursed mouth. Slowly he took a half step closer. He risked a swift glance at the yard beyond her. A lone groom exercised a horse in the paddock, but aside from that they seemed to be quite alone. Good. That had become a rare thing for him. Even with his additional efforts at privacy he had no idea how long it would be before one of the hounds discovered the fox – or wolf, according to her – out of his den.

"Then we're in agreement that I'm a man?" he pursued, just resisting the urge to brush a finger along her cheek. He generally wasn't so sentimental, but he knew his interest had nothing to do with her father sponsoring a fox hunt on behalf of her reputedly irresistible older sister. Those things had merely given him the excuse to come visiting. For a fleeting moment he wondered what he would have done if there had been no fox hunt and no sister to supposedly lure him into Devonshire.

“I will agree with that,” she finally said. “And even though you haven’t yet convinced me whether you are a good man or a bad man, I will concede that you might perhaps be less...disagreeable than I first thought.”

“You damn me with faint praise, my dear,” he returned, offering her a grin.

She blinked. “You quote Alexander Pope, my lord?”

“When the phrase fits. I’ve also been known to take a tilt or two at Shakespeare after a glass of whiskey.” Geoffrey edged closer still, under the guise of examining the stable wall for...nails or something. “At the Carmichael soiree I had chits being catapulted at me, and I responded badly. I hope it hasn’t cost me the chance to make the acquaintance and friendship of the one interesting woman in attendance. And no, I’m not talking about your sister.”

For a long moment Theodora Meacham gazed at him, her green eyes direct and serious. “I still can’t decide if you’re playing with me.”

“I am not playing with you, Miss Meacham. I give you my word.”

She took a step forward, wrapping her hand around his arm. Her fingers shook a little where they rested on his brown sleeve. “Then I think we should go for a walk, my lord.”

Chapter Four

THEODORA DIDN'T KNOW whether to call it irony or simply an amusing happenstance that a lone fox trotted across the walking path the moment she and Lord Vashton passed the end of the hedgerow. Or she supposed it might even have been a warning; evidently the earl was hunting more than foxes in Devonshire this autumn.

She studied his profile all over again, reassessing what she'd thought were her definitive opinions of the man. Arrogant or not, he was indeed handsome, with dark hair that brushed his collar, midday blue eyes, and a mouth that when relaxed was pleasant, and when it curved was...breathhtaking. Her argument, however, had never been with his appearance, with his tall frame or broad shoulders or long, elegant fingers.

"Why are you staring at my ear?" he asked, his gaze following the fox into the woods at the edge of the pathway.

"I was wondering if you meant to charge after the poor fox," she improvised. However...unbelievable his interest in her seemed to be, she would never discover anything if she couldn't move beyond his statement. Yes, she could be suspicious, but this conversation was indeed happening.

"Not on foot." He cleared his throat. "And might I suggest that we speak the truth? We've evidently already suffered through several misunderstandings."

Well. She couldn't precisely argue with that. Of all the things she'd thought about him, about his arrogance or his handsome looks, the idea that he might actually be interesting had never occurred to her. Had she been too annoyed, or too embarrassed at being sent out as the Meacham family ambassador, to notice? "Then I'm studying you, I suppose," Theodora admitted.

"For what purpose?" This time dark blue eyes briefly met hers before he looked away again.

To comprehend why you claim to prefer me to Belle, she thought to herself, but she'd already played that tune and hadn't received a satisfactory answer. "How many women have been catapulted in your direction over the past year?" she asked instead. Clearly she needed to decipher him before anything else could make sense.

"I lost count. A great many, and everywhere between the ages of fourteen and sixty."

Theodora wrinkled her nose. "Sixty?"

He nodded. "I won't give you the lady's name, but she assured me that she had learned all the secrets of the bed chamber and that while she could not give me an heir, she could give me endless nights of passion."

Theodora snorted. "It was Lady Eloisa Hinstead, wasn't it?"

His lips twitched. "And how did you come to that conclusion?"

"She is quite adamant about wearing the most scandalous gowns, and I've heard her say several times that she has remained unmarried because she has never met a man wealthy enough to tempt her. And you are quite wealthy."

