

The Best Of Both Worlds

Suzanne Enoch

For my uncle, Beal Whitlock,
whose laugh I will miss.

And for my aunt, Kathleen,
to whom I send a basketful
of hugs and kisses.

Chapter 1

. . . but enough talk of Lady Neeley's ill-fated fete. As difficult as it is for much of the ton to believe, there are other subjects worthy of gossip . . . most notably, London's bluest-eyed earl, Lord Matson.

Although not intended for the title (his elder brother died tragically last year), Lord Matson does not seem to be having difficulty assuming the mantle of man-about-town. Since arriving in London earlier this Season, he has been seen with a different eligible female on his arm each day.

And at night, with ladies who would not be considered eligible at all!

LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS, 31 MAY 1816

"But we weren't invited," Charlotte Birling said.

Her mother, seated behind the morning room's oak writing desk, looked up from the new *Whistledown* column. "That doesn't signify, because we wouldn't have attended, anyway. And thank goodness for that. Imagine us standing about chatting, and having Easterly walk in. Infamous."

"Sophia didn't have to imagine it. *She* was invited." Charlotte glanced at the mantel clock. Nearly ten. With a quickening heartbeat, she set aside her embroidery. She needed to get to the window without her mother making note of it.

"Yes. Poor Sophia." Baroness Birling tsked. "Twelve years of trying to forget that man, and just as her life begins to recover, he reappears. Your cousin must have been mortified."

Charlotte wasn't so sure about that, but she made an assenting sound, anyway. The clock's ornate minute hand jerked forward. *What if the clock was slow?* She hadn't considered that. *Or what if he was early?* Unable to help it, she bounced to her feet.

"Tea, Mama?" she blurted, nearly tripping over her cat. Beethoven rolled out of the way, batting his paws at the hem of her gown.

"Hm? No, thank you, dear." "Well, I'll just have some."

Her gaze out the front window, she splashed tea into a cup. The street in front of Birling House boasted a few stray leaves, fooled by the cold weather into thinking it still winter, but nothing else moved. Not even a vendor or a carriage on the way to Hyde Park. Above the sound of paper rustling at the writing desk, the clock ticked again. Charlotte took a sip of tea, barely noting both that it was too hot and that she'd forgotten to add sugar.

And then, she forgot to breathe. Heralded by a jingle of reins, a black horse turned up the lane from High Street. The world, the clock, the clapping of hooves, the beat of her heart seemed to slow as she gazed at the rider.

Hair the color of rich amber played a little in the soft morning breeze. The dark blue beaver hat shadowed his eyes, but she knew they were a faded cobalt, like a lake on an overcast day. His jacket matched the color of his hat, while his close-fitting dun trousers and his polished Hessian boots said as clearly as any gold-embossed calling card that he was a gentleman. His mouth was set in a straight line, relaxed but somber, and she wondered what he might be thinking.

"—lotte? Charlotte! What in the world are you gaping at?"

She jumped, spinning away from the window, but it was already too late. Her mother nudged her sideways, leaning forward to peer through the window at the passing rider.

"Nothing, Mama," Charlotte said, taking another swallow of tea and nearly gagging at the bitter flavor. "I was just think—"

"Lord Matson," the baroness stated, reaching over to yank the curtains closed. "You were staring at Lord Matson. For heaven's sake, Charlotte, what if he'd looked over and seen you?"

Humph. She'd been looking out the window at him for the past five days, and he hadn't turned his head in her direction once. Xavier, Earl Matson. For all he knew, she didn't even exist. "I'm permitted to look out my own front window, Mama," she said, stifling a sigh as the Arabian and its magnificent rider vanished behind green velvet draperies. "If he saw me, I hope he would assume that I was looking out at our fine roses, which I was."

"Ah. And you regularly blush at the sight of roses, then?" Baroness Birling resumed her seat at the desk.

"Put that scoundrel out of your mind. You have the Hargreaves' Ball this evening to prepare for."

"It's ten o'clock in the morning, Mama," Charlotte protested. "Putting on a gown and pinning up my hair doesn't take ten hours. It barely takes two."

"I don't mean physical preparations. I'm referring to mental preparations. Don't forget, you'll be dancing with Lord Herbert."

"Oh, bother. The only preparation I'll need for that is a nap."

