

## ONE TRUE LOVE

Suzanne Enoch

*To the memory of my great-grandparents,  
Vivian H. and Zelma Whitlock.  
A West Texas cowboy and a sheep rancher's daughter,  
their unlikely romance lasted for more than half a century.*

### Chapter 1

Lady Anne Bishop is back in town, along with the rest of society, eager to enjoy the frigid weather and overcast skies. London is suffering through a spate of cold unmatched in recorded history, and indeed, even the mighty Thames has frozen over. This Author cannot help but wonder whether this means that husbands all over town must now perform all the tasks they had put off by claiming, "I shall throw away my hideous mounted boar's head (or admit I have gout, or listen to the intelligently spoken words of my wife—you, *Dear Reader*, may insert whichever you like) when the Thames freezes over."

But despite the cold's tendency to turn one's nose a rather unattractive shade of red, the ton seems to be enjoying the weather, if only for the novelty of it all. Lady Anne Bishop, as noted above, was spied making angels in the snow in the company of Sir Royce Pemberley, who, it must be noted, is not her intended husband.

One can only wonder if this incident will compel the Marquis of Halfurst, who has been betrothed to Lady Anne since the occasion of her birth, to leave his home in Yorkshire and travel to London to finally make the acquaintance of the woman he will marry.

Or perhaps he is content with the situation at hand? Not every gentleman desires a wife, after all.

LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS,  
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Anne Bishop laid the letters on the card table. "Now," she said, smiling, "we've each read all three. Your opinions, ladies?"

"Mr. Spengle's invitation seems to be the most fervent," Theresa DePris commented, chuckling as she brushed her fingers across the missive. "He used the word 'heart' four times."

"And 'ardent' twice." Anne laughed. "He also has the best penmanship. Pauline, what do you think?"

"As if you care about penmanship, Annie," Miss Pauline Hamilton said, giving a delicate snort. "All of us know you're going to go to the theater with Lord Howard, so please stop flaunting your love letters before us poor unfortunate souls."

"They aren't love letters, for heaven's sake." Less amused, Anne turned Lord Howard's letter to face her. Desmond Howard was the wittiest of her circle of male acquaintances, to be certain, but love? That was just nonsense.

"What do you call their correspondence, then? I-like-you-very-much letters?"

With a slight scowl, Anne returned the missive to its former position. "It's all in fun. No one takes it seriously."

"Why, because you've been betrothed since you were three days old?" Pauline pursued, grimacing. "I think you take that agreement even less seriously than your suitors do."

"Pauline, you are becoming quite the moralist, suddenly," Anne said, shuffling the letters into a brisk pile. "I do not have suitors, and it's not as though I've done anything wrong."

"Besides," Theresa added, rejoining the debate, "when was the last time Annie received a letter from Lord Halfurst?"

"Never!" her two friends finished in unison, laughing.

Annie laughed as well, though she didn't consider it all that funny. In romantic tales, one's betrothed fought witches and slew dragons for one. A letter should have been easy to manufacture, even in godforsaken Yorkshire.

"Exactly," she said, anyway. "Never a word, much less a sentence, in nineteen years. So I don't want to hear any more nonsense about my sheep-farming betrothed." She leaned forward. "He knows precisely where I spend my days. If he chooses to spend his own as far from London as possible, that's no concern of mine."

Theresa sighed. "So you'll never marry?"

Anne patted her friend's hand. "I have a monthly stipend, I get to spend most of the year in London because of Father's cabinet position, I have the most wonderful friends I could ever hope for, and I receive at least three invitations to every event, even in the middle of winter. If that's not perfection, I don't know what is."

Pauline shook her head. "What about your sheep-farming marquis, though? Do you think he'll stay in Yorkshire until he withers and dies? If he decides to marry, won't it have to be you?"

Anne shuddered. Miss Hamilton had always delighted in finding the pitfalls on other's paths. "I really don't care what he does."

"Perhaps he'll perish in a sheep-shearing accident," Theresa suggested.

"Oh, I don't want anything ill to happen to Lord Halfurst," Anne countered quickly. Heavens, if he expired, she would lose the only barrier between herself and her mother beginning an eternity of nagging that she needed to find a husband. This way, she could blame any lack of a mate on the absent marquis. And it would just be wrong if she married someone else without his consent. "I like him quite well exactly where he is — far away from here."

"Hm," Theresa mused. "You say that now, but —"

The drawing room door rattled and opened. "Anne, come at once!" her mother hissed.

Lady Daven's face was white, and for a moment all Anne could think was that something had happened to her father.

"Mama, what's wrong?" she asked, shooting to her feet.

"It's him!" the countess continued, not even sparing the other two ladies in the room a glance. "Oh, why are you wearing that? Whatever happened to your new blue gown?" "Mama, what in the world are you talking about?" Anne pressed, sending her friends an apologetic glance and hurrying forward. "Who is here? Papa?"

"No, *him*. Halfurst."

Anne's breath caught in her throat, her silent gasp echoed aloud by Theresa and Pauline. "*What?*"

"Stop dawdling," her mother snapped, grabbing her by the arm and pulling her into the hallway.

"But—what is he doing here?" A thousand questions jostled for position in her mind, and only that one managed to squeak out with any coherence.

Her mother sent her an annoyed look. "We can only assume. He asked for you. Poor Lambert didn't know what to do with him, but thank goodness the idiot had enough sense to put him in the morning room."

Her betrothed was in the morning room. The sheep farmer. The Marquis of Halfurst. The fat, bald, slovenly, short, smelly sheep farmer to whom her parents had given their word she would marry, and whom she'd never met in all her nineteen years of life. "I think I'm going to faint," she muttered.

"You are not going to faint. This is your fault, anyway, carrying on as you have been. He's probably here to insist that you cry off marrying him entirely."

Anne brightened a little. "Do you think so?" Now that the stupid marquis had invaded London, the prospect of her mother's nagging her about marrying someone else didn't seem so terrible.

They stopped before the closed morning room door. "I wouldn't doubt it," her mother whispered fiercely. "Now behave yourself." She pushed open the door and shoved Anne forward.

"Be—" Before she could finish, the door slammed closed behind her.

He stood before the fireplace, warming his hands. For a bare moment, Anne just stared at his profile. Not bald, nor short, and certainly not fat in the dark, closely-fitting jacket he wore. Aristocratic, she thought abruptly, in the old, elegant sense of the word. "You're Halfurst?" she blurted, then flushed.

With a slight stirring of air, he faced her. Dark gray eyes, one obscured by a stray lock of damp, coal black hair, studied her with a thoroughness that stopped her breath. "I am." His low tone was clipped at the end, though she wasn't certain whether it was from amusement or annoyance. "Lady Anne, I presume."

Not ugly, either, she noted with a slow breath, then shook herself and sketched a belated curtsy. "What... what brings you to London, my lord?"

"Snow angels," he answered, in the same level voice.

"Snow—beg pardon?"

The marquis reached into his pocket, producing a much-folded piece of paper. With his piercing gray eyes holding hers, he strolled toward her, hand outstretched. "Snow angels."

Anne took the paper, careful not to touch his hand. It was silly, but touching him would make his presence unmistakably ... real. The large ruby signet ring on his right index finger flashed in the firelight, further lending the scene a dark, surreal quality. Glancing up at his lean, stony face, she unfolded the worn parchment. And blanched. "Oh. I ... ah ... Lady Whistledown exaggerates terribly, you know."

"I see," he murmured. The tone, soft as it was, vibrated down her spine. "So you weren't wallowing in the snow with Sir Royce Pemberley?"

Her astonishment at his appearance began to dim a little. Admittedly he had a tall, well-muscled form, and a lean, handsome face that would make a poet weep, but she had concerns other than his looks. He was rude, for one thing. She blinked, forcing her gaze away from his Greek-god countenance.

His wardrobe certainly didn't meet any proper London standards she'd ever heard of. His coat was well made, but easily a half dozen years behind the style. Dark buckskin breeches looked as though they'd seen much better days, while the quality of his boots was indistinguishable beneath the mud and snow covering them.

"I was not wallowing, Lord Halfurst. Sir Royce tripped into the snow, and as I attempted to help him to his feet, I lost my balance as well."

He lifted an eyebrow. "And the snow angels?"

Anne resisted the urge to clear her throat. Good heavens, her own mother hadn't asked so many questions, and certainly not in such a tone. "It seemed the thing to do, my lord."

His lips twitched. "I trust it doesn't happen often?"

Anne frowned. *Was he laughing at her now?* "You might at least have wished me good morning before you began railing at me, Lord Halfurst."

"Considering that I've spent the last three days riding through snow and ice and mud to discover why the devil my betrothed has been consorting with"—he took the clipping out of her hand—"with someone 'not her intended husband,' I think I've been quite civil."

Maximilian Trent, the Marquis of Halfurst, narrowed his eyes. He'd expected her to be surprised by his arrival, but not that she would give him an out-and-out argument about it. The slender young woman standing before him, her hands clenched into fists and her thick brunette hair coiled at the top of her head, didn't seem to care what he might have expected. And he found that interesting.

Little as he liked leaving Yorkshire, he had to admit that it was past time. Lady Whistledown's paper had made two things damned clear: first, he was going to have to go to London to fetch his bride, since she obviously wasn't going to come to him; and second, if his peers, in anonymous gossip or not, had begun questioning his manhood, then he'd been gone from London for too long, anyway. And when he'd set eyes on the woman to whom he'd been promised for nineteen of his twenty-six years, his first thought was that he should have come sooner. "I was not 'consorting' with Sir Royce. He is a friend."

"Former friend," Maximilian corrected. Considering this was the first time they'd spoken—ever—the conviction he felt at that statement surprised him.

She was glaring at him, none of the earlier curiosity remaining in her moss green eyes. "I don't think you have any right to—"

"Be that as it may," he interrupted, "here I am." He took a slow step closer. "Where's your father?"

Her brow furrowed. "With the Regent. Why?"

"The sooner we get the details settled, the better. Then we can be off before you have any further snow angel adventures."

She took an equally slow step backward. "Off? Off where?"

"To Halfurst. At this time of year I can't afford to be away long."

Lady Anne halted her retreat, hands smoothing her heavy lavender gown. "Just like that? After nineteen years you appear, and—snap—we're to be married and flee off to the wilderness?"

"Yorkshire is hardly wilderness," he returned, pulling out his pocket watch. If they left before noon, they could be back at Halfurst by the end of the week, even with the slower pace that the weather and having a new bride with him would dictate.

He pursed his lips, taking her in again. With the lady standing before him as his bride, several stops along the way might prove necessary—and pleasurable.

"No," she said distinctly.

Maximilian looked up from his timepiece. "What?"

He thought she hesitated, though her shoulders remained square and her chin up. "I said no."

With a snap he closed the watch. "I heard that. Just what do you mean by it, pray tell?"

"I thought it clear, Lord Halfurst. I mean that I will not leave London to accompany you to Yorkshire, and that—"

"You wish to be married here? I can probably obtain a special license without much difficulty, then." It made sense.

She'd grown up in London, and he had no objection to marrying her in London.

"Allow me to finish," she continued, a tremor in her fine voice. "I am not going to Yorkshire at all, and I would rather drop dead than marry you."

Maximilian clamped his jaw closed in disbelief. "You can't just say no. That decision is not yours, Lady Anne," he protested, anger tugging at him. "Your parents—"

"I'm certain my parents must merely have neglected to inform you that they would not wish to see me married unhappily, to a man I've never met and who, I might add, has never even bothered to send me a letter or a note or a torn scrap of paper in nineteen years."

He lifted an eyebrow, wondering whether she was trying to convince him or herself. "You—"

"I know nothing of your character, my lord," she stated, "and I won't be dragged out of London by a stranger under any circumstances."

"Perhaps you might have thought to notify me about this previously." This female, seven years his junior, was not going to dictate the terms of their marriage. This very attractive female was not getting away simply because he'd neglected to write to her.

"Perhaps if you'd bothered to introduce yourself before now, I wouldn't be refusing your suit."

She had little ground to stand on; her parents would face ridicule and embarrassment if they allowed her to dissolve an agreement with a family as old as his, besides the fact that he *had* corresponded with her father, and knew perfectly well that both Lord and Lady Daven supported the match. Maximilian opened his mouth, then closed it again. He had already won, though she hadn't yet realized that fact. Whatever he might wish to say next, he was tired and cold and wet enough that it wouldn't be pleasant or helpful. And it would be pointless to make the circumstance of their anticipated union even more difficult. For a moment he gazed at her. The high color in her cheeks, the quick rise and fall of her

bosom, the way  
her fingers clenched the heavy material of her lavender gown—he wasn't going to make any progress by yelling at her. He did, however, intend to make progress. Winning by default was no fun at all.

With a last, regretful thought about what the continuing foul weather was likely doing to the North Road, he nodded.

"Perhaps you're right."

"Per—yes, well, *I am* right," she returned, obvious relief softening her features.

Good God, she was lovely. He hadn't expected that. He hadn't expected *her*, at all. "Then I must make amends."

Her brow furrowed and then smoothed again. "That's not necessary."

"So you think I should return to Yorkshire posthaste?" he asked, amusement touching him again. However unexpected she was for him, Lady Anne was even more flummoxed by *his* sudden arrival.

"You did indicate that you didn't wish to be away for an extended period."

"So I did. First, however, I would be honored if you would accompany me to—" he flipped over the worn gossip sheet—  
"to the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane tonight, to see *The Merchant of Venice*." He looked up at her again. "I believe Edmund Kean is playing Shylock."

"Yes, he is," she said, a smile lighting her eyes to emeralds. "He's supposed to be quite remarkable. In fact—" She stopped, blushing.

"In fact, what?" he queried.

"Nothing."

"Good. Then I'll collect you at seven this evening." Feeling the need to touch her, Maximilian took one more slow step forward. Running his hand down her wrist, he uncurled her fingers from the material of her gown.

She made a small sound like a gasp as he brought her hand up, brushing his lips across her knuckles. Slow heat ran through his veins as she raised her face to his, gazing at him beneath dark, curling lashes.

"I'll see you tonight," he murmured, releasing her as his mind conjured all sorts of things he'd rather be doing with her than letting her go.

Without waiting for a response he strode out to the hall and the foyer beyond, collecting his hat and caped greatcoat. He had some things to take care of before this evening. And he didn't need to see the butler's expression at his old, out-of-fashion wardrobe to know what the most pressing of them was.

When he'd arrived in town a few hours ago he'd had little thought but to collect Lady Anne and return to

Yorkshire without delay. After seeing her, however, the idea of doing a little courting didn't seem so repugnant, after all.

## Chapter 2

This Author is not one to overstate one's own importance, but it is being said that This Author's own column, dated one week prior, is directly responsible for the recent town arrival of none other than Maximilian Trent, Marquis of Halfurst. It seems the good marquis took exception to his betrothed's snow angel escapades with Sir Royce Pemberley.

And if that weren't excitement enough, it was whispered that he is positively stalking Lady Anne. Consider, if you will, Dear Reader, what transpired Saturday evening at Drury Lane. . .

LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS,  
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"You refused him."

Anne continued pacing, ignoring her maid's piteous sighs as Daisy tried to put the finishing touches to her hair. "You should have heard him, Mama. 'Cease having any fun and accompany me to the middle of nowhere at once.' "

"He did not say that."

"He might as well have."

Lady Daven, seated on the bed and watching Anne's progress as she stalked back and forth, shook her head. "It doesn't matter. You can't refuse him. Your father and the old Marquis of Halfurst made—"

"Then let Papa marry him! I never asked to be exiled to Yorkshire!"