"So I am. And while I certainly have nothing against endless nights of passion, I do require a wife who can bear me an heir, and I would prefer a lady with whom I share both a similar number of decades and an interesting conversation."

"Then you've come here looking for interesting conversation and child-bearing hips."

Lord Vashton laughed, then stopped to face her. "I've come here to see if the spark I noticed in your eyes two months ago was simple anger, or something more."

"What if it was only reflected candlelight—"

He cupped her right cheek with his left hand, leaned down, and touched his mouth to hers.

Theodora stopped breathing at the slow, gentle brush, at the warmth of his breath against her cheek. As he slowly pulled away she found herself leaning forward, and just barely caught herself before she could topple over. Oh, my.

“And so I would like us to have a genuine conversation,” he continued, his gaze still on her mouth. “without either of us digging for chinks in the other’s armor or questioning the rules of attraction.”

“But I have to question them, because—“

“If someone told you that you must prefer a chicken because it came before the egg – or vice versa – would you? For that reason only?”

“That still makes you the fox in this equation, you realize,” she said dryly, then squared her shoulders. “It’s a stupid argument.”

“My point exactly.” A smile touched his mouth, and for a moment she couldn’t even remember what they were talking about.

“But the chicken’s feelings will be hurt,” she finally managed, determined not to be carried off somewhere with her head in the clouds. “And the chicken is important to me.”

“I refuse to stay away from poultry simply because the egg won’t accept that it is at least as significant to this fox as any chicken might be.” The earl made a face. “Perhaps we should stop with the analogies.”

Theodora nodded. “Definitely, my lord. I’m not terribly excited by the notion of being either chicken or egg.”

“In the analogy,” he pressed, looking at her intently. “Not in actuality.”

And there it was, that unsettling, breath-speeding expression deep in his blue eyes that made her feel...naughty and pretty and desirable all at the same time. Was that look truly just for her? “Not in actuality,” she repeated.

“Good. And call me Geoffrey.” Visibly shaking himself, the earl took her hand and placed it back over his arm as they continued along the path once more. “Now. About me. Until two years ago I had no prospects of being anything more a marquis’s son and an earl’s younger brother.”

For a moment she considered. If she continued with her suspicions and criticisms he might admire her wit, but they would never be friends – much less this other thing that made her nerves shiver and her heart pound. She thought she’d utterly failed at turning this man’s attention to Belle, and yet evidently she’d done a great deal more than that.

Was it hope or stupidity if she decided to accept that he was sincere? Would she be setting herself up for embarrassment or heartbreak if she let her guard down? Or was it more that she was affirming her own cowardice if she turned her back and returned to the house? After all, she’d just experienced her first kiss, and mostly what she wanted was to have another. From Geoffrey Kerick, Lord Vashton

And Annabel... No one had guaranteed that her older sister would marry anyone. No one had shaken hands or written their names on a piece of paper. For heaven’s sake, the only supposed connection between Belle and Geoffrey was that they’d danced a few times and that Geoffrey had come to Devonshire for a fox hunt. She blew out her breath.

“Did I come out well in that mental argument?” the earl asked, his fingers warm and firm around hers.

“This is nothing I expected,” Theodora returned. “I’m...I’m beyond surprised. And I’ve never been in this situation before, so I have no idea what I’m supposed to say or do.”

“Say you at least accept that I am after you, Theodora. And say that hearing that excites you.”

Oh, it did that. “Of course it’s exciting to have a handsome man express interest,” she retorted. “But all I know about you is that you’re an earl due to inherit a marquissdom, that you never expected

to be in these circumstances, and that you enjoy fox hunting. And I daresay you don't know anything about me, either."

"I know you don't like nonsense, but you have a sense of humor," he returned. "I know you'll converse with people you feel nervous around for the sake of your family. I know you've likely been...not ignored, but set aside, I suppose, until your parents see Annabel married. I know you've been called a bluestocking, which I assume means that you're intelligent and well read."

She looked up at him. This was all beginning to seem very, very real. And even more exciting because of it. "You have been looking into things, haven't you?"