She hadn't realized she'd spoken aloud until the baroness swept to her feet again. "Obviously, daughter, you have forgotten the efforts to which your father went in seeking out Lord Herbert Beetly and ascertaining his interest in finding a wife."

"Mama, I didn't—"

"If you require a nap in order to behave in an appropriate manner, then go take one at once." Scowling, the baroness crumpled the *Whistledown* column. "And have a care with that tongue of yours, lest you end up in here as well."

"I never do anything, so I don't see how that could possibly happen."

"Ha. Sophia's only error was in marrying Easterly twelve years ago. And even after not seeing him in all that time, even after living an impeccable life for over a decade, the moment he reappears, *her* name becomes associated with scandal again. Whatever you may think of Lord Herbert, *he* will not cause a scandal. You can hardly say the same for that man you were gawking at. Lord Matson has been in Town for less than three weeks, and he's managed to be noticed by *Whistledown*."

"I wasn't gawk—" Charlotte snapped her mouth closed. At nineteen, she knew all the steps and turns of her mother's tirades. Interfering now would only make things worse. "I'll be in my room, then, napping," she said stiffly, and left.

Besides, in all honesty, she *had* been gawking at Lord Matson. She didn't see the harm in it. The earl was exceedingly handsome, and gaping at him through a window or passing by him on the way to the refreshment table was the closest she was likely to get. Dashing, unmarried war heroes certainly weren't allowed on the Birling premises. Heavens, one might wink at her and cause a scandal.

It wasn't as if she wanted or expected to marry him, or something. Even without her parents' obsession with respectability and propriety, she knew better than that. The handsome, daring men were for dancing and flirting. Marrying a man who always had an eye toward his next conquest—that seemed a sure path to misery.

But he hadn't flirted with her or asked her to dance. Charlotte sighed as she reached her bedchamber, Beethoven on her heels. It would never happen. She could tell herself that her parents would warn off any male with a single blot on his reputation, and so they would, but she wasn't likely to attract any such man's notice, anyway.

Considering she'd only risen two hours earlier, napping didn't hold much appeal, though Beethoven had already curled up on her pillow and was snoring softly. Instead she retrieved the book she'd been reading and sank into the comfortable chair beneath the window. Ordinarily she would have pushed open the glass, but since summer refused to appear and the sky had already begun throwing down yet another

drizzle, she pulled a knitted throw over her legs and settled in.

This was how she prepared for her encounters with Lord Herbert Beetly—by pretending to be somewhere else. In her favorite novels princes and knights thrived, and even third sons of minor marquises were either heroic or villainous. And no one in the faerie realms could be said to be dull.

Charlottelifted her head, gazing at her faint reflection in the rain-streaked window. Heavens, what if that described her, as well? Was she dull? Was that why her father had chosen Lord Herbert as her perfect match? Narrowing her eyes, she intensified her scrutiny.

She wasn't a ravishing beauty, of course; even without the occasional muttered commentary disparaging her height and her less than bountiful bosom, she'd seen herself often enough in the dressing mirror to know. She did like her smile, and her brunette hair with its tint of red. Brown eyes, but she did have two of them, and they were set at the appropriate distance from her nose. No, it wasn't her appearance. It was the way she always felt like a duck, quacking among elegant swans.

So she enjoyed gawking at Xavier, Lord Matson while he rode to his daily boxing appointment at Gentleman Jackson's. And in all fairness she wasn't the only one who liked to look at him—and at least she didn't doodle his name linked with hers at parties, as she'd seen other girls do. She knew better. But it was still nice to daydream, once in a while.

As the hall clock signaled nine in the evening, Xavier, Earl Matson shrugged out of his greatcoat and handed the sopping wet thing over to the care of one of the Hargreaves' footmen. He took his place in the line of nobility awaiting introduction into the main ballroom, welcoming the rush of warm, if highly perfumed, air coming from inside, which didn't quite cover the faint musty smell. He imagined that in a very short time he would find it stifling. The event itself closed off his breathing, made him want to yank off his cravat and flee back into the cool, dark evening.

It still amazed him that an event so closely packed could feel so... isolating. He much preferred an intimate game of cards at some club or other, or even a night at the theater, where at least there was something to focus on besides the gossiping mass of humanity—especially when a large share of them seemed to be focused on him.