"Yesterday you were happy to be betrothed to Halfurst." Yesterday she'd never thought he might actually appear. With a scowl Anne relented and sat, allowing Daisy to fasten the last few hairclips in place. "I don't like him. Isn't that enough?"



"You only just met him. And surely you can have no complaints about his looks."

That had been the most disquieting part of the meeting. He was handsome—far more so than she'd ever imagined. "Yes, his face was pleasant enough, I suppose," she hedged. "But did you see his wardrobe? Good heavens, it was positively ancient! And he was mean. How did he expect me to respond?"

Her mother sighed. "Perhaps he was nervous at meeting you."

"I don't think he was nervous about anything," Anne muttered.

"Whatever your initial misgivings, you will meet with him again, Anne. Short of our discovering some sort of mental imbalance on his part, the agreement stands. Your father's honor rests on it."

"He offered to escort me to the theater tonight." She frowned. "Actually, he practically ordered me to accompany him."

"Good. Your father and I shall await your account of the evening." With a rustle of material, Lady Daven stood and swept out of the room.

"It *is not* good," Anne said to the closed door. "I don't like being ordered about; and certainly not by an antique-wearing sheep farmer." *But such eyes.* She shook herself. "And I really don't wish to be seen in his company. Everyone will make fun."

"My lady?"

"Daisy, please go and inform Lambert that he is to let me—and only me—know when Lord Howard arrives." "But—"

"No arguments, please. I am not going to spend my life imprisoned in Yorkshire."

As her maid hurried downstairs, Anne sat back to fiddle with her earrings. Her mother would've been livid if she'd known Lord Howard still expected to escort her daughter to the theater tonight. Anne wasn't entirely certain why she'd decided to be so defiant—except that the Marquis of Halfurst had arrived knowing he'd already won, and he hadn't bothered to be gracious about it, or to consider her feelings and her situation at all.

Someone scratched frantically at her door. "Come in," she said, jumping.

Daisy slipped inside. "My lady, Lord Howard is here, and I heard the countess your mother in the drawing room!"

Anne stifled a nervous breath. "Very well. Get your shawl, and let's be off."

A miserable expression on her face, the maid nodded. "As you wish, my lady."

"Don't worry, Daisy. I'll make certain any wrath falls on my shoulders."

"Oh, I hope so."

\* \* \*

"So he just barged in on an ox cart and expected you to trundle back to Yorkshire with him?" Desmond Howard nodded at the footmen as they passed through the main doors of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane and up the stairs, where only those privileged enough to have box seats were permitted to tread.

Now that they'd reached the theater without being discovered or stopped by Lord Halfurst or any of her family members, Anne relaxed a little. "Yes, without even a by your leave or a good morning."

"Typical."

Anne looked sharply at the viscount's square-jawed countenance. "Do you know Lord Halfurst?"

With her hand wrapped over his arm, she felt him shrug. "In passing. We attended Oxford at the same time. I haven't seen him since he was last in London."

She hadn't realized he'd ever been to London before today. "When was that?"

"Seven or eight years ago, I'd wager."

"Hm. And he didn't bother to call on me then, either." Of course, she would have been only twelve or thirteen, but they were still betrothed.

"He left after a very short time—when the old marquis died, I believe." The viscount chuckled. "I imagine he was none too eager to stay once his solicitors let slip that he was nearly bankrupt."

Wonderful. Halfurst was arrogant *and* poor. Her parents certainly hadn't told her that, and they were insane if they thought she would willingly go off to live in some shack with him, handsome face or not. "How delightful," she muttered. If the marquis needed her money, escaping him would be even more difficult.

Lord Howard chuckled again. "Don't trouble yourself, Anne," he returned. "Tonight, you're with me. And rest assured that in his place I would never remove such a lovely blossom as yourself from the fertile environs of London."

"Thank you," she said feelingly, smiling as he held aside the curtain to his private box.

"My pleasure, believe me," he murmured, seating himself beside her.

As the patrons filled the theater, oblivious to the silly pre-Shakespearean farce being enacted on stage, a commotion in the pit caught her attention. Down below, among a crowd of amused-looking commoners, stood a very

handsome, well-dressed gentleman in the company of an equally well-dressed and mortified-looking Miss Amelia Rellton.

"Who's that with Miss Rellton?" she asked, trying not to stare, though from the direction of the opera glasses in the other boxes, no one else had reservations about doing so.

"Hm. The Marquis of Darington, I believe," Howard said, sitting back again. "Obviously gone insane, to bring a lady into the pit with him." He shifted closer, then glanced back at Daisy, seated quietly in the corner. "All of the lost cubs are coming into Town for the winter—and for the women—apparently."

Abruptly Anne was grateful for her maid's presence. "Perhaps it's the cold," she answered.

"No doubt." He leaned even closer. "Tell me then, my dear, have you asked your parents to formally dissolve the agreement with Halfurst?"

The light in his blue eyes seemed too interested for such an innocent question, and Anne was reminded of Pauline's warning that she had suitors, whether she acknowledged them as such or not. "I've expressed some concern," she said carefully, at the same time wondering why she was being so cautious. Once she did convince her parents to deny Halfurst's claim, her mother would see to it that she married someone else.

"Some concern' isn't what it sounded like earlier," he returned, nodding at an acquaintance in a neighboring box.

The curtains went up on stage. "Shh. It's beginning," she whispered, sitting forward and never more grateful to see Edmund Kean perform than she was tonight.

She sat quietly, mesmerized, until intermission. She'd never seen Shylock played that way, nor so well; no wonder Mr. Kean's performance had been causing such a stir in London.

As the curtain closed, Anne joined in the applause. "My goodness," she exclaimed, smiling, "Mr. Kean is—"

"—completely engrossing," a quiet male voice interrupted from the doorway. "A remarkable performance, thus far."

Anne and Lord Howard turned at the same moment, and then Lord Howard lurched to his feet. "Halfurst."

The marquis didn't move, but remained in his relaxed lean against the rear wall, on the opposite side of the curtains from Daisy. From the maid's startled expression, she hadn't been aware of his entrance, either. His tall form was shadowed, but Anne sensed that his gaze was on her. "Lord Howard," Halfurst continued in the same soft voice. "I recall that you had a fondness for wagering—and for other men's wives, apparently."

"I am not your wife," Anne whispered.

He pushed upright. "You were, however, to be my companion this evening, were you not?"

"I..."

"Lady Anne made the wise decision to join me, instead," Lord Howard broke in. "And I'll thank you not to insult my character, Halfurst."

The marquis took a step forward, into the dim light of the chandeliers. Anne's breath caught. The old, behind-hand garb he'd worn earlier was gone, replaced by a dark gray jacket and trousers that looked so precisely molded to his muscular frame that they couldn't have been borrowed. Her mind, though, refused to dwell on where they might have come from. Instead, her gaze traveled up the length of him, past his pitch black waistcoat and white linen shirt and starched white cravat to his gray, glittering gaze. "You've...changed," she managed, blushing.

"Only my clothes," he returned, his eyes still holding hers. "You didn't seem to approve of my garb this morning."

"I think you should leave," Desmond broke in. Anne started. She'd nearly forgotten his presence. Lord Howard wore the self-assured look she'd often seen on his square, handsome face, the look that said he knew he had the advantage, and that he intended to use it. No doubt he would next hand. Halfurst one of his scathing set-downs. It was almost a pity. She wouldn't have minded spending the evening looking at the marquis in that splendid attire.

"I have no intention of staying," Lord Halfurst returned with a slight, humorless smile. "The view from your box is horrendous. I'm only here to escort my fiancée to a better vantage point—namely, *my* box."

"She's with me. You'd best get that through your thick, Yorkshire skull."

"Lord Howard," Anne protested. The viscount ignored her, even taking a step closer to the tall marquis. "Have you been gone from London so long that you've forgotten your manners completely? Go away."

Halfurst only shrugged. "If I'd forgotten my manners, I would presently be dragging you down the stairs and out to the alley, where I would then beat you within an inch of your life for presuming to step between myself and Lady Anne. As it is, I'm only asking my betrothed to join me in my box. I think that's quite polite of me." His gaze returned to Anne. "Don't you think so?"

Desmond's face reddened. "You ... I... How dare—"

"Don't stammer, Howard," the marquis continued. "If you have something to say, say it. Otherwise, you merely sound blustery." He held out his hand. "My lady? I can promise you an unobstructed view of the remainder of the performance."

Anne felt dazed. No one bested Lord Howard in a battle of wits and words, and certainly not in only one volley. And the

way the marquis looked at her, as though she were the only other person in the entire theater . . . "What if I don't go with you?" she asked anyway, forcing her brain to work again. She was not some bartered bride, for heaven's sake. Or was she?

"Then I will thrash Lord Howard," the marquis said, in such a matter-of-fact tone that she had no doubt he meant it. She stood. "Then I'd best go with you, I suppose," she returned in her most composed voice.

"Anne," Lord Howard protested, moving to intercept her. Halfurst's hand shot out and shoved the viscount back into his seat. "Good evening, Howard," he said, and stepped back to part the curtains.

Maximilian took Anne's gloved hand and drew it over his arm. He kept his face turned from hers as they proceeded around the curve of curtained boxes, her maid following behind them. Whatever reservations she had about marrying him were obviously more grave than he'd realized. At the same time, seeing her in that low-cut gown of faintest violet, the curve of her bosom drawing his attention, and with a string of pale pearls caressing her throat, he wasn't about to allow any other man near her.

He'd expected to find her pretty, but he hadn't expected the heat that coursed through him as he gazed at her, even warmer and deeper now than this morning. He would figure her out, and he would make her desire him as he desired her—because he wasn't leaving London without her.

"All of Edmund Kean's performances are sold out. How did you manage this?"

Maximilian pulled aside the curtain and ushered her inside. "I asked."

As he took his seat, he spared a glance at her. From her expression, she wasn't thrilled with this pseudo-kidnapping. He wasn't, either. Her parents obviously had no control over her, but even they'd been surprised to find her missing when he'd come to collect her for a night at the theater.

"I didn't join you because you have a better view, you know."

"Of course not. You were trying to preserve Lord Howard's health. Noble, I suppose, but I would have preferred that you join me because you said you would do so."

"No, *you* said I would do so."

"And you didn't contradict me. Keeping your word isn't so difficult, is it?"

Anne narrowed her eyes. "Be angry if you wish, but no one consulted me about any of this. Don't expect me to simply . . . surrender."

Apparently he'd underestimated both Lady Anne Bishop's sense of duty and the effort he would have to expend if he wanted her as his bride—and in his bed. "I do expect you to surrender," he said quietly, reaching over to take her hand.

Her fingers were clenched into a fist, and though he thought for a moment that she might attempt to punch him, he leaned over to brush his lips across her knuckles. Her hand, her glove, smelled of soap. The scent, so ordinary until tonight, intoxicated him.

She watched him as he straightened again. "If you expect me to surrender," she said, a quaver in her voice, "then I will expect you to convince me to do so."

Maximilian smiled. "Let the battle begin."

### Chapter 3

Interestingly enough, Lord Howard was spotted leaving Drury Lane prior to the end of the performance. His mood was of a foul nature, and he was drinking quite liberally from a flask.

No bruises were spied upon his person, however, laying waste to all of the rumors that he and Lord Halfurst had come to blows over the lovely Lady Anne, Heated words were definitely overheard, however, leading This Author to wonder just how the altercation was avoided.

This Author is certainly not the bloodthirsty sort, but truly, Dear Reader, would not a purplish mark or two add a touch of character to Lord Howard's rather blandly handsome visage?

LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS,  
31 JANUARY 1814

Maximilian rose early. Sleeping had been a waste, anyway, considering he'd tossed and turned all night, visions of the woman who was supposed to be his bride, and who was sleeping in another house entirely, tangled in his dreams.

Half of Trent House remained covered in sheets and shut away to keep the cold from seeping into the main rooms. Even after his six-year absence from the premises, however, the servants had thankfully responded with alacrity.

His bride-to-be, though, didn't seem to be coming around at all. She expected to be wooed, when he'd expected to have her delivered to him at Halfurst as promised.

"Tea, my lord?" the butler asked as he reached the dining room.

"Coffee. Strong." Maximilian selected a hefty helping of ham and eggs from the sideboard and dug in. It was a moment before he noticed the short stack of letters at his elbow, atop the day's edition of the *London Times*. "What are these?"

"I believe they are invitations, my lord," Simms supplied, pouring him a large cup of coffee.

"Invitations? To what?"

"I couldn't say, my lord—though Mayfair does seem unusually... active for this time of year."

Maximilian grunted. "The rivers in Yorkshire freeze every winter. I don't see why half the populace of southern England has to come view it happening in London."

"It is something of a novelty here ... as are you, if you don't mind me saying so, my lord."

As he leafed through the invitations, Maximilian nodded. "So it would seem. But these are mostly from families with single daughters, if I recall my Lady Whistledown columns correctly. Don't they realize I'm off the market?"

"I..."

"That was a rhetorical question, Simms. Please have Thomason saddle my horse."

"Your horse," the butler repeated dubiously.

"Yes, my horse."

"May I point out that it is snowing, my lord?"

"This is practically springtime in Yorkshire. I believe Kraken and I will manage."

"Yes, my lord."

As Maximilian ate, he opened the various missives. Apparently even with the rumors of his empty coffer which had been circling London for years, mamas wanted to offer him their daughters. In a sense, it was amusing. Women galore seemed available to relieve him of his bachelorhood—all but the one he'd been promised. And especially after last night, none of them would do but Lady Anne Bishop.

And while his earlier neglect of his betrothed might have been through complacency, and a choice to concentrate on the tangle of matters and confusion of properties his father had left him, he wouldn't make that mistake again. Anne had issued

him a challenge, one he probably deserved, and he would answer it.

"Simms, would you happen to know an establishment where I might purchase some flowers? Roses, preferably."

"Ah. I believe Martensen's has access to a hothouse. Shall I send someone to—"

Max pushed away from the table. "No. I'll take care of it." Most of the London nobility seemed still abed as Maximilian found Martensen's and then rode on to Bishop House. Considering that everyone claimed to be in London to enjoy the weather, the closed coaches and thick, cumbersome wraps of those who had ventured out of doors in the chilly morning seemed more than a little hypocritical. He was used to that from his peers, however.

The butler seemed surprised to see him. "I don't believe Lady Anne has risen yet, my lord," he said, smoothing a frown.

"I'll wait."

As the butler showed him into the cold, closed morning room, he glanced at the foyer table. A salver with calling cards from three other gentleman lay on it. So Lord Howard and Anne's snow angel companion Sir Royce Pemberley weren't his only competition.

"Did they deliver those in person?" he asked, slowing. "It is snowing, my lord," the butler said, apparently considering that answer enough. "I'll send someone to light the fire."

"Don't bother. I'll manage it."

"Y . . . yes, my lord. I shall inform Lady Anne of your presence."

\* \* \*

"He can't be here," Anne muttered, throwing off her dressing gown and rubbing color into her cheeks at the same time. Not

that she needed to go to the effort. In Lord Halfurst's presence her cheeks seemed perpetually warm.

"It's only nine o'clock

in the morning, for heaven's sake."

"Do you wish the blue merino, or the plum velvet gown?" Daisy asked, half buried in the large wardrobe.

"The plum velvet, I think." Anne quickly brushed a restless night's tangles from her long dark hair. "But that's for outside.

Isn't it snowing?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Perhaps the merino, then." But that would mean she would have to sit inside and chat with him. He'd seemed so . . . intriguing last night, and if there was one thing she didn't want, it was actually to like him. He only meant to drag her off to Yorkshire,



and away from all her friends and family in London. "No, the plum velvet."