"Once I realized that no young lady I've met gave me a sleepless night until you, I had to know who you are, Theodora," he gazed at her from beneath dark lashes. "Theodora. That does suit you, you know. Exotic and unusual."

She liked the way he said her name. "I wonder sometimes if we're named to suit our character, or if we alter our character to suit our name."

"Either way, then, I should fear a fellow named Brutus."

Theodora laughed again, belatedly remembering that she was to remain at least a little suspicious of him, however remarkable this day was turning out to be. She'd never lost her head over a man, and now that one was actually looking at her, she wasn't about to do so. Still, he made a good point. "Definitely," she agreed aloud.

For a long moment he gazed at her, then faced down the path again. "So tell me, Theodora, when your parents decided to...nudge Annabel in my direction, what did you think? That I was a poor choice?"

Oh, he didn't want to hear that. "When did you decide you needed to marry?" she countered.

"I asked you a question first. And we're being honest and forthright, if you'll recall." He took a slow breath. "I do know the tradition, that as my father's heir I'm supposed to marry for prestige and money. But until two years ago I had thought to be able to marry...whomever I wished. Someone whose conversation I enjoyed, someone who cared for me more than for becoming the future Marchioness of Haithe."

She'd never considered that. And she knew that Belle had spent part of the last week introducing her reflection as Annabel, the Marchioness of Haithe. Oh, dear. "And did you have someone in mind two years ago?"

Geoffrey shook his head, a handsome, rueful smile touching his mouth. "That was the other thing I had no pressing need to settle down. It was my brother's children who would be his heirs. My offspring would only be nephews and nieces to the future marquis, if I chose to wed at all."

For a moment Theodora walked beside him in silence. "I'm sorry you lost your brother," she finally said.

"Thank you. So am I; he was a good man and my dearest friend." Grimacing, he sent her a sideways glance. "Clever chit. I ask you a question, and suddenly I'm regaling you with my tale of woe. I know you weren't pleased to be dancing with me at the Carmichael soiree, no matter what your intentions in doing so. Why?"

"Haven't you conversed with me?" she retorted. "I've been through three governesses and two finishing schools, learning all about the ways to flutter my eyelashes and chat fetchingly about the duller topics imaginable. None of it made any difference. I simply don't show well with people I don't know. I never know what to say and so I'll mention something about a book or some debate in Parliament, and the next thing I know I've been called a bluestocking or a suffragist."

A muscle in his jaw jumped. "I had no idea you were such a nonconformist. Next you'll tell me

you like Americans.”

The most surprising thing about this conversation, Theodora decided, was the frequency with which Geoffrey Kerick made her grin. “I like their coffee. Does that count?”

“If that’s the criteria, I suppose I like the Yankees, as well.” He turned to look at her again. “You see, something else we have in common.”

Theodora nearly asked what all the other somethings might be, but the birds were singing, the nip of autumn afternoons touched the air, and a very handsome man seemed to be working quite hard to endear himself to her. And while gentlemen had gone out of their way to be nice to her before, they had all needed something – either her family’s money or a closer association with a respected title, or more likely, an avenue of introduction to Belle. Just what it was that Geoffrey Kerick wanted seemed a much more...complex puzzle.

“They say you served under Wellington,” she offered, because she felt more easy discussing him than herself.

“I did. My father attempted to insure that his two daft offspring stayed far from battle, so mainly galloped about seeing to it that the duke’s orders went where they were supposed to.”

From the abruptly somber expression that crossed his lean face he’d done more than he claimed, but she liked that he didn’t boast about it. If some tales she’d heard from returning soldiers were to be believed, Bonaparte would have surrendered and never attempted an escape from Elba, if he’d even dared a revolution in the first place. “But your brother was killed in Spain, was he not?”

With a nod he stooped to pick up a stone and skip it across the narrow stream. “French hussars ambushed the supply wagons he was leading. Tim was killed protecting flour and pigs.”

“I’m so sorry,” she returned, though she’d said it before. “I daresay he knew the supplies’ importance to both sides, whether the duty sounded glamorous or not.”