Yes, he was newly arrived in Town, and yes, he had a sizeable fortune to his name. But for God's sake, he'd spent the last year at Farley, the family estate—his estate—in Devon, and after twelve damned months of paper-shuffling and mourning clothes, whose damned business was it but his own if he cared to spend a few quid wagering and enjoying a good glass of port? And an actress or two? And an accommodating young widow of uncertain reputation, but well equipped with a seductive smile and lovely long legs?

Places like the Hargreaves' Ball, however, were where eligible, marriage-minded young females came to show off their plumage, and tonight he was hunting more respectable prey. So he handed the butler his invitation and strolled into the main room as his name and title were announced in a stentorian bellow.

"Matson," another voice boomed off to his left, and Xavier turned as Viscount Halloren strode up to grab his hand and pump it vigorously. "Came for the show, have you? Looks as though everyone has."

"The show?" Xavier repeated, though he had a good idea what Halloren was talking about. Apparently everyone read *Whistledown*.

"That Neeley bracelet debacle. Seems all the suspects have put in an appearance."

Xavier didn't much care about the missing bracelet, but at least the mystery columnist had something to discuss besides his social calendar. He nodded. "It looks as though everyone in London's put in an appearance."

"Ha. Have to be seen at the Hargreaves' Grand Ball, don't you know. And I told you, this is the place to begin if you're looking for a likely chit to marry. More lively crowd than Almack's, and that's for damned certain." The viscount leaned closer. "Just a word of advice. Don't drink the sherry. And get to the port early."

"My thanks." When Halloren seemed ready to begin a dissertation on alcoholic beverages, Xavier excused himself.

◇ He'd never been to a Hargreaves' Grand Ball before, but the decorations seemed so sparse as to be nonexistent, and it didn't take a mathematician to see that there weren't enough chairs for everyone by half. Apparently this was expected, however, because the majority of the guests avoided the drinks and snacks, and instead stood in clusters discussing who might have stolen Lady Neeley's infamous bracelet. He'd apparently landed in the gossip capital of London. Grateful as he was that he wasn't the topic of conversation, it was just a damned bracelet, for God's sake.

"Mother, just because Lady Neeley decided to accuse Lord Easterly doesn't mean we have to join the flock," a female voice to one side of him said.

"Hush, Charlotte. She's only saying what everyone is already thinking."

"Not everyone," the voice returned. "For goodness' sake, it's just a blasted bracelet. Ignorance about its whereabouts hardly seems to balance out against ruining a man's reputation."

Xavier turned his head. It was impossible to figure out which chit had spoken, since a hundred of them in various ages, sizes, and dress colors seemed to be wedged into a solid slice of feminine charms. He wasn't the only one interested in navigating it, however. A ripple inside the wedge opened to reveal a tall, brown-haired gentleman—Lord Roxbury, if his memory served him.

He took a lady's hand, bowing over it and cooing something that made her flutter, then went on to the next, a tall, thin female with dark hair.

"Good evening, Miss Charlotte," Roxbury drawled, kissing her hand.

"And to you, Lord Roxbury." She smiled at the baron.

That was the voice which had caught his attention. The smile she gave the baron was a little crooked, not poised and perfect and practiced for hours in front of a mirror. Genuine, in a sea of *faux* humor and humility. *Charlotte*. With an impatient breath, Xavier waited until a chuckling Roxbury moved away, and then stepped in before the chits closed ranks again.

"Charlotte, I've told you not to encourage such scoundrels," the older woman beside her hissed. She took the young lady's hand and rubbed at it with the corner of her matronly shawl.

"He didn't leave a mark, Mama," Charlotte replied, her brown eyes dancing. "And he's kissing

everyone's hand, for heaven's sake."

"That is his error; you don't need to encourage it. Just be thankful Lord Herbert didn't see you showing favor to another gentleman."

"As if he would no—" She looked up, brown eyes meeting Xavier's. The color drained from her face, and her mouth formed a soft O before it clamped shut again.

Something grabbed his insides and wrenched him forward another step. Oddly enough, the sensation wasn't at all unpleasant. "Good evening," he said.

"Good . . . hello," she returned, offering a curtsy. "Lord Matson."