By the time she was dressed and descending the stairs, she was out of breath, and unsure whether her hands shook because of the cold, annoyance at his presumption, or anticipation of seeing him once more. Annoyance was the most likely. They'd parted only nine hours ago, after all.

"My . . . lord," she said, stopping in the morning room doorway.

The marquis crouched on the hearth, setting a match to the newly stoked coals. From the smudge of soot across the back of one hand, he'd done that, as well. He glanced over his shoulder at her. "Be with you in a moment."

"But—"

"Your servants were busy," he said, shrugging as he stood. Warmth touched the edges of the room as the fireplace roared into flame. "I offered."

So her sheep farmer knew how to make a fire—and a fine one, from the look and feel of it. Anne shook herself. He wasn't *her* anything. "What brings you to Bishop House so early?"

He approached, wiping the soot off his hand with a handkerchief. "I neglected something last night."

"I don't think you did," she answered truthfully. "I had a lovely evening." Except for the near brawl he'd gotten into with Lord Howard, but even the way he'd dismissed the viscount had been . . . interesting.

A soft smile touched his mouth. "Good. But that's not what I meant."

"What, then?"

Lord Halfurst stopped in front of her, taking a moment to run his eyes the length of her plum velvet gown and back up to her face again. Very slowly he reached out and tilted up her chin. "I forgot to kiss you good night," he murmured, his gaze focusing on her lips.

"You . . ." Anne trailed off again as he leaned down and brushed his lips against hers. Her eyes closed, almost against her will. Brief and gentle and soft, and yet full of promises, or something that made her want to throw her arms around his neck and demand more. With a sharp breath she snapped open her eyes again. "You take liberties," she managed.

He shook his head. "We are betrothed, after all." Halfurst drew her closer, and kissed her again.

When he released her the second time, she was actually leaning toward him. With a silent curse she straightened.

"What... You already kissed me good night."

"That was good morning."

"Oh."

Returning for a moment to the fireplace, the marquis retrieved a splendid bouquet of flowers from the mantel.

"Winter roses," he said, handing them to her.

Their bright scarlet color itself seemed enough to warm the room. In her heavy velvet gown, Anne was beginning to feel rather heated herself. "Thank you," she said, breathing in their spicy scent. "They're lovely. But not necessary."

"Evidently, they are necessary," he countered. "I have some things to make up for. This is merely the beginning."

"The beginning?" she repeated, watching the slow curve of his mouth. Somber, he was aristocratic and handsome, far enough from her imaginings that she could almost believe he was an imposter. When he smiled, though, the expression lighted his eyes, and in response her heart did silly little flip-flops.

"Of my courtship."

The pronouncement, so calm and matter-of-fact, stunned her, and it was a moment before she could get her jaw to work again. "I thought you intended to drag me off to Yorkshire."

Halfurst tilted his head as though trying to read her thoughts. "I could do that," he admitted in a low voice, "but I couldn't make you want to be there, and I certainly couldn't make you want to be there with me."

Anne narrowed her eyes. "Forgive my cynicism, but what happened to make you suddenly so willing to be reasonable?"

"You did. But it's not reason; it's patience. You were meant to be mine. I intend to have you."

My goodness, he seemed sure of himself. "Why, because I'm pretty and my family has money?"

The smile touched his mouth again. "Because you told me you'd rather drop dead than marry me."

"Because ... That's absurd."

"And because you interest me, and intrigue me, and because after nineteen years without a word from me and as popular as you are, you only said no, and not that you'd chosen someone else."

Anne felt dizzy. It wasn't just his absurd turn of logic, but the way he held her gaze as he spoke, and the way he seemed to know what she wanted to hear. "So you intend to woo me?"

"I do."

"And what if I still resist?"

"You won't."

He did have a male's typical arrogance. "But if I do?"

For a moment he didn't speak. "Then I'll return to Yorkshire."

"Alone," she prompted.

"Without you," he answered, his eyes glittering, as if he knew she wouldn't like that response.

Heavens, he didn't think he could make her jealous, did he? She'd known of him all her life, but she'd only known him for a day, after all. He still gazed at her, so she grimaced at him, wrinkling her nose. "Good."

"Good," he repeated softly. "And now, would you care to go walking with me this morning?"

"But it's snowing!"

"Barely. We're both dressed for it." The marquis pursed his lips, looking her up and down again. Something akin to humor, but darker and warmer, touched his gray gaze. "Unless you'd care to sit here with me." Anne cleared her throat. "I'll fetch my cloak."

"I thought you might."

"It doesn't mean I'm afraid of you, Lord Halfurst," she said as she made her escape.

"Maximilian," he corrected.

"No."

The marquis turned, keeping her in view. "Why not?" Oh dear, she should just have given in. She was much more suave and confident with her other male friends. They, however, didn't question every word she said. They probably only listened to half of them.

"Calling a gentleman by his Christian name implies a certain... familiarity," she said, scowling as she realized how much she sounded like her mother.

With two quick strides he was between her and the doorway. "I heard you call Sir Royce and Lord Howard by their Christian names," he said in a low voice, meeting her gaze levelly. "What sort of 'familiarity' do you enjoy with them?"

Anne forced a short laugh. "Are you jealous, my lord?"

"Yes. And I become more so with each moment I spend in your company."

The proclamation stopped the coy, practiced retort she'd been about to make. Men pretended jealousy to garner further favor, and she usually found it tiresome. Men didn't admit to actual jealousy—not any men with whom she'd been heretofore acquainted. "I'm ... I haven't been attempting to make you jealous," she offered, the heat in his gaze leaving her equal parts nervous and excited.

"I know that. It's another reason you intrigue me, Anne." He brought his hand up, tucking a strand of her hair back into the clip from which it had escaped. "Call me Maximilian."

A sheep farmer. He's a sheep farmer, she reminded herself fiercely. One who lived in Yorkshire, of all places. "Very well, Maximilian," she said. Her determination to remain unmoved didn't stop the slow swirl of lightning from coiling up her spine.

The light in his gray eyes deepened and darkened. All he said, though, was "Fetch your wrap, Anne."

He followed her into the foyer, noting that she didn't even glance at the silver tray holding the calling cards of her beaux. That was one point scored for early risers.

Lady Anne Bishop, he was coming to realize to his growing delight, was far more complex than he'd anticipated. Each moment the plans he'd worked out to win her needed to be modified and adapted as he learned something new about her.

The butler lifted a heavy gray cloak lined with ermine from the coat rack, and Max stepped in to intercept it. "Allow me," he said, taking it from his surprised fingers.

Approaching her again, he slipped the cloak over her shoulders, breathing deeply of the lavender scent of her hair as he did so. Moving around in front of her, he fastened the silver clasp beneath her chin. Her scent, touching her bare skin, intoxicated him. He'd thought to find a female to bear him an heir, and little else. The thought that he would actually desire her had never crossed his mind.

"Anne!" a voice called from the balcony. "Where do you think you're going?"

Lady Daven hurried down the stairs, a footman and two maids in tow. As she approached, ranting about her daughter's intentions much as she had last night when they'd discovered her missing, Maximilian stepped forward.

"Lady Daven, good morning," he said, sketching a bow.

She skidded to a halt, her fair skin reddening. "My goodness. Lord Halfurst. I... Forgive my intrusion. I hadn't realized you were here."

"No apology necessary. I merely thought to get a jump on my competition this morning. I've asked Lady Anne to accompany me on a walk."

"Your compet—" Anne began, frowning.

"I assure you, my lord, you have no competition. Lord Daven and I have always made Anne's duty

perfectly clear to her."

"Mother, please don't—"

"Even so," he answered, "I have lately come to think that winning by default isn't precisely winning."

Anne threw open the front door and stalked outside. Stifling a frown of his own, Maximilian nodded to her mother and followed her. Whether her parents had made her duty clear to her or not, convincing her to abide by their wishes was obviously something else entirely.

"Anne," he said, taking her hand and wrapping it over his arm, "I hadn't realized you were so anxious to take the morning air."

She shrugged free, increasing her pace. "If you're only being nice to 'win' some sort of competition for my favor, I can assure you that you have no chance, and you might as well return to Yorkshire right now."

His earlier good humor began to fade. "Don't be absurd."

"Abs—"

"Of course I'm here to win your favor," he cut in, grabbing her arm again. "I wouldn't be here otherwise." He leaned over, brushing her ear with his lips. "But just remember that I was not the one making snow angels. If you'd behaved, you might have avoided meeting me altogether." That wasn't quite true; he'd intended to come to London in the spring to bring her to Yorkshire, anyway. He would have been a fool, however, not to take advantage of the leverage her indiscretion gained him.

She looked sideways at him. "So if I hadn't appeared in Lady Whistledown's column, you never would have bothered to exert yourself to leave Halfurst? Now who's being absurd?"

His first instinct was to send her a retort about her own lack of respect for their parents' agreement. They'd already covered that territory, however, and he intended on moving forward—not revisiting the past. "Perhaps we should just agree that we haven't regarded our duties to one another as we should."

"That's my point," she insisted. "I don't have a duty to you."

"Then why are we walking together in the snow, my dear? You did seem to think it would be a horrific experience." He brushed a snowflake from her nose. "And yet it becomes you."

Anne glanced over her shoulder at her maid, but not before he glimpsed her sudden smile. "Humph. I'm most likely on this crusade because I've been rendered senseless by weariness and hunger."

He laughed. And he'd thought he would find her a malleable, if spoiled, chit. "I'll remember that you prefer to stay in bed late, then," he murmured, noting the flush of her cheeks. He didn't think her color was because of the cold, and that pleased him. "For this morning, though, I thought you might enjoy some fresh bread and butter from Hamond's bakery."

She evidently was hungry, because she didn't object when he led her to the bakery and ordered

breakfast. "How did you know about this place?" she asked, between dainty mouthfuls of buttered bread.

"I'm not a stranger to London," Maximilian answered, resting his chin on his hand to watch her eat.

She looked up at him from beneath her thick, curling lashes. "Then why not visit more often?"

"I don't like it here."

"But why not? Friends, soirees, the theater, shops, the wonderful food—what's not to like?"

She'd left out the most alluring feature of London—herself. Generally at this time of morning he would be out in the far pasture, checking on his livestock. On occasion London did have its merits. For a moment he didn't want to answer, but he seemed to be developing a curious weakness for honest inquiry and moss green eyes. "Your experience differs somewhat from mine. I ... found I was being judged by rumor rather than by my character."

"Perhaps that's because we had nothing else to go by." Her gaze darkened. "That's why I presume you're here as much for my purse as for me."

He smiled. "We were betrothed when I was seven, Anne. My only concerns at the time were horses and tin soldiers. I'm sorry to say, you were neither. Very disappointing, really."

She scowled, bread halfway to her alluring lips. "Do you mean to say we've met before?"

Nodding, Max ran a finger down the back of her hand. "I held you, when you were three months old."

"You did?"

"Yes. You sneezed on me, and poked me in the eye." She laughed, a delightful, musical sound that made his pulse speed. "And you've no doubt carried a grudge against me for nineteen years because of that."

"Hardly." Max twisted his lips. Finding the words to say had never been difficult before. Before, though, he hadn't cared about the impression he made. Perhaps that was another reason he hadn't fared well in London. Directness didn't seem to impress many people here. But Anne seemed to appreciate it. "At fourteen, it seemed ridiculous to write letters to a seven-year-old. At twenty, you were still a babe of thirteen. And then my father died, and ... other concerns took precedence."

"So you forgot about me."

He shook his head. "I just. . . assumed, I suppose, that that aspect of my life was taken care of." Maximilian met her gaze again. "It was wrong of me to do so. I'm now attempting to make amends for it."

"And you think I'm spoiled and self-centered to make you jump through hoops to prove something to me? I can assure

you, Maximilian, that I am not—"

"Yes, I did think you were spoiled—until ten minutes into our acquaintance. Or reacquaintance, rather." Grinning, he wiped a smudge of butter from her lower lip with his thumb, because he couldn't seem to get past the desire, the need, to touch her.

"And what stupendous thing did I say to alter your opinion of me?"

"You saw my attire, heard my declarations, and then refused me because you didn't know my character."

To his surprise, she set aside the remainder of her meal and stood. "So I passed your test," she said, wiping her hands and pulling on her mittens again, "but you haven't passed mine. And unfortunately, you can't. Not while Halfurst remains in Yorkshire."

Back to that again, were they? Maximilian took a deep breath as he rose. "Keep reminding yourself of that, Anne Elizabeth," he murmured, tucking her against him as they left the bakery. Whether because of the cold or because she liked being touched by him, she didn't object. "Make it your battle cry. Whenever you see me, when you taste my mouth on yours, when you feel my hands on your bare skin, Anne, remind yourself that Halfurst remains in Yorkshire, and that so do I."

"I will," she said in an unsteady voice. "And it is argument enough."

They reached the front steps of Bishop House, and Lambert opened the door. Anne would have freed her arm from his, but Maximilian caught her, drawing her up against his chest. "I don't intend to give up the advantage that being engaged to you gives me, Anne," he said softly, and lowered his mouth to hers.

As he rifted his head from her, Anne's eyes were closed, her soft lips parted in warmth and invitation. Good God, what was he getting himself into? An arranged marriage wasn't supposed to feel so... arousing.

"We'll go for a carriage ride tomorrow," he forced himself to say, readjusting her cloak and barely able to keep himself from pulling her back into his arms.

"I... I have plans already."

"Cancel them. And tomorrow I will kiss you good morning again."

The deepening color in her fine cheeks aroused him even further. Thank Lucifer for heavy, caped coats. He pulled his closer around his front.

"You're very sure of yourself, Maximilian."

"No, my lady, I'm very sure of you."

## Chapter 4

On Sunday, Lord Halfurst was spied paying a call upon Lady Anne Bishop.  
On Monday, Lord Halfurst was spied paying a call upon Lady Anne Bishop.  
On Tuesday, Lord Halfurst was spied paying a call upon Lady Anne Bishop.

This Author must deliver this column to the printer prior to Wednesday morning, but truly, does anyone think This Author would be lacking in journalistic integrity if the following were written Tuesday eve.

On Wednesday, Lord Halfurst was spied paying a call upon Lady Anne Bishop.  
No? This Author thought not.

LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS,  
2 FEBRUARY 1814

"There is no imminent marriage."

Lord Daven opened and closed his mouth. "I beg your pardon?"

"I told him that you would not force me to marry him." Anne took a deep breath, gazing at her father's stony expression.

*Best just to get it over with.* "I told you I didn't want to go to Yorkshire."

"Slow down a moment, Annie. If you . . . refused him—which I can't believe you did without consulting me—then why has Halfurst continued to call on you?"

She looked at her toes. "He's wooing me," she mumbled.

"I'm not as young as I used to be, daughter, so for God's sake speak up!"

"He's wooing me," she repeated in a louder voice, lifting her head again. "That's what he says, anyway."

The earl's lips twitched.

"Are you laughing at me, Papa?"

"At the moment, yes, I am." He sat back in his chair, a rare smile softening his features. "Just be aware that Maximilian Trent is not his father."

That stopped her, and she returned to her own seat. "What do you mean by that?"



"Oh no, you don't. You've kept me out of this, and so you can just continue to do so. As far as I'm concerned about it, all I meant was that you shouldn't think he does anything frivolously, my dear. He hasn't come to be where he is by accident."

Scowling, Anne leaned forward. "Papa, where is he, and how do you know? You haven't even mentioned his name in a year."

The earl chuckled. "Let's just say that I've followed his career more closely than you have, Annie. I've written *him* letters, and he's written back." He opened the accounts book on his desk. "Now if you don't mind, I have some work to do."

"You aren't being very helpful."