For a long moment he walked beside her in silence, and she worried that she’d once again said the wrong thing. Should she have stated that the former earl had no doubt fought gallantly? Or that the late Timothy Kerick deserved a more heroic death? But of course she’d spoken before she’d considered the most politic response. Theodora opened her mouth to interject a...wiser comment, but it seemed far too late for that. And the oddest thing of all was that she felt disappointed that her own stupid mouth had ruined something just when it was becoming interesting.

Finally he blew out his breath. “I know Tim thought it was important,” he said quietly. “Thank you for being one of the few people with whom I’ve spoken since to also think so. Most sympathize and say he deserved a better death, as if there was such a thing.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” she burst out, relieved, then clapped her free hand over her mouth. Stupid, stupid, stupid. “I mean, I was afraid I’d offended you,” she muttered through her fingers.

Thankfully he smiled as he plucked her fingers away from her face. “I’m not offended. I am somewhat curious as to why you’re suddenly concerned over offending me. A few minutes ago you couldn’t wait to foist me off on your sister.”

“It was more than a few minutes ago. And my acquaintance with you previous to today consisted of you asking me to dance because it was expected, and then ignoring me. And admittedly I wasn’t terribly happy to be one of the chits catapulted at you. I know you must have thought I was after you.”

He laughed. “You made it quite clear from the onset that you weren’t dancing with me to please yourself. Don’t worry on that count.”

“Oh. Well good, then. I suppose.”

Geoffrey studied her serious, thoughtful expression for a long, hard beat of his heart. Clearly she saw her tendency to be...forthright as a flaw. In previous conversations with men more expecting of

flattery, it had likely caused her trouble.

“I’m glad you speak your mind, Theodora,” he commented, selecting the longer trail that rounded the lake when it curved away from the shorter one leading back to the garden. The more time he had alone with her, the better. Of course this way she could also push him into the water if she decided that was some elaborate jest, but it was a risk he was willing to take. The more he spoke with her, the more she fascinated him. “And I’m glad that other men find that off-putting. Otherwise neither of us would be standing here at this moment.”

“Then you truly didn’t come to Beldath to hunt foxes? Or to court Belle?” From her tone Theodora still didn’t quite believe he was doing anything but teasing. The idea made him angry – not at her, but at whoever it was, whatever it was, that had convinced her being herself was unattractive.

Best make his intentions unmistakably clear, then, before she assigned him some other sin. “No. I’m here to hunt foxes or your sister,” he confirmed. “I’m hunting you, Theodora Meacham.”

Color darkened her cheeks, and for the first time in their admittedly short acquaintance she didn’t seem to know what to say. He found that rather encouraging. Taking advantage of her discomfiture, Geoffrey faced her. Cupping her cheeks in his hands, he leaned in to taste her mouth again.

He’d kissed women before; hell, he’d had lovers before. But the stutter of his heart at the touch of her soft lips...that was new. Perhaps it was merely his mind attempting to convince his soul – or vice versa – that he’d found the one, but given that at first glance she was absolutely not the wife for a man new to his title and one who had only inherited accidentally, this pull he felt for her was more than just circumstance. And she tasted like strawberries.

If he’d had any doubts before about whether he’d been right to pursue a lady he’d only met twice and with whom he’d clashed on both those occasions, this kiss answered them, shot them in the arse and sent them running away. Her arms lifted to wrap around his shoulders, and desire pulsed through his muscles warm as summer.

The other women throwing themselves after him – the eyelash flutterers and weather chatterers – had no idea. But why would he want a compliant, demure porcelain doll when he could have a challenge, a conundrum, a match? Of course the other side of this equation had to come to the same conclusion for this to work, because she would never agree to marry him otherwise.

And that idea didn’t startle him or trouble him in the least. He’d been bandying about in his head for weeks, and his only worry had been that Theo wouldn’t be what he’d remembered and what he’d discovered about her had been incorrect. And that she wouldn’t feel the same pull between them that he did.

Slowly he lifted his head again, looking down at her oval upturned face with her closed eyes, long lashes, and soft, parted lips. Hopefully that kiss had done at least something to convince her that they belonged together. If it hadn’t, he’d lost before he’d barely begun.