"You have me at a disadvantage," he said quietly, noting that the mother had stiffened into a fair imitation of a board. "You know my name, but I don't know yours."

"Charlotte," she gulped, then with a breath squared her shoulders. "Charlotte Birling. My lord, this is my mother, the baroness Lady Birling."

The name didn't sound the least bit familiar, but then he'd only been in London a few short weeks. "My lady," he said, reaching out to grip the woman's fingers.

"My . . . my lord."

He released her before she could have an apoplexy, turning his attention back to Charlotte. "Miss Charlotte," he said, taking her hand in turn and repeating the manner in which Roxbury had addressed her. Her fingers through her thin lace gloves felt warm, and despite her initial stammering, both her gaze and her grip remained steady. Abruptly he didn't want to release her.

"I'm surprised to see you here tonight." With a sideways glance at her mother she twitched her fingers free.

"And why is that?"

The smile touched her mouth again. "Warm lemonade, watered-down liquor, stale cake, and a barely audible orchestra with no dancing."

Xavier lifted an eyebrow. "It sounds as though no one should be here." With a glance of his own at her white-faced mother, he leaned closer. "So what is the attraction?" he asked in a lower voice. *Besides this unexpected female, of course.*

"Gossip, and morbid curiosity," she answered promptly.

"I've heard the gossip, but explain the rest, if you please."

"Oh, it's simple. Lady Hargreaves is at least a hundred years old, and she has seventy or eighty grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She refuses to choose an heir, so everyone comes by to see who the latest favorite might be."

Realizing something he'd never expected of the evening—that he was enjoying himself—Xavier chuckled. "And who is the current front-runner?"

"Well, it's fairly early in the even—"

"Charlotte, you were going to escort me to the refreshment table," the baroness broke in, stepping between the two of them.

Xavier blinked. He'd all but forgotten anyone else was there—and given the crowd and the noise and his usual fairly keen sense of self-preservation, that was highly unusual. Paying attention to a proper chit was a good way to either get gossiped about, or worse, entangled—and it was far too early in his selection process for that. "Good evening, then."

"It was nice to meet you, my l—"

"Oh, there's your father," Lady Birling interrupted again, grabbing her daughter's arm.

He looked after them for a moment as they made their way through the crush. She'd known who he was, and while that wasn't all that surprising considering the attention the *Whistledown* columns had been paying him, it bothered him that he'd spent nearly a month in London and she'd never caught his eye. Certainly she wasn't a classical beauty, but he would definitely set her on the pretty side of plain. In addition, her smile and her gaze had been . . . compelling.

"There you are, Xavier," a female voice cooed at him, and a slender hand wrapped around his arm.

"Lady Ibsen," he returned, checking his flying thoughts.

"Mm. It was *Jeanette* last night," she breathed, pressing her bosom against him.

"That was in private."

"Ah, I see. And this evening you're otherwise occupied. Well, I've been keeping an eye out, myself. I have several prospective brides in mind for you. Come along."

He gazed down at her oval, upturned face and into her dark eyes, which bespoke her Spanish ancestry. "Brides who wouldn't mind if their husband continued his philandering with a particular female of questionable reputation, I assume?"

She smiled just enough to hint of private seductions. "Of course."

With a breath he gestured her to lead the way. As they pushed into the crowd, however, he couldn't resist a last look over his shoulder at a tall chit with warm fingers and a crooked smile.

And finally, in more sedate news, Lord Herbert Beetly was seen earlier this week, shopping for a brown hat to match his brown coat and brown trousers, which, to be sure, all match his brown hair and brown eyes.

Which begs the question—*Were Lord Herbert to patronize a restaurant, would he choose brown chocolate cake? This Author somehow thinks not. Brownd potatoes seem much more to his taste.*

LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS, 31 MAY 1818

"We would have thought your cousin's error with Lord Easterly would have been lesson enough for you, Charlotte. Charlotte?"

Charlotte looked up from her plate of marmalade-covered toast, dismayed to realize that she hadn't heard a word her father had spoken. "Yes, Papa," she returned anyway, deciding that would be a safe response.

"Well, obviously it wasn't. Your mother told me that you not only spoke with Lord Matson, but that you encouraged his conversation."

"I was merely being polite," she countered, doing her best to keep her attention on the conversation and not drift back into an Xavier Matson-colored daydream.