"Hm. Neither have you been. You might have asked my advice before you told him what I would or wouldn't do."

Still frowning, Anne left the office for the more congenial domain of the morning room. She'd expected her father to be livid when he'd finally summoned her to discuss Lord Halfurst. Maximilian. The sheep farmer, who apparently had some secrets.

She'd barely picked up her embroidery when Lambert scratched at the door. "Come in," she called, smoothing her skirt and trying to pretend that her heart wasn't racing. He'd come calling every day, and Lord and Lady Moreland's skating party on the Thames was that afternoon.

The butler entered. "My lady, Lord Howard is here to inquire whether you are at home."

"Lord Howard? Yes, of course." She'd barely thought of Desmond in almost a week, except to cancel the museum visit he'd suggested.

The viscount entered, still shaking snow from his tawny hair. "Anne," he said with a smile, coming forward to take her hand, "I'm pleased to find you home."

"Yes, I'm afraid I've been rather occupied the past few days."

"Monopolized is more like it," Desmond returned. "May I sit?"

"Of course."

He took a seat in one of the overstuffed chairs, while she sat opposite him on the couch. She'd known him since her debut in London, and as she thought about it, he'd always been available to dance with, to escort her to various soirees and fireworks displays, and most of the other amusements the town had to offer.

"Do you attend the Moreland skating party?" he asked.

"I'm invited. I haven't yet decided whether I—"

"You mean Halfurst hasn't asked to escort you yet."

"Desmond, I am obligated to spend a certain amount of time with him."

The viscount lurched to his feet, striding to the window and back. "I don't see why you should feel obligated to him at all. You've told me again and again how he's ignored you for your entire life." Abruptly he sat beside her, taking her hand in his. "Which makes me wonder—why is he here now, in London?"

A little uneasy at Lord Howard's outburst, she frowned. "He read about me making snow angels with Sir Royce Pemberly."

His grip on her hand tightened. "That explains it. He perceived that another man had an interest in you, and hurried to London to make certain he still had a claim on you—and your money."

Whatever his monetary situation, Maximilian obviously had enough blunt to purchase an all-new wardrobe and to open his house on High Street again. On the other hand, she knew of some families completely without funds who had still managed to dissemble for years before the truth came out.

"In all honesty, my lord, you're the only one who's mentioned Lord Halfurst's money problems."

"Ha. You don't expect him to tell you, do you? And if it's not money he's after, why hasn't he acceded to your wishes, dissolved your parents' agreement, and married one of the other chits who've been throwing themselves at him since he returned to London?"

Other women had been pursuing Maximilian? She'd had no idea. When they were together, all his attention seemed so ... focused on her. "What do you suggest I do, then, Desmond?"

He leaned closer, near enough that his cheek touched her hair. "Whatever Halfurst's motives, Anne, we both know you don't belong in Yorkshire. And he isn't the only man who would welcome your affections."

With that, he brushed his lips against her cheek. When Anne looked at him, startled, he repeated the motion, this time against her lips.

Other than stunned surprise, the first thought to cross her mind was that with Lord Howard she didn't have to stop herself from flinging her arms around his neck. She didn't crave a deepening of the embrace, or even a repeat of it. "Please stop that," she said, pulling her hand free and standing.

He stood at the same time. "I beg your pardon, Anne. I... allowed my feelings to dictate my actions." The viscount seized her hand again. "Please forgive me."

"Of course," she returned, relieved that this oddness was over. "We are friends."

He smiled again, relief in his sky blue eyes. "Yes, we are friends. And as your friend, please allow me to escort you to the Moreland party. Whatever you decide about Halfurst, there's no reason you can't

spend one afternoon simply enjoying yourself."

Well, he was right about that. Intriguing and tantalizing as she was coming to find Maximilian's company, she couldn't forget that he meant to take her off to Yorkshire. And if he followed his previous pattern, it would be at least six years before she saw London again. How could she bear that?

"Yes," she stated. "I would be happy to attend the Moreland skating party with you."

"Thank you, Anne. I'll come by for you at noon."

As he left, Anne turned to look at Daisy, seated in one corner and ostensibly sewing a stocking. "Do more gentlemen seem to be kissing me, lately?"

"Yes, my lady. None so well as Lord Halfurst, though."

"What?"

"You said yourself, my lady, that he kisses quite well."

She sighed. "Yes, I did, didn't I?"

Not ten minutes later, Lambert scratched at the open door again. "Lord Halfurst is here to see you, my lady."

Warmth swept beneath her skin. "Please show him in, Lambert."

Maximilian paused in the morning room doorway as the butler stepped back to allow him through. Soon he wouldn't have to ask anyone's damned permission to enter a room and see her. Soon he wouldn't have to stop at a kiss, and he wouldn't have to imagine what lay beneath the tantalizing curves of her gown.

"Good morning," he said, crossing the room as she stood.

"Good morning."

Already her gaze was focused on his mouth. Maximilian wrapped an iron fist around the abrupt desire to lay her down on the couch and make her his in more than just an old agreement on paper. Stroking her cheek with the back of one finger, he leaned down and touched his mouth to hers.

Keenly aware of the maid seated in the corner, he held back, ending the kiss far sooner than he wanted to.

Her fingers had wrapped into his lapel, and she'd pulled herself close against his chest, so that he could feel the swell of her breasts as she took a deep breath. Sweet Lucifer, he should have come to London the moment she'd turned eighteen, whatever his personal feelings about the place and the people. He shouldn't have stayed away, no matter how much he

disliked it, because by doing so he'd missed nearly two years of knowing Anne Bishop.

The maid cleared her throat. With a start, Anne released him and took a step backward. "Good morning."

He smiled. "You said that already."

"Did I? I forgot."

"Then perhaps you forgot our kiss as well, and I should remind you."

She closed her eyes for a brief moment. "I don't think that would be wise," she whispered, gazing up at him again.

"Amen," the maid muttered.

Maximilian glanced over at her. Daisy was right, as was Anne. He needed to show restraint; he'd already realized that pushing his betrothed only made her push back. And he had no intention of letting her get away now.

"Very well," he said, reluctance making him sigh. "Then might I instead ask you to join me this afternoon? I've been invited to an ice skating party on the Thames."

Her fine cheeks paled. "Oh."

Suspicion tightened the muscles across his shoulders. "What is it?"

"I've ... Lord Howard was here earlier. I agreed to attend with him."

Damn that buffoon. "You kiss me, and you make plans with him?"

"She kissed him, too," the maid blurted, and ducked her head.

"Daisy!"

"What?"

Anne took several more steps backward. "I didn't kiss him. He kissed me."

Maximilian clenched his fists. "Has he kissed you before?"

"No! Of course not."

He believed her, but anger continued to charge through his muscles and his nerves. Desmond Howard had touched her, and she'd agreed to go skating with the bastard. "I'm not playing a game with you, Anne," he said stiffly. "And I would appreciate if you would do me the courtesy of not playing one with me."

"I wasn't—"

"Enjoy your skating." Too annoyed and too bloody frustrated to continue conversing in anything resembling polite tones, Maximilian turned on his heel to stalk back down the hallway, grab his coat and hat from the surprised butler, and stride back out to the street.

Cursing, he swung up on Kraken and trotted back toward Trent House. One damned thing was certain; he was going ice skating on the Thames that afternoon. Lord Howard might have the edge for the moment, but Anne Bishop belonged to him.

\* \* \*

Anne sat between Theresa and Pauline on the bench provided for the ladies. The Morelands had invited nearly a hundred guests from the looks of it, and she fervently hoped the ice of the new-frozen Thames would hold all the resulting weight.

"I've been doing a gender count," Pauline whispered, as her maid helped her fasten the ice skates over her boots.

"What did you expect?" Anne returned in the same low voice, for Lord and Lady Moreland were only a short distance away at the end of Swan Lane Pier. The orchestra they'd hired for the outing seemed absurd in the extreme, but at least they were on the pier and not adding to the strain on the ice.

"What do you mean?" Theresa asked, tentatively standing in the last inches of snow before the river ice began.

"One hundred guests, and nearly seventy-five of them are female," Pauline said dryly. "What do you think it means?"

"Oh. Donald again."

For the past four years Viscount and Lady Moreland had been holding off-Season soirees, presumably because most of the other young bucks would be elsewhere, in hopes of convincing some young lady that their son, Donald Spence, was a fine catch. Everyone knew the ruse, and obviously no one was fishing. Each year the ratio of female to male guests grew greater, but still no one had fallen for Donald's lackluster charms. Anne had already spent ten minutes conversing with him, having been cornered nearly the moment she descended from Desmond's carriage. It seemed to be the price of admission to the soiree, but if anything he'd grown duller since last she'd seen him.

"Here comes Lord Howard," Pauline muttered. "I'm off. Wish me luck."

"Don't break anything," Anne called after her. The warning was unnecessary; Pauline swished across the ice as though she'd been doing it daily for years.

Lord Howard trudged over from the men's bench as Anne climbed to her feet. She hadn't skated in ages and barely then, but from the look of some of the other guests, Pauline excluded, she wasn't the only unsteady one. "Shall we?" Desmond asked, offering his hand. Her ermine muff hanging from the ribbon about her neck, and

her right hand tightly gripping his arm, Anne nodded. They stepped onto the ice together, and thankfully she didn't collapse as they glided forward in a fairly competent fashion.

"Oh, this is fun," she exclaimed, relief making her chuckle.

"And even better, all chaperones must remain on the bank." Desmond slipped his arm free of her grip and skated a slow circle around her. "Green velvet becomes you," he said, continuing his circles. "And the cold brings roses to your cheeks. You are breathtaking, Anne."

That odd feeling started in her gut again. This was not how friends spoke to each other. "You look very fine yourself, Lord Howard," she returned, keeping the smile on her lips. "And I think you've been practicing your skating. You far outshine me."

"Nothing could."

Trying to gather her thoughts, Anne looked across the ice. Fifty or so guests had joined them already on the cold surface. As she watched, Moreland servants in socks emerged onto the Thames, pushing carts of sandwiches and Madeira before them while the orchestra launched into a country dance.

"You haven't answered me," the viscount said from behind her.

She shook herself. "Beg pardon. Answered you about what?"

His sky blue eyes narrowed for a brief moment as he passed in front of her, then cleared again. "I have to rescind my earlier apology, Anne. *Idid* mean to kiss you."

Oh no. "Please stop circling," she snapped. "You're making me dizzy."

Immediately he returned to her side, taking her hand again as they neared the far bank and the higher piles of snow there. "Perhaps it's your feelings making you dizzy. I know this must be unexpected, but we have been friends for some time now. Surely you've realized my admiration and regard for you."

Anne swallowed. His recent declarations that he would never remove her from London and that he feared for her happiness in Maximilian's company abruptly made sense. It wasn't friendship he was after. "Desmond—"

"Damn him," the viscount cut in. "How did he manage to get invited? Obviously the Morelands had no idea what they were doing."

She turned. A clinging, slipping female on either arm, Lord Halfurst glided up and back along the ice. Something one of the ladies said made him laugh, the sound ringing merrily across the width of the river. Her heart jolted. He was supposed to be sulking somewhere, or thinking up their next outing. He *wasn't* supposed to be enjoying himself at the party to which she'd declined to accompany him.

"I suppose any chit with an incomewill do for him," Desmond murmured in her ear. "At this rate he'll be a married man by St. Valentine's Day, and you'll never have to worry about being dragged off to Yorkshire."

"But he seemed so..."

"Sincere?" the viscount finished. "Yes, he looks it." Anne wanted a few moments to think in peace, without Desmond Howard echoing her own worst doubts aloud. As she continued to watch, unable to turn away, Halfurst returned to the snowy bank, released the ladies in his company, and amid much laughter collected two more. From the silly tittering and giggling, all the gathered females were supremely grateful both for his attention and for his clear skill on the ice.

"Come, my dear," Desmond continued. "You're upset. It's quite natural; you had no idea he was courting other females."

"Wouldn't you consider," she forced out, trying to shake free of Desmond's whisperings, "that he's merely being nice?  
This party does lack for male escorts."

"Ah, dear Anne. Always determined to think the best of everyone, aren't you?"

"Not real—"

"I have an idea to take your mind off this odiousness. At Queenhithe the commoners have set up food and gaming booths all across the Thames. They're calling it Freezeland Street or some such thing. It's just around the bend. Why don't—"

"Please fetch me a Madeira, Desmond," she interrupted, unable to listen to another sentence from him without shrieking, whoever's best intentions he might have in mind.

"Of course. Don't try to get about on your own. I'll be right back."

Maximilian was on his third or fourth pair of ladies, escorting them easily about the ice despite their obvious lack of skill and balance. This whole thing was a mistake, Anne decided; she should never have come, and certainly not with Desmond. Lord Howard's kiss should have been warning enough, both about his intentions and about her own feelings toward him. Perhaps without meaning to she was playing a game of some sort with Halfurst.

With a scowl and an awkward kick, she skated back in the direction of the pier, and Maximilian. Even when she ultimately refused his suit, she didn't mean to be spiteful about it. She certainly hadn't meant to behave like a coquette that morning.

He looked over to see her approaching, and for a brief moment their eyes met. And then he turned his back, he and his charges skating toward the shore.

"Anne, what's going on?" Pauline asked, sliding to a halt and nearly dumping the two of them onto the ice.

"Nothing's going on. I just need a moment to think." A tear ran down her cheek, and Anne brushed it away before anyone could see.

"This is a bad spot for thinking," her friend returned. "Let me help you to shore before you end up on your backside."

Just then Lord Halfurst, having relieved himself of his clinging chits, faced her again, arms crossed over his chest. *Ha*. So he thought to make her come to him, to apologize for daring to attend a party in someone else's company. And then he would expect her to dance off to Yorkshire and never see her dear friends like Pauline again.

"Go away, Pauline," she stated, turning her back on him. Let him see how he liked it.

"But Annie—"

"I'm fine. I don't need your help."

Pauline *wasnot* going to deliver her into the arms of her tormentor, no matter how handsome and kind and warm he seemed to be. She hadn't been wooed, and she hadn't been won—not by a few amusing outings and some arousing kisses. Misery lay just beyond them, and she knew it.

With a deep breath she pushed off in the opposite direction, ignoring Pauline's fading advice to keep her speed down.

Sir Royce Pemberly appeared in front of her, his expression startled.

"Lady Anne—"

With a gasp she dodged, trying to avoid slamming into him. Flailing her arms, she went into a spin that she hoped looked daring and not desperate. Her left blade cut into the ice, and abruptly she was skating forward again at high speed.

In a blur a pretty blue wrap flashed in front of her, and she careened into someone. As she passed she heard a thud.

"Oh no, oh no," she quavered, looking over her shoulder. Susannah Ballister—whom Anne knew quite well from the previous Season—lay sprawled in a snowbank, her gown and wrap askew and her hair across her face. As she watched, still fleeing and unable to stop, Susannah sat up and shook snow from her front.

"Anne!"

She cringed at Maximilian's bellow, and faced forward again. Her face felt crimson, and she was absolutely not going to stop and be yelled at, much less by him and in front of everyone else. In a moment she'd rounded the bend, out of sight of the Morelands' idiotic skating party.

Finally she took in a breath, managing to slow down enough to guide herself onto the bank without falling. No one was in sight, but just up ahead she could hear the sounds of the frost fair Desmond had mentioned.

"Thank goodness," she gasped, wiping tears from her face again. She wanted a place to think, and a fair where no one knew her seemed perfect. Crossing her fingers for luck, she pushed back out onto the ice and skated at a much more cautious pace toward the sounds of music and laughter.