Her eyes opened, light green with a thin rim of brown around the edge of the iris. Lovely eyes. Eyes he could imagine gazing into for a very long stretch of years to come.

“You know,” she said, her voice a touch breathless, “you may not be as objectionable as I first thought.”

“I’ll call that progress.” And that remained the crux of the problem, as well; he liked her already, but she hadn’t yet decided how she felt about him. Particularly since in her mind he hadn’t come to Devonshire with her in mind at all.

She grinned. “You’re an optimist.”

“I suppose I am.” He smiled back at her, mentally crossing his fingers and sending up a prayer to whomever might be listening. “But there’s one more thing you need to know. I’m not the only one

tired of the mob of females and the parade of fox hunts. My father expects me to marry by the end of the year. If I don't, he'll find someone for me and see that I do so, anyway."

That particular conversation had likely been the least friendly one he'd ever had with his father, but he did understand the old marquis's reasoning. And he wanted Theodora to understand it, as well. "He lost a son two years ago, Theo. He's worried about losing another, and about his...legacy, I suppose it is. He wants to know that everything's been set to rights."

She furrowed her brow. "And those other house parties with the half dozen foxes?"

Geoffrey shrugged. "I couldn't very well refuse. And I suppose I was looking. But I've been comparing every female I meet to one lady. To you."

"Based on two very brief conversations?"

It didn't quite seem the time to admit that he'd been interrogating everyone he could find about her. Not if he didn't wish to send her fleeing. "Not only that. But I need to know if you think you could – if you would at least consider the idea of...of me, I suppose."

"A few days to decide the course of the remainder of my life? That's quite daunting."

"And not very romantic," he agreed, wishing he'd foregone the other visits and come to Beldath earlier. That he hadn't wasted so much time, and that he had more of that same time to convince her what he'd known for a certainty the moment he'd spied her again by the stream, bedraggled and spattered with mud. "But there is some saying or other about the longest journey beginning with a single footstep. Everything begins somewhere. Perhaps we begin right here."

She sent him a thoughtful smile that seemed to have sunlight at its edges. "Perhaps we do."

Chapter Five

THE SUN WAS the merest sliver over the western hillside when Theodora and Geoffrey returned to the manor house garden. She almost attempted to convince herself this was all a dream, but that would have meant waking up to realize that Geoffrey had come to Beldath in pursuit of Belle after all, and that she was the matrimonial choice only for men who needed money.

Geoffrey held her hand as they passed the autumn roses, every press of his fingers against hers sparking warmth and wonder. The cynical part of her, the one that knew how ill she showed in public couldn't help pointing out that her enthusiastic reaction to his pursuit was simply because she'd never experienced such a thing before. The rest of her wasn't doing much thinking at all. Instead she drank in every word of conversation, every whisper of a touch, so she would never forget how she felt for those moments.

Beneath his bed chamber window he tightened his grip on her hand, then released her. "I have to leave you here," he muttered.

Immediately Theodora looked from him up to the open window and back again. "That's how you escaped?"

"You said you didn't want anyone to know we were meeting. As I seem to become the Pied Piper the moment I leave the bed chamber, I thought climbing out the window would be wiser. So now I have to return the same way, or the flock will begin lurking out here, as well."

A few hours ago she might have responded to that statement with faux sympathy over his unfortunate popularity. She knew more about him now, however, about how he'd found himself in a position he didn't relish, about how he'd been shoved into the middle of polite Society when he'd been perfectly content to remain on its fringes. And how he was being pushed toward marriage – and how he'd told her all of that voluntarily. If he merely needed a convenient bride, he certainly didn't have to look as far afield as her. Aside from that, he'd gone through a great deal of trouble to chat with her when she'd been somewhat – very well, quite – prickly toward him. And he kissed magnificently. "Please be careful," she said aloud, taking a step back.

"You didn't suggest I break my neck," he returned with a grin. "More progress."

Her cheeks heated. "It's only that I would be blamed for it if you fell," she grumbled. Yes, she liked him, suddenly and a great deal more than she'd ever expected. But she was not a soft, fluttery sort of female, for heaven's sake.