◇ "There is a point at which politeness must give way to responsibility," the baron stated. "Thanks to your cousin's error in judgment, this family is once more in a precarious position. Another scandal could—"

"Papa, Sophia married Easterly twelve years ago. I was seven, for heaven's sake. And I fail to see what was so scandalous about it, anyway."

Lord Birling lowered his eyebrows. "As you say, you were seven. You didn't witness the uproar when Easterly simply left England and abandoned Sophia. I did. And no one in this household will ever be the cause of such a stir. Is that clear?"

"Yes, it's clear. Perfectly clear. And don't worry, Papa. I'm certain Lord Matson will never have cause to speak to me again." Especially not after the way her mother had practically gone into hysterics at the sight of him. Charlotte sighed. First the miracle, that he'd looked at her, and spoken with her, then its destruction—if he even thought about her ever again it would be in gratitude that he'd escaped.

"I'm just thankful that Lord Herbert hadn't yet arrived to witness you talking with another man," the baroness contributed from across the table.

This time Charlotte frowned. "So now I'm not allowed to speak with anyone?"

"You know very well what I mean. We're not being cruel, dear, and I hope you realize that. We are doing our utmost to provide you with the best future possible, and I don't think it unreasonable to hope and expect that you will do nothing to actively sabotage what is in your own best interest."

She hated when her parents were right—especially when her best possible future reached as low as Lord Herbert Beetly. "Of course," she said, reaching across to pat her mother's hand. "It's just that excitement seems terribly rare in my life, and when it's so handsome, it's sometimes difficult to ignore."

"Hm." Her father gave a brief smile. "Do try."

"I will."

At that moment, as if the morning had been waiting in the hallway for its cue, the butler opened the breakfast room door.

"My lord, my lady, Miss Charlotte, Lord Herbert Beetly."

Charlotte stifled a sigh, rising from the table as her parents did to greet their guest. "My lord," she said, curtsying, and wishing for one second that despite her promise to ignore excitement it could be someone dashing like Lord Roxbury or Lord Matson coming to call.

Herbert's dullness wasn't his fault, she supposed; his entire family seemed to suffer from a singular lack of wit and imagination. As he finished greeting her parents and approached her, she had to admit that he was pleasant in appearance—he did dress well. And if his gaze was a little ... vapid, his countenance was handsome.

"Miss Charlotte," he said, bowing over her sticky marmalade fingers, "your shopping escort has arrived."

He also tended to state the obvious. "So I see. If you'll give me a moment, we can be off."

"My pleasure."

As she excused herself and hurried upstairs for her bonnet and gloves, she heard her father inquire whether Herbert had eaten already or not. Of course he had; this morning he would have shaved, dressed, eaten, and picked out the exact appropriate carriage for their venture because, well, that was what one did before calling on someone.

"Oh, be quiet, Charlotte," she told herself as she collected her things and returned downstairs. "Your life is just as orderly."

With her maid, Alice, accompanying them, she and Herbert rode to Bond Street in his coach. She would have preferred a curricule so she could look about more freely, but since it was drizzling yet again, the closed coach made more sense.

"I hope you don't mind the coach," Herbert said as they disembarked, "but with the rain I didn't think the curricule appropriate."

Good God, they were even thinking alike. Fighting a swell of panic, Charlotte forced a smile and hurried through the door of the closest shop. She was as dull as Herbert. Did her friends, who always had exciting tales to tell even if she didn't quite believe all of them, think her as vapid as she thought him?

Trying to outrun her own dullness, she didn't see the clothing mannequin until she bumped into it. Before she could grab it, the heavy, metal-ribbed behemoth tipped away from her, thumping into the arms of the nearest shopper. "Oh! I'm so sorry! I wasn't looking where . . . Lord Matson."

With a twist of his lips the earl effortlessly shoved the thing upright again. "Charlotte Birling."

Faded cobalt eyes took her in from head to toe, and she wished that she'd elected to wear something less goose-necked despite the weather. For goodness' sake, she looked like a dowdy old spinster. "I apologize, my lord."

"You've already done that. What—"

"Charlotte," Herbert's voice, tight and high-pitched, came from behind her, "why in the world did you come in here? It's not at all proper."