## Chapter 5

Lady Anne Bishop proved herself to be quite the worst skater on the ice, with the possible exception of Lord Middlethorpe, who, it must be noted, is nearly four times her age.

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She'd been skating over to join him. It'd all been going quite well, Maximilian thought. Despite the torture of seeing Howard practically attached to her, he'd felt hope. Whatever the viscount said, she hadn't liked it, and when she'd started back to the shore, he'd returned as well, to relinquish his charges to the safer bank.

And then all hell had broken loose. Worse than Anne knocking chits into snowbanks, she'd vanished around the curve of the river—alone.

"Damnation," he muttered, skating through the remainder of the guests and after her. "Anne!"

She'd vanished. His chest tightening, Maximilian scanned the snowbanks on either side of the Thames as he sped along. He rounded another curve, and stopped short.

London was a very odd place. Spanning the river from shore to shore, a small village of wooden shanties had risen on the ice. Hundreds of citizens slid and walked and skated among the makeshift buildings while fiddle music and the shouts of vendors filled the air.

He'd been somewhat relieved to realize that Anne skated terribly. She wasn't perfect. On the other hand, a young lady alone in a crowd could find herself worse than embarrassed. With another low curse he skated onto the ice street between the rows of booths and carts.

He could scarcely advance a foot without being jostled by someone hawking gingerbread or meat pies. Drunken gamblers slipped and slid on the ice. A growing anxiety clutched at him. Chagrined or angry or whatever Anne had felt to cause her to leave the party, this was a dangerous place for her to be alone. Damn Howard for leaving her side.

"Stop! Thief!"

At the sound of the female voice, Maximilian whipped around. Anne clutched the arm of a large, hard-faced man, her green reticule gripped in one of his hands.

"Anne!"

The man shoved, and she went down onto her backside next to one of the shanties. With a leer the thief began a sliding run up the street.

Maximilian skidded to a halt beside Anne. "Did he hurt you?" he asked, crouching to brush hair from her face. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she panted, her hands shaking in his as he pulled her to her feet. "But my brooch was in my bag. I feel so st—"

"Wait here," he commanded, thrusting her toward an approaching constable, and was off like a shot.

Some brute had dared push his Anne to the ground. For once he didn't have to be subtle or civilized or wait for another game piece to advance. As Maximilian caught sight of the fellow flashing through the crowd, he gave a grim smile. *No one* was allowed to harm his Anne.

Anne watched Maximilian vanish in pursuit of the purse snatcher. "There, there, miss," the constable said, gripping her arm. "No harm done."

She wasn't so certain of that. Her whole body shook, and not from the cold. She'd thought herself completely alone, and then Maximilian had appeared out of nowhere. And he'd vanished again—after what could be a very dangerous man, all because she'd been stupid and mentioned her silly brooch. "Please let me go," she said shakily.

"The gentleman said you should wait here."

"Lord Halfurst," she said distinctly, "might be in danger."

"Lord ... Oh bloody hell," the constable muttered. "Right. You stay here, miss."

He skated off, his desire to be of assistance to a nobleman obviously outweighing his concern for a female who was in all probability a mere miss. Anne had no intention of correcting his misapprehension, if it would convince him to go help Maximilian.

Another constable appeared, demanding to know what all the excitement was about. Before someone could point her out to him, Anne pushed off in the direction Maximilian had vanished. He'd come after her when no one else had, and she would not let him be hurt on her account.

Maximilian caught up to the thief just before the shanty street ended. With a growl he launched himself at the man. Vendor carts and beer mugs and brandy balls went flying as they both went down in a flailing heap of fists and feet and skates.

They careened into the corner of one of the booths, bringing the flimsy thing down on top of both of them. Maximilian grunted as a boot slammed across his thigh. Thank God the fool hadn't been wearing ice skates, or his plans to produce an heir with Anne Bishop might have been extinguished. With a better

purchase on the ice because of his own skates, he scrambled to his feet first.

"Bloody—" the thief began, and stopped when Maximilian's fist met his jaw.

Leaning across him, Maximilian yanked Anne's reticule from beneath a pile of beer mugs and oysters. "Thank you very much," he panted, stuffing it into his coat pocket.

"Lord Halfurst! M'lord, are you unhurt?"

Maximilian turned to see the constable skating through the mayhem and wreckage toward him. "Weren't you supposed to be watching after someone?" he snapped, trying to regain his breath. Damn it all, now Anne was alone again.

"She . . . she sent me to help you, m'lord," the constable protested. "I—"

"Maximilian!"

Max spun back around just in time to wrap his arms around Anne as she thudded hard into him. With another curse he landed in the beer and wood splinters and oysters again, Anne crumpled across him.

"Are you all right?" she asked, raising her head from his chest to look down at me.

"I'm a bit winded," he forced out. *Mostly from people and buildings falling on me.* "And you?"

"I feel horrid, knocking Susannah down, and then running off like an idiot, and sending you after a thief. Heavens, he might have had a knife!"

"But you're not hurt," he repeated, wishing she would stop wriggling on him. It was damned distracting, and they'd gathered quite a few onlookers with all the commotion.

"No, I'm not hurt."

"Good. Would you mind removing your skate from my knee, then? Slowly, if you please."

"Oh good heavens," she gasped, slipping with ungainly and exaggerated care off him and onto the ice. "I've hurt you!"

He sat up. "Only a scratch. My trousers have seen the end of their run, though, I'm afraid."

"I'm so sorry."

Now she looked ready to cry. "Don't be," he said in a quieter voice, smiling. "I've had much worse than this."

The constable had been joined by another, and together they hauled the reeling thief to his feet. "What do you wish done with him, my lord?"

Max pulled Anne's reticule from his pocket and handed it back to her. "Nothing. No harm done. Just see him away from here."

"Ah, yes, my lord."

Muttering to one another about all nobles being madmen, they dragged the thief off, presumably to give him a stern talking to. As long as Anne was all right, Maximilian didn't much care what happened to the man. Stifling a groan, he climbed once again to his feet, and pulled Anne up after him.

"I suggest we return to the party," he said, wrapping her gloved hand securely around his arm so she wouldn't be able to cause any further havoc.

"No, I can't," Anne blurted, her face going scarlet. "I behaved like such a hoyden." She looked up at him. "And besides, you're hurt, and wet, and you smell like fish and beer."

"Isn't that what you'd expect from a sheep farmer?" he returned evenly. "Or perhaps mutton and wet wool would be more in line with your thinking."

"You're just angry because I went skating with Lord Howard. And you *are* a sheep farmer."

His jaw tightening, Maximilian gave a slight nod. "Yes, I am. Why did you flee the party?"

"Because I wanted to."

She'd already convinced him that she wasn't the spoiled, flighty chit he'd expected at first sight of her. "With no thought to the danger you might be putting yourself in? Some of this ice is too thin to hold a rat. Not to mention your barging into the middle of a street fair. You're lucky our friend only wanted your reticule."

"I was managing quite well without you."

That was enough of that. He let her go. With a squeak Anne lost her balance. Before she could fall, Max slipped his hands beneath her arms and pulled her upright against him.

"Care to revise that statement?" he suggested to the back of her head. At her continued silence, he relented a little, pushing off in the direction of Queenhithe Dock. "All right. Then tell me why you decided to attend with Lord Howard "

"He asked me."

"You knew I would ask you."

"He asked first."

"I asked you to marry me first."

She looked up over her shoulder at him, and he was surprised to see tears in her green eyes. "You never asked me.

No one ever asked me."

Anne expected him to say something cynical, like reminding her that no one had asked him, either, but he didn't. In fact, as she thought about it, he'd never said anything to bemoan his own part in this.

They reached the dock at Queenhithe, and with no visible effort Lord Halfurst lifted her onto the edge of the pier. While

Anne watched, fascinated, he untied her skates from her half boots. His hands brushing the hem of her skirt and gripping her ankles left her feeling oddly... hot inside, despite the cold against her skin. She would never have thought a sheep farmer would know how to skate so well, and yet he obviously did.

He seemed to know how to do quite a few things well— things that made him fit into London better than she ever would have suspected. And yet in some ways, he didn't fit in at all. "I should have told Desmond no," she said slowly.

Max looked up at her as he tied her skates together and slung them over his shoulder. "Why?"

He wanted a truthful answer; she could see that in his warm gray eyes. "Because I knew you would ask me."

With a hop he sat beside her and leaned down to remove his own skates from his fine Hessian boots.

"He doesn't own your heart, does he, Anne?"

She studied his profile. "No one owns my heart."

He straightened. "I've already accepted that challenge."

"I'm not sure why. I've told you a hundred times that I won't marry you."

"Ah." A slight smile touched his sensuous mouth, and then he leaned down again, his too-long black hair half obscuring his lean face. "Do you like to argue, or just with me?"

"I think it's my turn to ask you a question," she countered, abruptly wondering whether he had any lovers waiting for him

back in Yorkshire. Sheep farmers were no doubt very popular there, and he was by far the most handsome farmer she'd ever set eyes on.

"Then ask."

"Do you *need* to be in Yorkshire all year long? Or is it just that you like to be there all the time?"

His skates off, he slung them over his other shoulder and stood. "I'm a landlord, the local magistrate, the farmer's almanac,

and whatever else Halfurst needs. It's a responsibility, not a choice." Bending down, he helped her to her feet.

For a moment, Anne hoped he would take her arm around his again, as he had when they'd been on skates. Instead, though, he helped her stuff her hands into her warm ermine muff. "Am I a responsibility, Maximilian, or a choice?"

"What you are, Anne, is a conundrum. Shall I hire us a hack, or do you want to walk?"

"Walk? It's miles!"

"A hack it is."

He guided her back to the street. She liked that he'd called her a conundrum; it sounded so much more interesting than simply saying she was contrary or flighty. In truth, mostly what she felt lately was confusion—interrupted by moments of unexpected lust toward the man she'd sworn she would never marry. And even covered with beer and oysters, he enticed her.

"You must be freezing," she said abruptly, freeing one hand from her muff to take his arm as a hack stopped before them.

He handed her up, giving directions to Bishop House before he joined her inside and pulled the door closed. Even in the closed carriage she could see her breath. For heaven's sake, if Halfurst froze to death she wouldn't be able to argue with him any longer, and he wouldn't kiss her good morning.

"How wet are you?" she demanded, pulling him around to face her, and unfastening the top buttons of his greatcoat.

Maximilian lifted an eyebrow. "Beg pardon?"

"You're soaked all the way through," she said, stuffing her hand inside his coat, against his jacket. "Why didn't you say something earlier?" When she shoved the dark material of his jacket aside, even the fine lawn shirt covering his chest was cold and wet to the touch.

"Anne, I suggest you remove yourself to the opposite seat immediately," he said in a low voice.

"But—"

"Now."

She looked up. Maximilian's gaze was fixed on her hands, both of which had found their way inside both his greatcoat and his jacket. Jaw clenched, he gripped the door handle in one fist, and the back of the worn seat in the other.

Blushing scarlet, she yanked her hands back to her lap. "... I was only worried that you might catch a chill," she managed. Good heavens, not even courtesans simply stuck their hands down men's fronts.

"I am quite warm, thank you," he grunted, his gaze still on her hands and his breathing harsh.

"Are you—"

"Anne?"

"Yes?"

"Shut up."

"Oh."

He muttered something she couldn't interpret, but it seemed unwise to ask him to repeat himself. Instead she watched as he closed his eyes tightly, his jaw clenched so hard she could practically hear his teeth grinding.

"Are you all right?" she whispered.

Maximilian shot to his feet, opening the flimsy door in the same motion. "I'm walking."

Anne grabbed his arm. "You can't!"

He swung his head around to face her again. "You're asking me to remain?"

"You're being ridiculous," she answered in her most matter-of-fact tone. She was being ridiculous, too, to insist that he remain with her, unchaperoned, in a closed carriage. "You will catch your death of cold if you go back outside." Releasing his arm, she moved to the opposite seat and folded her hands over her lap. "I promise not to assault your virtue."

He narrowed his eyes. "It's not *my* virtue I'm worried about."

"Just sit down."

With another deep breath he did so. "You do realize that if I did catch my death, you would never have to worry about being dragged off to Yorkshire."

At least he seemed able to converse again. "I won't be dragged anywhere, regardless."

"I'm beginning to realize that."

Did that mean he was giving up? The look in his eyes remained distinctly lustful, however, so she didn't think so. And whatever base thoughts he might be having, by the time the hack stopped, Halfurst was shivering, and making a valiant effort to pretend that he was not.

Maximilian stepped to the ground to hand her down. "In order to keep my virtue intact," he chattered, casting a glance up at the driver, "I'll forgo a goodbye kiss, just for today."

He was going to climb back into the hack and leave. And his home on High Street was another twenty

minutes away. With a deep scowl Anne grabbed his arm again. "No, you don't."

"I'm beginning to think you like me," he murmured.

Not quite certain whether her concern was over his health or the proximity of his lips to hers, she decided to pretend it was the former. "That is not what I mean," she said flatly, tugging him in the direction of the front door.

She could as easily have moved a mountain, but he went with her, anyway. "My father will have dry clothes you can wear. I won't have you dying and everyone blaming me."

"Fine." His shivering wasn't so bad that he couldn't dig a sovereign out of his coat pocket and pitch it to the hack driver, but neither was he faking a chill.

Lambert didn't appear at the door as they reached it, and Anne belatedly remembered that it was Thursday, the staff's weekly afternoon off. "Drat," she muttered, fishing in her reticule for a key and doubly grateful that Halfurst had recovered the bag for her.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. No one's home."

"Ah."

A low shiver went down her spine, one that had nothing to do with the cold. She'd never spent this much time alone with a man, and to have this large, muscular one in the house was foolhardy, to say the least. The hack was gone, though, and as she'd said, she couldn't allow him to walk home through the snow. "Whatever the circumstances," she said, as much for her own benefit as for his, "you are cold and wet, and you became that way because of me."

"I'm not protesting," he said in his low drawl, following her into the foyer. "I just want to be certain that one of us isn't delirious."

That would explain her actions, anyway. "My father's rooms are this way," she said, heading for the stairs.

His hand slipped down her arm to grip her fingers. "No one's home?" he asked, pulling her back toward him. "You're certain?"

Slowly he drew her closer. Leaning up on her toes, she met his mouth in a hot, hard kiss. Compared to this, his kisses of greeting had been chaste. Anne wound her hands into his lapels, and reality in the form of cold, wet beer crashed down on her.

"Ew."

Maximilian looked down at her, his expression amused and his eyes warm. "I usually don't get that



reaction."

"You still need to change clothes. I don't know how you can stand being so cold and wet."

"I barely noticed."

He would have caught her in his arms again, but she dodged backward. "The spare bedchamber's right there. I'll fetch something for you to wear."

For a moment she was concerned that the fireplace in the spare room wouldn't be lit. Her sheep farmer, however, knew how to amend that.

Anne paused in her rummaging for a clean shirt. *Her* sheep farmer? Where had that come from?

"Well, someone has to watch over him here in London," she muttered, not believing it even as she said it. Maximilian Trent, despite—or perhaps because of—his preference for Yorkshire, was quite probably the most capable man she'd ever met.

She grabbed a shirt, trousers, a waistcoat, jacket, and cravat, none of them her father's best. This was, after all, an emergency. She hoped Maximilian wouldn't require anything further.

"Here you go," she said in a loud voice, pushing open the half-closed door. She didn't expect to find him naked, of course, but one never knew.

To her vast disappointment he was still fully clothed, even still wrapped in his caped greatcoat, as he squatted before the fireplace with outstretched hands.

"Get out of that coat, for heaven's sake!" she ordered, dumping the clothes on a chair.

He straightened again, grasping the mantel to pull himself up. "I tried," he said, his expression almost sheepish. "My hands were shaking too much."