"Of course," he returned, lifting a hand to brush a strand of hair from her cheek. "Sit beside me at dinner."

She almost nodded. "I can't!" she remembered belatedly. "We already sat together at luncheon. People will talk."

"Good. I want them to."

"B–"

"I have no need, or desire, to hide my interest in you. My attraction to you. In fact, the only thing I wish to hide is that I know how to make an escape for the occasional private walk." Geoffrey turned for the trellis, then stopped and faced her again. "One more," he murmured, walking back up to her and capturing her mouth with his.

This kiss was not as delicate as the first two. Oh, heavens, she was counting them. Hot and plundering, it stole her breath and made her clutch his shoulders to keep from sinking to the ground. Heat speared down her spine, leaving her feeling...wanton, primal, wishing she could pull off his brown jacket and tan waistcoat and the fine-spun shirt beneath to run her hands along his bare, warm

skin.

Wearing a grin that looked a bit breathless, himself, Geoffrey backed to the wall, grabbed a rung of the trellis, and climbed up to his window with far more grace than she ever could have managed.

For a long moment after he disappeared inside, Theodora gazed up after him. She could feel the words from Romeo and Juliet bubbling up in her chest, and resolutely turned away. She was not Juliet, he was not Romeo, and they were not star-crossed lovers doomed by their forbidden passion.

“There you are,” Belle said, walking into the garden from the direction of the front of the house.

Or perhaps she and Geoffrey were doomed, after all. “I was out walking,” she announced, too loudly.

“I thought you must be.” Annabel took her arm and wrapped her hands around it. “Come inside. We need to change for dinner, and you must tell me what you and Lansing talked about at luncheon. Did he mention me?”

Had he mentioned Belle? Oh, dear. Theodora scowled. How was she supposed to proceed? What if she told Belle that he was interested in her younger sister? What if it was all some rose-scented dream after all?

When Annabel nudged her shoulder, she blinked. “Beg pardon?”

“I asked if you told Vashton that I enjoy riding, and that mama’s been letting me plan the household meals for nearly a year.” Belle furrowed her perfect, slightly-arched eyebrows. “And you shouldn’t go walking so much. You’ll end up with man legs if you keep that up, and no one will want to marry you.”

Ha. Someone already did. “I wasn’t hiking the Lake District, Belle,” she retorted. “It was just a stroll around the pond.”

“Fine. I didn’t mean to insult you.” Her sister sighed. “It’s only that after luncheon Lord Vashton went upstairs to take a nap. After he came all this way to meet me, I haven’t even had a chance to do more than wish him a good morning.”

“He came all this way because he was invited to a fox hunt,” Theodora countered. “And if you want to know if he likes you, ask him.”

“Oh, as if I would be so bold.” Abruptly Belle stopped. As her hands were wrapped around her sister’s arm, Theodora was forced to halt, as well. “What in the world is wrong?” the twenty-two-year-old demanded. “Has someone else caught his eye? It’s not Rachel Henry, is it? Oh, I should have realized when she stole the seat next to him at luncheon. I knew we should never have invited her. She’s always been jealous of me, as if I have any say over the color of my eyes or my height.”

Was it insulting that Annabel had never considered her own sister to be a romantic rival, or was it a compliment to her supposed loyalty and integrity? She didn’t feel in great possession of either one, at the moment. “What about Vashton?” she asked aloud.

“What do you mean, ‘what about Vashton?’”

“I mean, it takes two to make a match. A hundred women could make eyes at him, but he has to like one of them back if anything’s going to happen.”

“You do know something,” Belle returned, narrowing her pretty emerald-colored eyes. “He fancied someone. Who is it? Has he declared for her? Do I still have a chance to win his affections?” She seized Theodora’s arm again. “If there’s been no declaration, then nothing is settled. Is she here? Is that why he’s come?”

Theodora squeezed her eyes shut for a heartbeat. This was not a conversation she could have. Not at this moment. “Just stop asking me questions, will you?” she snapped, yanking her arm free and striding for the front door. “If you want to know something about Lord Vashton, ask Lord Vashton, f

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