Tearing her gaze from the gray-and-black-clothed rake standing before her, she looked around. And scowled. *Blast it*. In as much of a hurry as she'd been to flee from her own thoughts, she might have chosen somewhere more appropriate than a men's tailor shop. "Drat," she muttered.

"Are you trying to escape that fellow?" the earl murmured, tilting his head to study her expression.

"No, just myself," she returned, then flushed. *What in the world was wrong with her?* To say such a private thing to anyone, much less a near, if handsome, stranger, was completely unlike her.

Something flashed in his eyes, but it was gone before she could begin to guess what it might be. To her surprise, though, he pulled a card case from his pocket and slipped it into her fingers.

"No," he continued in a normal tone, "I wouldn't have known it was missing until I returned home. Thank you, Miss Charlotte. It belonged to my grandfather, you know. And out in the rain, it would have been ruined."

He held out his hand, and she numbly set the case back into his palm. "I'm only glad I noticed you drop it, my lord." She curtsied, struggling to keep her voice steady when she wanted to sing that this was the nicest thing anyone had ever done for her. "If you'll excuse me, then." Charlotte would have left, but with Herbert crowding up behind her, the only way out would have been to knock over the mannequin again. Gesturing at the man practically climbing her shoulder, she hid her nervous frustration with a smile. "Lord Matson, may I present Lord Herbert Beetly? Herbert, this is Xavier, Lord Matson."

To his credit, Herbert leaned around her to offer his hand. "My lord."

Matson returned the grip. "Beetly."

A clerk emerged from the rear of the shop. "Are you certain there's nothing else I can do for you, my lord?" he asked hopefully, placing a wrapped bundle on the counter.

The earl kept his attention on Herbert. "No, thank you. You'll send me the bill?"

"Of course, my lord." The clerk finally looked in Charlotte's direction. "May I assist you?" he asked, managing to sound officious and look dubious all at the same time.

Hm. She may not have intended to do it, but she could enter a men's shop if she wished. What if she'd been there looking for a gift for her father or something? Still, if Herbert reported to her parents that she'd spoken again with Lord Matson, she'd be in quite enough trouble without adding anything else into the mix. "No thank you," she replied. "We were just leaving."

Matson picked up the bundle and tucked it under his arm. "So was I," he said, gesturing for Charlotte and Herbert to precede him out to the street.

Goodness. Half hoping that the earl meant to accompany them on their shopping excursion, Charlotte stopped beneath the nearest overhanging eave. Reality had certainly gone astray in the last twenty-four hours. After she'd nearly knocked him down in the tailor's, her heart had begun pounding so hard that she thought even the clerk must have heard it.

Since last night her thoughts had lingered on the humor in Lord Matson's eyes and on his cool, confident manner, which didn't care what anyone else might think. Since she'd been seven and her family had decided that Sophia's troubles meant their disgrace, she'd wished she could be cool and uncaring about other people's opinions.

"Thank you again, Miss Charlotte," the earl drawled. Taking her hand, he stroked her fingertips with his thumb and then released her again. "Beetly."

"Matson."

She watched the earl down the street until he vanished into a pastry shop. A moment later she realized that Lord Herbert stood halfway in the rain, water dripping down the brim of his hat, glaring at her. Charlotte cleared her throat. "I need a pair of silver hair ribbons," she offered, and marched across the street without checking to see whether he followed.

Xavier stood in the pastry shop window, watching as Charlotte Birling entered a milliner's, her escort and her maid following. So the chit with the fine eyes did have a beau. Last night he'd thought her mother had invented one in order to escape his conversation.

He'd liked holding her fingers; in the past day he'd reflected on the feel of her warm hand in his several times. Touching her seemed the best damned idea he'd had in weeks.

He had felt physically attracted to females before, so the sensation wasn't that unusual. The odd thing about his surprising interest in Miss Charlotte Birling was his obsession with her mouth. As soon as he'd seen her smile he'd thought of kissing her soft lips, of saying and doing things to please her so he could see her genuine, crooked smile.

It should have been amusing, except that as he watched Lord Herbert Beetly shadowing her, he wasn't amused. He was used to assessing the character of enemies and supposed friends in a heartbeat, and she seemed to be someone trying very hard to be quiet and demure and finding it a difficult prospect. For reasons few people would understand, he could sympathize.