It seemed an obvious ploy, but as he rubbed his hands together his whole body gave a shudder. "You truly are cold, aren't you?"

"I'm bloody freezing," he answered, shivering again. "I didn't realize it until I nearly burned myself with the tinder and didn't even notice." He gazed at her for several seconds, then cleared his throat. "I did get the fire started. Give me a few moments, and I'll be fine."

"I'll help," she decided, coming forward. He needed assistance, and besides, she really wanted to touch him. Not just his jacket or his shirt, but the smooth skin beneath.

"That's not necess—"

"Stand still," she ordered, spreading his arms and stepping between them to finish the job she'd begun of unfastening his coat.

Her hands were none too steady, either, as she stood well within the reach of his embrace. Still, she managed to get his coat open and push it down his shoulders.

His jacket followed. Anne could feel his gaze on her face, but she didn't dare look up at him. If she did, she wouldn't be able to pretend any longer that this was strictly for his own good.

As she started on the tight buttons of his waistcoat, one of his hands came around, and with a flick of his fingers, her heavy cloak pooled to the floor. She froze.

"I thought you might be warm," he murmured.

Though it occurred to her to point out that the dexterity of his fingers seemed to have returned, she didn't say anything of the sort. She opened his waistcoat, and from there it seemed necessary for her to run her hands along his cold, damp shirt. Hard muscles jumped beneath her fingers, and low heat traveled up the backs of her legs.

Anne leaned up against him, pushing the waistcoat down his arms and to the floor. Beer and oysters had never smelled so arousing. With her body pressed against his, she became aware of the hardness pushing at her through his trousers. She glanced down. "Oh my."

Finally she lifted her face to meet his gaze. With an exhalation of breath, as though the statue he'd become had awakened, he lowered his mouth to hers in a hot, openmouthed kiss. "Anne," he said, folding his arms around her waist, pulling her harder against him.

She closed her eyes, letting the feel of him soak into her. She kissed him back, the caress of his mouth leading her on. To where, she didn't know, but she desperately wanted to be there—with him.

The fastenings at the back of her gown loosened beneath his fingers. Heat burned through her, quelling the tiny voice of logic that remained and told her to run as fast as her legs could carry her.

Her legs wouldn't have gotten her very far, anyway, for she was beginning to feel very unsteady on them. The taste of him left her hot and oddly light.

Maximilian tore off his cravat one-handed, a low growl sounding in his chest. He yanked her against him, and abruptly they were on the carpeted floor, amid the growing piles of their clothes.

His hands caressed her everywhere, stealing her breath and leaving her moaning for more. He pulled his shirt off over his head and then slid the length of his lean, muscular body down her legs. Mouth and lips caressing every inch of her skin he exposed, slowly he drew her shirt up.

Anne lifted her hips to help him, and his hand slid between her thighs. "Maximilian," she groaned, the pleading in her voice surprising her. This was close to what she wanted, what she needed, and any more of this tantalizing delay was going to drive her mad.

The shift passed her waist and then her breasts, and his warm lips followed. His tongue teased at her nipples, one and then the other and back again. And she couldn't even speak. Instead, she twined her shaking fingers into his dark hair and pulled him closer against her.

Still teasing and suckling her breasts, Maximilian twisted sideways, yanking off his boots and tossing them aside. His trousers followed.

As he moved up her body again to capture her mouth in a hot, plundering kiss, Anne was keenly aware of the heat and the hard shaft pressing against her thigh. A keen thrill of excited terror ran through her. Stopping him now, though, was out of the question. If Maximilian didn't finish what he'd begun, she was going to die. She felt it, the craving need to be part of him, stronger than any desire she'd ever felt in her life.

Sliding his hand down her breast, past her stomach to her thigh, Maximilian tugged her legs apart. He fit himself to her body, skin to skin, hip to hip.

"Anne," he whispered, lifting his head to look her in the eye. And then his hips shifted again and slowly pushed closer, and he entered her with a slow, deepening joining she could never have imagined.

A sudden pain made her gasp. Maximilian stopped instantly, balancing his weight on one elbow and teasing at her left nipple with his free hand.

"Relax," he said huskily, kissing her throat and the base of her ear. "It will pass. The pain only means that I'm your first. It won't happen again. Just feel me, Anne."

"It's better," she managed. Never had she been so aware of her body; never had she felt such anticipation and... satisfaction all in the same moment. "Don't stop."

He met her eyes again, nodding. "I don't think I could stop if I wanted to." With a slow, deepening thrust, he buried himself inside her.

Anne clutched at his shoulders as he began a deep, rhythmic plundering. Her breathing, the beating of her heart, seemed to match his thrusts. This was what she wanted. Nothing could be better, or feel better, than this. Ever.

Then his pace began to increase, and a deep tension swept through her. There couldn't be more. This was too much, already.

"Maximilian?" she gasped.

"The best is yet to come," he returned breathlessly, obviously sensing her question.

"How?"

"Just be, Anne. Don't think."

As if her mind could function, anyway, with his lean body pressing hers to the carpet and his arms cradling her, and his inexorable thrusting in and out between her legs. "Oh God," she whimpered, clinging to him.

She shattered, breaking into a thousand pieces of breathless pleasure. A moment later he shuddered inside her, and she knew that he joined her in this indescribable heaven.

They lay in a heavy breathing tangle of arms and legs for a moment. Just as he began to feel heavy on her, Maximilian slipped his hand beneath her and rolled them over, so she lay atop him.

"How do you feel?" he murmured, brushing her long, brunette hair out of his face. He'd been as gentle as he could, but considering how badly he'd wanted her, he wasn't sure he'd been gentle enough.

"Disheveled," she answered, running a hand along his chest. "And very ..."

"Relaxed?" he suggested, allowing himself a small smile.

"Yes. Very."

"I seem to be warm now myself." He sighed. Once they were at Halfurst, he would see that he made love to her before the fireplace as often as possible. The scent of beer and oysters came to him again as he inhaled, and Maximilian frowned. Even Anne smelled of their misadventure now, and it certainly wouldn't be very seemly for them to be discovered naked together and smelling of a low-class inn.

"You smell like beer," she said, her cheek resting on his chest. Her warm hands slid around his waist.

"And so do you, now," he returned. "I don't suppose there's a washbasin in here? We should probably at least smell sober when we see your father."

She sat up, her crumpled shift sliding down her breasts to her waist. "What?"

"I'll already be wearing his clothes," Maximilian said, sitting up as well, and tugging her against his chest. Even now he craved her again. "We should at least not reek of beer and oysters when we meet to arrange terms." Though any terms would do; he wanted Anne, and anything else was superfluous.

Now she was scowling. "What terms?"

"For our marriage."

Anne shoved at him, stumbling to her feet. "You tricked me."

"I did not trick you," he said flatly. "You wanted this as much as I did."

"Yes, *this*," she said, gesturing between them, her gaze pausing for a moment below his waist. "But that doesn't mean I've ... agreed to anything."

He stood as well, frustrated anger and lust burrowing through him. "You are mine," he said flatly. "You may even be carrying my child. Aside from that, I already told you that this isn't a game, Anne. I came to London for you. And now—"

A door downstairs opened and slammed shut. "Lady Anne? Oh dear! Are you here, my lady?"

Anne blanched. "It's Daisy." She whirled to the chair and grabbed her father's spare clothes. "Get dressed," she snapped, throwing them at his chest.

"No."

For a heartbeat she hesitated. "Fine. Stay here naked," she returned, snatching up her own clothes. "I'll be elsewhere."

Maximilian strode to intercept her at the door, but she slipped out before he reached it. Damn her. He hadn't planned a seduction for today, and he'd dealt poorly with his desire to make her his *Idiot*.

With a curse he dropped the clothes back on the chair and grabbed the trousers. Certainly he could use this to make her his wife, and no one in London would blame him for it— except for Anne. And above all else, he wanted what they'd had together today—desire, and even friendship. To drag her off to Yorkshire now would earn him nothing but her disappointment and their mutual misery.

He fastened the trousers. They were too damned short. Thank God for his boots, or he would end up looking like the sheep farmer she'd ridiculed. And obviously the less he resembled that, the better his chances.

## Chapter 6

All London is abuzz with news of Lady Shelbourne's Valentines Day ball. Invitations, This Author is told, are due to arrive today.

This Author is not certain, however, whether guests will be required to wear the Valentine-ish colors of red, pink, and white.

Red, pink, and white. This Author shudders to think.

LADYWHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS,  
7 FEBRUARY 1814

The best chance he'd yet discovered arrived four days later via the mail. A St. Valentine's Day ball, hosted by Margaret, Lady Shelbourne.

Maximilian turned the invitation over in his hands. If he'd received one, then Anne surely would have, as well. And considering her latest tactics, the ball might be his last chance to win her.

He'd called on her yesterday and the day before, and on both occasions she'd been out with Lord Howard. He could assume they hadn't gone ice skating again, but that hardly left him with enough information to hunt them down.

She'd enjoyed their lovemaking; he could sense that, in the language of her body beneath his and in the beat of her heart. He had been her first, and even more than before, he wanted to make damned certain he was her only.

Whatever she might say, they belonged together, and not simply because it said so on some old piece of paper. The idea that she was seeing Howard to avoid him annoyed Maximilian; the thought that she might accept a proposal from the damned viscount to avoid being dragged out of London infuriated him.

"So you have no idea where she's gone," he asked the Bishops' butler.

"None, my lord. I only know that Lady Anne said she would return in time for dinner."

The butler was probably lying, but that was part of the man's job. Well, the main target had vanished, but there were still other pieces he could fit into the puzzle. "Would Lord or Lady Daven be in, then?"

Lambert blinked. "Ah, if you would care to wait in the morning room, I shall inquire."

That meant someone was home. The question was whether they would want to speak with him or not. Anne's explanation for his presence the other day had sounded innocent enough to him, but he wasn't her parent, thank Lucifer.

"Lord Halfurst," a quiet male voice said from the doorway. "This is a surprise, though not an unexpected one."

Maximilian nodded. "Lord Daven. Thank you for seeing me. I know how busy you are."

"No need for that. Am I to assume that Anne has come to her senses? I wasn't certain I'd be seeing you again after she escaped to the theater without you."

"I'm persistent."

"So I've discovered."

At the earl's gesture Maximilian seated himself in one of the room's comfortable chairs. "I wanted to ask you a question."

The earl cleared his throat as a footman brought in a tea tray. "I'll avoid all assumptions."

"It's not about her dowry." Max leaned forward, rubbing his hands together. This was what he hated most about London—the artifice, the pretending, the veneer of politeness that meant no one would say what they really thought of you, except to your back. He preferred being direct, and it seemed important that Anne's family know that. "Do you wish your daughter to marry me?"

A scowl lowered Daven's brow. "Well, of course I do. An agreement between two families is—"

"No. Do *you* wish Anne to marry me?"

"Ah." The earl took a sip of tea. "You mean with the widespread rumors that your father left you bankrupt."

Apparently some residents of London could be direct. It was refreshing, in a way. "Yes."

"Well, to be honest—and I assume you want honesty—if that was all I knew about you, then no, I wouldn't want you marrying my daughter. Halfurst is an old and respectable title, but frankly that is no assurance of happiness."

For a moment Max remained silent. "But you know the truth behind the rumors. When I wrote, I made the facts as clear as... my being a gentleman would allow."

"Yes, I know that." The earl set aside his tea. "Which leads *me* to a question: do you wish to marry my daughter?"

"I wish to, and I intend to do so, my lord. At the moment, however, I still seem to be making up for nineteen years of not corresponding with her."

Daven chuckled. "Anne's hardly spent time anywhere but in London. She's convinced this is where the world begins and ends."

"Yes, I'd gathered that," Maximilian said dryly. "It's not actually my letter writing she disapproves of; it's my place of residence."

"There are solutions to that, my boy."

With a nod, Maximilian stood. "So there are."

First, though, he wanted to know something. Stupid and meaningless though it might be, he wanted to know that she chose him above all the other sugar-tongued nobles pursuing her.

With Lord Howard in the middle, that was going to be supremely difficult, unless he wished to play by the same rules as the viscount. And he really preferred to avoid that, if at all possible. Where Anne was concerned, however, he was willing to do just about anything. If she would take one step toward him, he

would walk a hundred miles for her.

\* \* \*

"Why do you keep looking over your shoulder?" Desmond asked, his own gaze on the snow-covered street. "Do you expect Halfurst to pursue us to Covent Garden?"

"He might," Anne answered, pushing her hands deeper into her muff.

Not even to herself would she admit that she missed Maximilian, that her body felt impatient for his kisses and craved his touch. She'd thought about asking Lord Howard to kiss her again, to prove to herself that this stupid feeling she had was just a general yearning for something her body had very much enjoyed. She knew, though, that it wasn't true; she enjoyed Halfurst, and only Halfurst. Having someone else kiss her would only prove a point she didn't wish to make.

"I should hand him a beating for making off with you at the skating party," the viscount went on, obviously annoyed. "And for frightening you into colliding with Miss Ballister."

"He didn't frighten me into anything," Anne retorted, flushing. "Please stop discussing it."

"I don't see why you should object. It's only another sign of his quaint Yorkshire manners." Desmond snorted. "No doubt his floors are covered with straw to accommodate the pigs with whom he shares his home."

"Oh, Desmond, stop it. You know that's not true."

"Well, yes, but only because Halfurst is in sheep country." This time he laughed. "Sheep are probably where he learned his lovemaking skills. You know—"

"Lord Howard! Stop this carriage at once! I will not be party to such crude—"

He pulled the team to a halt. "Anne, please calm down. I apologize for my very rude behavior. I got carried away."

"Obviously." Trying to hide the double attack of guilt and mortification that had hit her, Anne stuffed her hands deeper into her muff and glared straight ahead. If she looked at Desmond, she felt certain he would guess what she'd done—and how thoroughly she'd enjoyed Maximilian's skills. *Sheep, ha.*

"Come, Anne, looking for a way to spare his feelings is admirable, but it's been well over a week. You'll be risking the accusation that you're leading him on if you don't have your parents announce the break with Halfurst soon."

Taking a steadying breath, Anne faced him again. "We are friends, are we not?"



He clasped her elbow. "Of course we are. And we verge on becoming more to one another, I hope."

Not that again. Still, she had no more wish to hurt his feelings than Maximilian's. "All rumor, speculation, and innuendo aside, what do you know of Lord Halfurst?"

With a flick of his wrists, Desmond set the carriage moving again. "Not much, really. His father spent the entire year before young Viscount Trent arrived in town bragging to anyone who would listen about what a success he would be. It actually looked that way for a time, until old Halfurst expired at his own soiree and his widow went screaming through the ballroom proclaiming that they were all ruined."

"Lud. My parents never mentioned that."

"Well, they wouldn't, considering you were betrothed to him. After that, tales of the family's bankruptcy were everywhere.

They even denied him membership at White's, as I recall. And then, practically without a word, he bundled up his mother and what remained of the family's belongings and fled to Yorkshire."

Intent as Maximilian seemed to be about straightforward truth, she could see why he hadn't made up some lie about his circumstances. She couldn't imagine him running from anything, either, but he'd been only eighteen. A year younger than she was now.

"So, as I said before, you know why he's here," Desmond continued. "He feared you and your money would escape him, and he's run to town to gather you both up and flee back to Yorkshire."

Yorkshire. She'd never been there, and it was without a doubt the most hated word in her entire vocabulary. "I suppose so."

The viscount glanced at her. "You 'suppose so'? Don't tell me he's charmed you with that quaint directness of his."