Another pair of females hurried past the window, their flimsy parasols bucking in the stiff breeze. Lady Mary Winter and her mother, Lady Winter. The younger Winter had made it onto his list of potential prospective spouses, though in truth he'd spent more time scratching names on and off of it than actually looking into a union. He knew marriage made sense; he was Earl Matson now, and an earl needed heirs. If his own family was any example, he would need two. Then the first one could die of pneumonia, and the second could abandon his military career and rush home to take his brother's place as though that had been the plan all along.

"Sir? Is there something you wish to purchase?"

Xavier jumped, reluctantly turning from the window to the pastry clerk eyeing him from behind the food-laden counter. Since he was using the man's view, he supposed he should pay for the privilege. He approached, pointing at a likely pile of tea cakes. "A dozen of those," he said, dumping a few coins onto the counter.

"Very good, sir."

Having paid his window fee, he returned to the view while the clerk wrapped up his purchase. Charlotte and her small entourage were still inside the milliner's, Beety no doubt making perfectly staid fashion suggestions and Charlotte politely ignoring every one of them. It amused him that he'd decided he could read her character well enough to deduce the points of her conversation. He wondered what she would select, and whether she would wear it out of the shop.

Now that he'd begun his imaginings, though, his mind wasn't content with guessing the color of her hat or her hair ribbons. He was seeing her removing them, her expressive brown eyes watching him as he watched her undress, her skin warm and radiant in dim candlelight. And he was hearing her soft moans and cries of ecstasy as he taught her a few things that a tall, propriety-minded chit who thought Lord Herbert her best prospect wouldn't know.

Xavier swallowed. *Jesus*. He collected his tea cakes and strode back out into the rain. On the alley corner a small group of urchins huddled against a wall, their usual enthusiasm for begging and picking pockets dampened by the weather. Giving a short whistle to get their attention, he tossed them the package of pastries.

Obviously he needed to go home and look over his marriage plans in a more serious light. Sympathizing with an absurdly straitlaced chit who was completely opposite his usual taste was one thing, but this was rapidly beginning to feel like an obsession. And that was extremely troubling.

"I thought we were here for hair ribbons," Herbert said, his face folding into an impatient frown.

Charlotte looked up from the rack of paste jewel necklaces sitting in the corner of the shop. "We are. I was just looking. Don't you think some of these are pretty?"

In particular, she kept fingering the necklace with an intricate silver chain and a dewdrop-shaped emerald in a delicate silver setting. It was only worth a few shillings, and the length was too long to wear with anything she owned, but she liked it.

"It's worthless," Lord Herbert returned. "And a bit tawdry, don't you think? Whatever would you do with it?"

"Mm," a female voice cooed from the doorway. "Tawdry is the point."

Charlotte leaned around a hat stand to see who had spoken. Dark eyes in a face pale and smooth as porcelain gazed back at her. "Lady Ibsen," she said, inwardly cringing.

Speaking with Lord Matson twice in two days would get her in enough trouble. Conversing with Jeanette Alvin, Lady Ibsen, would likely get her locked in her room for a week. The young wife of the late Marquis of Ibsen had once been respectable, Charlotte was sure, but since her husband's death she'd become known for holding wild parties and for keeping company with any number of gentlemen, both single and married. Her latest, according to rumor, was none other than Lord Matson.

"Miss Charlotte," the marchioness replied, shaking water droplets off her shawl and handing her parasol to her maid. Herbert's face had reddened the moment Jeanette had appeared behind them. "My lady," he blurted, tugging at his cravat.

◇ So even proper gentlemen couldn't quite control themselves in Lady Ibsen's presence. Hm. Herbert never blushed around *her*. It didn't help that on several occasions Charlotte had wished to have the marchioness's reputation—and her popularity with handsome young men.

"Why is tawdry the point?" she asked, mainly because she felt contrary. Lady Ibsen glided to the rack of necklaces and lifted one in long, delicate fingers. "It draws one's eye," she said, lifting a *faux* ruby bauble so that it caught the lantern light.

"So would any real gems," Charlotte returned.

"Ah, yes, but it isn't merely the sparkle." She fastened the clasp behind her neck and drew her hand down the length of the chain. The ruby hung squarely between her breasts, glinting. "It's also the length."