"It's not that," she hedged. "If he's so desperate for money, and if everyone knows it, how is he able to supply himself with a new wardrobe, and rent a box for a sold-out performance at Drury Lane?"

"I would assume he's lived like a pauper for the last seven years so he can make a good showing now. After all, if your parents reject him, he has no one else."

"He hasn't even met with my parents," she muttered, quietly enough that Desmond wouldn't hear. Obviously the viscount had forgotten his claim that any female would do for Maximilian. But she didn't agree. She'd always had the distinct feeling that the Marquis of Halfurst could have any female he wanted, and that he preferred her. His passion had certainly been very effective, and very unmistakable.

"I've made you blush. Let's speak of something else."

"Yes, please," she returned vehemently. Above all else she didn't want Desmond to know it hadn't been he making her blush; even thinking of Maximilian was enough to speed her pulse and leave her flushed with warmth and wanting.

"Annie!"

Starting, Anne looked up the street. Theresa and Pauline stood beside Pauline's family coach, waving at her. *Oh, thank goodness. Friendly faces.* "Let's stop, my lord," she said, waving back and grinning with relief. Conversing with men had never been as troublesome and problematic before Halfurst's arrival in London.

"But I wanted to spend some time alone with you," the viscount protested.

"You've spent the entire drive here talking about Halfurst," she retorted. "I really don't wish to hear any more."

"Then stop asking questions about him, my dear. One would almost think you've become infatuated with the sheep farmer."

How else was she supposed to get information, if not by asking questions?  
"Stop the carriage, Desmond. Daisy and I shall walk."

"Anne, don't be angry with me for enjoying your company," he said in a placating voice. "We'll discuss whatever you like."

Despite his peace offering, now that she'd decided it, she wanted nothing more than to escape his company. In all fairness, though, she had agreed to join him for a shopping excursion to Covent Garden. "Perhaps you'd escort all of us," she suggested. "I haven't seen Theresa or Pauline for days."

With a faint scowl he guided the phaeton to one side of the busy street. "As you wish, my dear."

So now he thought she was being difficult, and he had to humor her. Everything had been so much easier when her male friends had accepted that she was betrothed, and the only thing she had to offer was her friendship. Lately, though, all Desmond seemed interested in was trying to kiss her, and telling her how poor Maximilian's character was.

And that was the oddest part. She should have been happy to hear that rejecting the marquis would be the wise thing to do. Instead, though, for every blight the viscount offered, she seemed determined to come up with a reason to dismiss it. Why was she being so foolish? And why had she welcomed Halfurst's embrace, and his touch, and his body?

"Anne," Pauline said, grabbing her ankle as the carriage rolled to a stop in the snowy street, "I'm glad we found you."

"I'm happy to see you again, as well," she said, a bit surprised at the vehemence in her friend's voice.

"No. We've been looking for you," Theresa took up. "We went to your house this morning to see if you

wanted to go shopping, and who do you think we saw there?"

She could guess. "Halfurst?"

"Yes! Did you know?"

"How could I? I accepted an invitation to go shopping with Lord Howard this morning." For the viscount's sake, she favored him with a smile as he came around and lifted her down to the street.

"Well, he's in your morning room. Apparently he's been there for over an hour. And your mother told us that she thinks he means to wait for you until you return!"

Anne closed her eyes for a moment, the familiar rush at the idea of his presence mingling with a distinct uneasiness. If he was at Bishop House and she wasn't, then no doubt he'd finally spoken to her father. And with the earl's cryptic comments about keeping an eye on Halfurst's career, her father seemed to favor the match. Good heavens, she might as well be married!

Desmond beside her was doing a poor job of hiding his displeasure at this latest pronouncement; no doubt he realized what she would ask of him next. "Desmond, please—"

"Take you home?" he interrupted. "Give me one good reason why I should."

She took an annoyed breath. "Lord Howard, if you would just remain pleasant for another few minutes, then we might remain friends, as well."

"And what does that get me?" he retorted. "A letter from Yorkshire every six months, describing how miserable you are and how much you wish you'd listened to your 'friend'?"

"This doesn't sound like friendship," she said crisply, taking Theresa's hand and hoping if her friend felt her fingers shaking she would think it was from the cold. "It sounds like jealousy. I have never made it anything but clear that I am betrothed, and whether I plan on marrying Lord Halfurst or not, that fact does not change."

"Only when it's convenient for you, that is," he sneered.

"Annie, Pauline and I will see you home," Theresa said in a tense voice, tugging her in the direction of Pauline's carriage.

"Yes, you do that," Howard snapped. "I'll be available when you return to your senses and decide you've had enough of your sheep farmer."

Before she could conjure a suitable retort, he climbed into his phaeton and lurched back into traffic.

"My goodness," Pauline whispered, taking Anne's other hand. "I've never seen him like that."

"Neither have I," she returned, her voice shaking to match her hands. "Will you please take me home?"

"Of course, Annie. Come on."

As she took her seat in Pauline's carriage, she was surprised to realize that she wasn't thinking so much of Desmond's jealous fit as she was of seeing her sheep farmer again. Four days seemed a lifetime, when all she could think of was how very good it had felt to be with him.

\* \* \*

Thank God, Anne's mother had finally believed him when Maximilian had told her that she didn't need to keep him company, and that he would be quite content to read a book and wait for his betrothed. Her apologetic hovering set his teeth on edge, and Lady Daven's depictions of her daughter were woefully inaccurate and inadequate. Anne Bishop defied description, by anyone's definition.

For one thing, she was practically the only Londoner he'd encountered who didn't bother with affectations; she was who she was, and seemed quite content with that. And far from being shy and retiring, as her mother insisted she was, Anne was curious and forthright and utterly imperfect.

He'd meant to give her a sampling of what married life with him would offer her, and he'd meant to use his skills at lovemaking to convince her to give up her arguments about staying in London. While he thought he might have succeeded at the former, her continued insistence on parading about town with Lord Howard was proof enough that she hadn't succumbed to the latter. Nor was she likely to, if she was able to keep avoiding him.

She had to return home eventually, and then this nonsense would stop. He would convince her to marry him, and only when he'd run out of resolve and time would he surrender to London. After being inside her, his resolve had become boundless. And for the first time since he'd inherited Halfurst, he didn't care if it fell into ruin while he waited for her. He wasn't leaving London without Anne Bishop.

That didn't mean, however, that he intended to play by her rules. She was used to men throwing themselves at her feet, after her beauty or her money or her favor. He heard her enter the house, sooner than he expected, but he remained seated, reading the book he'd selected from the Bishop House library, when she stepped into the morning room.

"Lord Halfurst?"

He looked up. "Anne." Heat coiled through him at the sight of her, and he had to fight to keep seated, and to keep other parts of his body from becoming immediately erect, as well.

"What are you doing here? Didn't Lambert tell you I'd gone out?"

Her voice sounded unsteady, and the thought that his presence might be the reason for that made his relaxed slouch even more difficult to maintain. "He did. I decided to wait."

Slowly she came further into the room, and it took all his self-control to refrain from leaping to his feet and smothering her body with kisses. Her maid started to enter the room behind her, but at a feminine command outside, Daisy vanished behind the closing door. Lady Daven had some sense, anyway.

She tilted her head, glancing at the book in his hands. "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*? I didn't know you read Shakespeare."

Anne was nervous, and that was good. "You didn't? What did you think I read? Or you didn't think I could read at all, perhaps."

"Don't be ridiculous. I just couldn't... imagine you taking the time to read Shakespeare, is all. You seem so consumed by Yorkshire."

Did he? More likely, she was obsessed with it. His obsessions had lately taken a more feminine shape, with long, curling brunette hair. "I could quote something for you, if you like," he said, setting the book aside and standing, "but that wouldn't prove anything but my ability to borrow someone else's pretty words."

Anne took a small step backward as he rose. "You . . . didn't answer my question. What are you doing here?"

"You've been avoiding me."

"No, I haven't," she shot back, giving a nervous laugh. "I hope you don't think I just sit at home waiting for you to come calling. I have friends, and activities. This is my home, you know."

"I know." His gaze on her soft mouth, he slowly stepped toward her. "Nevertheless, I owe you a good morning kiss. Four of them, actually."

"I..."

If he let her argue, he'd never be able to touch her today. Maximilian closed the distance between them with one quick stride. Taking her shoulders in his hands, he leaned down and covered her mouth with his. She responded instantly, leaning up against his chest and curling her hands into the front of his jacket. He went hard, and felt her heat as she pressed herself closer against him.

As he drew his arms down the length of her and around her waist, she gave a stifled groan and pushed away. "Stop it!"

"Why?" he murmured, against her lips. "You want me again, and you know that I want you, don't you?"

Her hips moved against him, and he clenched his jaw, fighting for control. "Yes."

"Then don't ask me to stop."

He kissed her again, and he felt her give in—for a moment. "No!" she said again, shoving harder.

She couldn't have moved him if she wanted to, but he released her anyway. Persuasion only, he reminded himself, trying not to let his discomfort show on his face. Forcing her would win him nothing. "If you would agree to marry me, I would make you feel like this every day."

"That is not fair!" she shouted, as if volume equaled conviction. If her gaze hadn't trailed below his waist and back again, her parted lips still beckoning him, he might have believed her.

"Why isn't it fair? It's the truth. This is marriage, Anne. Being with me, skin-to-skin. I know you enjoyed it. I felt you, remember?"

"Fine. Remind me of my weakness," she retorted, a tear running down her cheek. "You're no better than Lord Howard."

The single tear bothered him, and suddenly it seemed more important to make her stop crying than to wear her down into a marriage agreement. "It wasn't weakness, Anne," he murmured, brushing the moisture from her cheek with his thumb. "It was desire. There is nothing wrong with desire. Not between us."

That earned him a glare, which he could only consider an improvement over her weeping. With a discontented sigh he seated himself again. If he made her flee, he might as well have stayed at home. He knew precisely what her objection to him was; what he needed to do was figure out how to convince her of the merits of Yorkshire. In the dead of winter, that wasn't such an easy task.

"Anne," he said, "sit down."

"Only if you'll tell me why you're here."

"I'm here to see you. Isn't that simple enough?"

"You're here to try to seduce me into marrying you," she said, her tone accusing. Even so, she sat—in the chair at the far end of the room.

Maximilian chuckled. "I've already seduced you, and we're still not married. I don't intend to apologize for continuing to find you desirable."

"If you know that seduction won't work, how do you intend to convince me of anything?"

For a moment, she almost sounded as if she wanted to be convinced. His heart leaped. "Have you ever

heard of Farndale?"

She scowled. "Farndale? No."

"It's about three miles west of Halfurst. A small valley in the foothills of the Pennine Mountains. In the early spring the entire floor of the dale is carpeted with wild daffodils."

"It's lovely, I would imagine."

"You don't have to imagine it. I would show it to you." He gazed at her stony expression. "Anne, you've never been to Yorkshire. How do you know you would hate it so much?"

"Why do you hate London so much?"

"I... it was a difference of opinion, I suppose."

"You mean everyone treated you badly when they found out you had no money."

He narrowed his eyes, unable to stop the abrupt anger that drowned his damned lust for this outspoken beauty.

"Lord Howard, I suppose?"

"Yes, he told me everything, but only because I asked him to. Don't blame him."

"I doubt he told you everything, Anne." *Damn Howard*. He hated this, the gossip and innuendo and one-upmanship.

For Anne, though, he would tell the truth. All of it. "Why don't you ask we?"

She folded her hands in her lap. "Why should I? It doesn't matter, because in the end you'll still want to drag me off to Yorkshire. Daffodils or not, I will not spend the rest of my life in exile."

He cursed. "Would you spend it with Desmond Howard, then? Why don't you ask him about *his* finances? How long do

you think he'd be able to keep you in your precious London after he finished going through your dowry?"

"You lie."

Maximilian lurched to his feet. "I do not lie," he snarled, striding over to her. Clamping his hands on either arm of the chair,

he leaned down, forcing her to look him in the eye. "Ask him, Anne. And if you want to know anything—*anything*—about me, all you need do is ask."

Straightening, he stalked to the door and yanked it open. He hadn't meant to leave without securing her hand in marriage.

He hadn't meant to leave without making love to her again. He hadn't meant to start bellowing about other people. He

didn't do that. It wasn't right, and he knew firsthand how much it hurt.

"Are you bankrupt?" her shaking voice came. "Are you here for my money?"

Maximilian stopped. "No. I'm not. To both questions. I won't let it be that easy for you, Anne. And I'm

not finished with  
you, yet." Taking a deep breath, he faced her. "I think I know you. I believe you to be honest, and  
honorable. And I am  
betting that you won't be able to leave it at this, without finding out everything. You know where I'll be."

"So you're going back to Trent House to sulk? I don't—"

"What I meant was, I intend to call on you every day between now and February fourteenth. And then  
I'll be at the  
Shelbourne St. Valentine's Day Ball. On the fifteenth, though, I will be leaving London."

"Then you'll be leaving alone."

"We'll see. As I said, I think I know you, Anne." He lowered his voice to be certain none of the lurking  
servants would be  
able to hear. "And I know that you crave being with me again. Think about that."

## Chapter 7

Ah, Valentine's Day. This Author personally detests the holiday. A girl must take the measure of her  
worth  
by the number of cards and bouquets she receives, and a young man is forced to spew poetry as if  
anyone actually spoke in rhyme.

It's a wonder the holiday hasn't been banned from the capital. Or the nation, for that matter.

But This Author supposes that there are those with more sentimental hearts, because Lady Shelbourne's  
first (annual? This Author prays not) Valentine's Day ball is sure to be a massive crush, if the number of  
affirmative replies is any indication.

And since this is Valentine's Day, This Author would be remiss if the question were not posed—*Will  
any  
young couples make a match of it? Surely Lady Shelbourne cannot consider her party a success if  
the  
words "Will you marry me?" are not uttered even once.*

Or perhaps that will not be enough. After all, what is a proposal without the proper reply of "I will?"

LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS,  
14 FEBRUARY 1814



Anne slammed the *Atlas of Britain* closed as her father entered the library. "Good morning, Papa," she said, trying to sound casual, and dismayed at the distinct squeak in her voice.

The earl lifted an eyebrow. "Good morning. What are you doing in here?"

"Reading." She forced a careless laugh. "What else would I be doing in the library?"

"Daughter, has anyone ever told you that you're an abysmal liar?"

One man had— not that that had endeared him to her. "Don't you have a meeting today?"

"An atlas," her father said, tilting his head to view the book's cover. "Of Britain. Are you interested in any particular area?"

Anne grimaced. "You know what I was looking at. I was merely a little curious, for heaven's sake."

Maximilian had been telling her about western Yorkshire for a week, just little bits, obviously for the sake of whetting her interest. He also hadn't kissed her in a week. Given that strategy, she remained uncertain whether the craving that resulted was for him or for his blasted shire. Lord Halfurst could be very devious for an honest, forthright, virile male. An exceedingly virile male.

"There's nothing wrong with a little curiosity," her father commented, thankfully unable to read her thoughts. He paused. "Halfurst tells me he's leaving tomorrow."

Her pulse skittered. "Yes, he'd mentioned that."

"I suppose you'll be happy to see him gone?"

"What do you want me to say, Papa?" she asked, briskly, standing to replace the atlas on its shelf. "I ... like him, but he still lives in Yorkshire."

"Believe it or not, Annie, I am trying to stay out of this. I could force you to marry him, but I have no wish to see you miserable."

"Then why did you make this silly agreement in the first place?" she burst out, surprised to find that she felt more exasperated than angry.

The earl shrugged. "Robert Trent was my dearest friend. When he had a son and then I had a daughter, it seemed the natural thing to do. And I did—and do—like young Maximilian."

His voice warmed as he spoke, the humor his political career often didn't allow touching his eyes. Anne felt wretched, squirming in her seat. The earl so obviously wanted this match, and she so badly wanted to be in Maximilian's arms again that she could barely think straight. "He's so stubborn," she said into the air.

"And so are you, my dear." He stood. "If you don't wish this match, then let him go. I'm sure your mother will be happy to find someone more to your taste."

She scowled. "More to *her* taste, you mean."

"Yes, well, with an estate closer to London, anyway. That seems to satisfy your requirements."

"Papa."

"Happy St. Valentine's Day," he said with a small smile, and left the room.

As soon as he was gone, Anne took down the atlas again. Thanks to Maximilian's vivid depiction, she knew precisely where Halfurst lay. From the way he described it, full of daffodils and green rolling hills and picturesque streams and waterfalls, he considered it another Eden. Even the grazing herds of sheep took on a pastoral beauty, nestled as they were among the hills and Roman and Viking ruins.

Part of her wanted to see it for herself, to have Maximilian show her the places he so obviously loved. The other part of her was terrified that if she loosened her grip on London, she would never see it again.

And the worst part of all was that she couldn't see any way around it. Yorkshire or London, Maximilian or ... someone who wasn't him. "Maximilian," she murmured, her heart beating faster at the mere sound of his name. Butterflies came to life low in her belly.

Someone scratched at the library door. Anne yelped and shoved the book back into place.

"Yes?"

Lambert entered the room, a large bouquet of yellow daffodils in his hands. "These just arrived for you, Lady Anne. Shall I put them in the morning room with the rest?"

Daffodils. "Thank you, no. Leave them on the table, please." She spied the letter nestled among the blossoms, and clasped her hands to keep from springing forward and snatching it up.

"Very good, my lady." The butler set down the flowers, and left.

Since her debut, St. Valentine's Day had meant flowers; last year her mother had counted thirty-seven separate bouquets, most of them accompanied by candies and poems, and in one memorable case, a haunch of venison. Francis Henning had evidently thought her too skinny. The scent of roses filled every room of Bishop House today, as well. No one, though, had ever sent her daffodils.

Her hands abruptly clammy, Anne rubbed them on her skirt before she lifted the folded missive from the bright yellow blooms. She opened the heavy paper, and a smaller, weightier card fell to the floor.

On the back, in a dark, even hand it said, "As I remember it." When she picked the thing up, on the front was a six-inch-square colored sketch of a green pasture bordered by oak trees and boulders, and carpeted from one

end to the other with yellow flowers. In the corner the initials "MRT" held her gaze for as long as the lovely rendering. "An artist as well," she said, running a finger carefully across the surface.

She took a seat and placed the sketch on the table. Then she turned her attention to the letter. All the other notes and cards she had or would receive today featured hearts and cherubs and declarations of heartfelt admiration.

This one, of course, was different. "'Anne,'" she read to herself, "'Nineteen daffodils for the nineteen years we've been promised to one another. I would wish one day to show you where they grow wild.'"

"A scholar, an artist, and a romantic," she whispered, her fingers shaking. "I would never have guessed."

With a hard blink, she went on. "I am thinking of you, as I hope you are thinking of me, with desire and anticipation. I shall see you tonight. Maximilian."

Tonight. The Shelbourne St. Valentine's Day ball. If she had any sense of courage or conviction, Anne decided, she would decline to attend. Then he would be gone, and she would probably never see him again.

With a sigh she stood to go examine her wardrobe. She already knew she would wear yellow.

\* \* \*

Maximilian stood beside Lady Shelbourne's dessert table, doing his damndest not to pace. She'd been invited, he knew, because he'd asked her father. She would come tonight, because he needed her to.

"Damnation," he muttered.

Others seemed to be waiting for her there as well, which only served to further blacken his mood. Lord Howard, of course, circled the room like a vulture, sampling the various available feminine sweets while he waited for the main dish. Sir Royce Pemberley was also there, though his attention seemed to be on a unique female in an equally unique pink gown that appeared in perfect harmony with the swathes of pink, red, and white silk that hung from the ballroom ceiling.

Well, turnabout was fair play. With another glance at his competition, he strolled toward Margaret, Lady Shelbourne and the pink chit chatting with her.

"Might I have the pleasure of an introduction?" he asked, stopping before the ladies.

"Of course, my lord," Lady Shelbourne answered, swift dismay touching her face and then vanishing again. "Liza, Lord Halfurst. My lord—"

The pink chit grinned and stuck out her hand. "Miss Elizabeth Pritchard. Liza. Pleased to meet you."

He shook her hand. "A pleasure to meet you." Her light brown hair seemed to be coming out from its

elaborate coif,  
the ends sticking out at odd angles, but she had an intelligence in her eyes that Maximilian couldn't help but notice. And for once a matron seemed reluctant to see him near a single female, which in itself made Miss Liza Pritchard the most interesting part of his evening thus far.

"Might I have this waltz, Miss Liza?" he drawled. "If it's not already spoken for, of course."

Unless he was mistaken, she sent a glance in Pemberley's direction. *Good*. "I'm afraid I'm all yours, my lord."

She was taller by several inches than Anne, and as they swirled onto the dance floor, he noted that her shoes were red.

And then one of them trod on his left foot.

"I'm so sorry," she gulped, flushing.

"No need to apologize," he returned, smiling and hoping his eyes wouldn't water. She didn't appear that sturdy, but—

Miss Liza stepped on him again. "Oh no!"

"No worries, Miss Liza," he grunted. Good God, unique as she was in appearance, she danced with the grace of an elephant.

"I should have warned you," she mumbled, "dancing is not my forte. Perhaps if we counted the steps aloud?"

His left foot was going numb, but he couldn't help being amused. "The danger makes the adventure more worthwhile," he returned.

To his surprise, she laughed, and then, less amusing for him but to the obvious enjoyment of the nearest couples, she began counting. "One, two, three. One, two, three—oh drat."

He managed to avoid stumbling over her as she tripped on her own gown, then caught Sir Royce Pemberley staring at the two of them. A moment later he came forward, blocking their path.

"Might I cut in?" he asked tightly.

Maximilian met his gaze. He'd thought to find anger, or the snide disdain he was used to from Londoners, but instead he found himself nodding and stepping back, allowing Sir Royce to take his place. They said nothing else, but as Miss Elizabeth took Sir Royce's hand and met her partner's gaze, Maximilian abruptly realized that Anne had told the truth about the snow angels incident being nothing more than a moment of amusement. Royce Pemberley was not at the Shelbourne ball for Lady Anne Bishop. He'd already found his love.

Limping slightly, Max returned to the dessert table. The more circling Lord Howard did, the more nasty looks turned in

Max's direction. He wondered whether Desmond Howard had ever bothered to tell Anne about the young maid he'd ruined when they'd both been at Oxford, and how much the viscount had resented Maximilian's intervention in seeing the girl safely to a position with his mother.

The air stirred. Without turning, he knew that she'd entered the room. Anne. His Anne. Straightforward as he'd been in stating he would leave with or without her, he wasn't quite certain he could manage to go a day, much less a lifetime, without her by his side.

He managed to intercept her before Howard. "You wore yellow," he murmured, taking her hand and brushing his lips across her knuckles.

Green eyes glowed in the chandelier light, and not just from the excitement of the dance, he thought. Could she be as drawn to him as he was to her? Dear God, he hoped so.

"Something put me in mind of daffodils, today," she returned, the soft timbre of her voice not quite steady.

"You outshine them all. Will you dance with me?"

"Maximilian—"

"Just dance with me," he insisted, drawing her toward the dance floor. Any protest that began with his name couldn't be good, and if he didn't take her into his arms at once, he had the distinct feeling he would expire.

She must have felt the same, because with an exhaled breath she relaxed and nodded. "One dance, and then we need to talk."

"Two dances," he countered. "After all, this piece is already begun."

"I can't dance twice in a row with you."

"Who'll notice? Besides, we're betrothed."

This was perfection. Holding her as close as she and etiquette would allow, he didn't even mind the additional maneuvering required to avoid crashing into Miss Elizabeth and Sir Royce. Unlike her ice skating, Anne's dancing was incomparable. With her swaying in his arms, he could forget he was in London, forget that a hundred other guests milled and chatted and gossiped around them, forget that Lord Howard waited in the wings for him to return to Yorkshire.

"Are you truly leaving tomorrow?" Anne asked, long lashes hiding her eyes from him.

"I can't stay forever," he returned, hoping that was regret he heard in her voice.

"Why not?" She looked up, meeting his gaze. "Why can't you just stay here in London?"

For a heartbeat he was tempted. "Halfurst is my home and my responsibility. I can't just abandon it, even

for you."

"So you would have everything your way. That's not fair, Maximilian."

It *wasn't* fair, and he took a moment to consider before he responded. "I hoped you would have more desire for me than for London, Anne. It's only buildings and some rather unpleasant people."

"They aren't unpleasant to me. If you had stayed, instead of running off, you would have seen that."

She'd been talking to Howard again. "I did not 'run off.' Halfurst needed—"

"You let everyone say whatever they wanted about you, and you didn't do anything about it."

"What they said didn't matter."

"Ha!"

Max lifted an eyebrow. " 'Ha'?" he repeated.

"Yes, ha. All of their silly gossiping *did* matter, and it still does. That's why you dislike London."

"I..."

"And it's your own fault," she continued.

In her enthusiasm for the argument, she didn't even notice that he pulled her closer in his arms. Six inches of space between them be damned. Anne Bishop intoxicated him as no woman ever had, or ever would again. "And how is it my fault, pray tell?"

"All you had to do was say something, you big oaf. Bankrupt or not, you might have defended your father's reputation—and your own, Maximilian."

"Did you just call me an oaf?"

She cuffed him on the shoulder. "Pay attention. This is important."

It seemed more important that she was fighting to keep him in London, but he didn't want to mention that yet. "If I were paying any more attention to you, you'd be naked," he murmured.

"Stop that. And don't just pay attention—do something!"

"So I should stand on a chair and bellow at all and sundry that I was grieving horribly for my father, and that I didn't give a hang what anyone said about either of us? Or should I simply declare that Halfurst was never bankrupt, and that my yearly income is somewhere in the neighborhood of forty thousand pounds?"

She blinked her moss green eyes at him. "Forty thousand pounds?"

"Approximately."

"Then just tell everyone—someone—that all the rumors were groundless, and they'll—"

"They'll like me again?" he finished. "I've told the one person whose opinion I care for."

"And who . . ." Anne blushed prettily. "Oh."

The waltz ended, and he reluctantly slid his hand from around her waist.

"Ah, splendid," a familiar male voice murmured from behind him. "It's my turn now, I believe."

Anne tightened her grip on his arm. "Desmond, I promised Lord Halfurst the quadrille, as well. I would be happy to—"

"Do you think the sheep farmer can dance a quadrille?" the viscount asked, sneering as Max faced him. "I'm surprised he managed the waltz. What did you trade for lessons, Halfurst, mutton?"

Maximilian gazed at Howard levelly. The guests had grown silent, the better to overhear someone else's business. Of more concern to him was Anne, practically quivering with anger and indignation beside him.

At that moment he realized he wouldn't—couldn't—lose her, no matter what it took. She'd made several good points in her argument. Whether he cared about his reputation or not, she did, and if they were to be married, their names would become joined.

"I have respected my fiancée's friendship with you, Howard," he said in a low, level voice. "But now you are embarrassing her. Leave."

"Leave? I have no intention of going anywhere. You're the outsider here, marquis."

"Lord Howard, please stop," Anne hissed. "You've done enough damage."

"Oh, I've barely begun. Please, let's hear more of your witty repartee, sheep farmer."

That was enough of that. Anne had urged him to take action. "How's this?" Max returned.

He shot out with his right fist, catching Howard square in the jaw. With a grunt the viscount dropped to the polished floor.

"Much better." Maximilian faced Anne, ignoring the explosion of gasps and tittering from all around them. "Come with me."

"Good heavens," she whispered, staring at Howard's crumpled form. "One punch."

Max was unable to help a grim smile at her astounded expression. "You should have told me earlier that you preferred a man of action."

Anne felt too dazed to speak as the marquis led her out the nearest exit and down a narrow set of stairs. She'd only meant that he should defend his reputation verbally—knocking Desmond unconscious had not been part of the

scenario, satisfying  
as the sight had been. "He's going to be very angry."

"Hence my escorting you from the scene," Maximilian returned, stopping at the bottom of the stairs.  
"Where in damnation  
are we?"

"These are the servants' stairs, I think."

As she spoke, a footman laden with a tray of sweetmeats exited through a swinging door, nearly  
colliding with Halfurst.

"Beg pardon, my lord," he stammered, attempting to bow and balance at the same tune.

"What's through there?" Maximilian asked, indicating the door.

"The kitchen, my lord."

"Is there an exit on the other side?"

"Yes, my lord. To the gardens."

"Good." The servant continued to gawk at the two of them, until the marquis nudged him toward the  
stairs. "Go."

As soon as the footman vanished up the stairs, Maximilian yanked Anne up against him and lowered his  
head to kiss her  
with a ferociousness that left her breathless and taut with desire.

"Someone will see us," she managed, tangling her fingers in his black hair.

"I don't care."

"I do."

He lifted his head again, gazing down at her with glittering gray eyes. "Because you don't want to be  
forced into marriage?"  
he breathed.

"Max—"

Grabbing her hand, he pushed through the kitchen door. A dozen servants froze in various stages of  
meal preparation.

"Ignore us," he commanded. Heads lowered at once.

"Maximilian," she repeated, half wishing she'd kept quiet so he might have continued kissing her in the  
hallway,

"what happens now?"

"Wait here a moment."

To her surprise he left her and went scouring about the kitchen, apparently looking for a snack. At the



far end of the room  
he seemed to find what he was after, because with a murmured word to one of the cooks, he wrapped something large in  
a napkin and returned to Anne.

"You know your Greek mythology, I presume?" he asked, holding out his hand.

"Yes," she answered, dividing her attention between his intent face and the item resting on his palm, "though I don't see the relevance between golden—halved—apples and this situation."

A slow smile touched his mouth. "Wrong myth. Open it."

Her heart unexpectedly thudding, Anne pulled back the napkin. "A pomegranate," she said. *A pomegranate.*

Maximilian cleared his throat. "As you may recall, the lovely Persephone found herself torn between her lover, Hades, in the world below, and her mother, Demeter, in the world above, until they devised a way for her to have both."

Abruptly Anne couldn't breathe. "You would leave Yorkshire?" she asked, her voice breaking.

"That, my love, is up to you."

A tear ran down her cheek. "You called me your love," she managed.

"That is because I love you."

"Oh my, oh my," she whispered. She could have everything, now. She could have Maximilian Robert Trent. He would be hers, forever. Fingers shaking, she removed six pomegranate seeds, one after the other. "Six months in Yorkshire, and six months in London," she said.

"And you with me, Anne. Say you'll marry me."

She took the red fruit from his hand and set it aside, then flung her arms around his shoulders. "I will. Yes, I will marry you," she said, laughing and crying at the same time. "I love you so much."

He kissed her, lifting her in his arms and swinging her around and around. "Thank God," he murmured, over and over again.

Anne couldn't stop kissing him. Three weeks ago she would never have thought that she would agree to marry a sheep farmer, much less that she would want to do so. He would have to stay in town a few more days now, because she didn't think she could stand letting him leave without her. And if he obtained a special license quickly, they could be in Yorkshire by spring, and she would be able to see the daffodils bloom.

"Happy St. Valentine's Day," she whispered, hugging him tightly.

She felt him smile. "Happy St. Valentine's Day."