"Oh, my," Lord Herbert whispered, and for a moment Charlotte was concerned he might faint.

With a low chuckle, Lady Ibsen returned the necklace to the rack. "And see how effective," she murmured, flicking the ruby to send it into a slow, glittering spin.

Charlotte couldn't help a smile. "I see."

She went back to the hair ribbons as Lady Ibsen purchased a surprisingly tasteful blue hat and swept out of the shop. Herbert made quiet clucking sounds of disapproval the entire time, but neither did he remove his gaze from the marchioness's petite, buxom figure.

With a sigh she brought her ribbons to the counter. When Herbert sidled to the window to gaze after the departing Jeanette, Charlotte swiftly leaned over and snatched the emerald necklace. Indicating with a lifted eyebrow that she wished to include it as part of her purchase, she dropped it into her pelisse pocket.

Nodding, the clerk put the ribbons into a small box and handed it over. "Eight shillings, my lady," she said, amusement in her voice.

Charlotte paid for and collected her package, handing it over to Alice. As they left the shop, Herbert sent a frown back in the clerk's direction.

"I say, I don't think you should patronize that shop any longer. Eight shillings for two ribbons is scandalous."

They returned to his coach, and Charlotte couldn't help looking over her shoulder for any sign of Lord Matson. "Scandalous," she repeated softly, fingering the necklace in her pocket.

Gossip seems to tell that the splendidly wicked Lord Matson might be looking for a wife, but it is difficult to credit these rumors. After all, what marriage-minded man would turn to Lady Ibsen for advice?

LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS, 3 JUNE 1816

Viscount Halloren was late. Xavier checked his pocket watch for the third time, then sank back into the edition of *The London Times* he'd supposedly been reading for the past forty minutes.

At half past noon, White's club was crowded. Understandable, then, that the head waiter didn't look overly pleased at holding a table for only a single occupant who'd requested one glass of port and refused to order luncheon.

Xavier, however, wasn't in an accommodating mood, and he wasn't going to budge until he'd had a chat with William Ford, Lord Halloren. He and William were distant cousins, and although he'd only met the viscount once before his current venture into London, his relation was proving a valuable source of information—particularly since the damned *Whistledown* column seemed obsessed now with the theft of Lady Neeley's bracelet, and was giving minimal space to the parade of eligible females prancing about Town this Season.

And he needed to find a bride. Quickly. This hunting about, clueless, was making him insane. So much so that for the past two nights he'd dreamed of a tall, dark-haired chit with fascinating eyes and an apparently very capable mouth.

"Matson."

Finally. He looked up from the paper, gesturing for his cousin to take a seat. "Halloren. Glad you decided to join me."

"I almost didn't. With this damned muck of weather we're having, nobody's walking anywhere. I swear I've never seen such a crowd of coaches on the streets in my life."

"So this isn't usual?"

"Good God, no. When's the last time you were in London?"

He actually had to think about it. "Six years ago, I believe. Right before I left for Spain."

"Six years in the army. No wonder you're so set on finding a female now that you're back."

"Five years in the army," Xavier corrected. "One year back at home trying to figure out how to be a landowner."

Halloren nodded, his gaze surprisingly sympathetic. "Knew your brother. I don't think Anthony ever let me pay for a meal."

Hm. If that was a hint, he would accept it. He'd invited the viscount for an interrogation, anyway. He might as well feed the man.

They placed their order, and Xavier saw to it that Halloren had a brimming glass of port. It had occurred to him this morning that asking a confirmed bachelor about a list of prospective brides seemed a bit odd, but the viscount remained his best source so far.

"Why is it that you're unmarried?" he asked anyway, deciding that if the answer was too unsettling, he'd skirt the subject and muck on by himself.

Halloren guffawed. "I'm not married because I have no fortune and because, well, look at me. I'm the size of an ox. Frightens off the young chits, I think."

Xavier chuckled. "But you've kept an eye out for a possible wife, anyway."

"Of course. Marrying a chit with money is my only hope." He tilted his glass back, draining half its contents. "Unlike you, you lucky bastard."

Xavier fiddled with his own glass. "It's not luck," he returned. "Not good luck, anyway. I would rather have had my brother than his title and money."

"I meant your hideous appearance, actually. You ain't exactly been lonely since you came into Town."

Yes, apparently everyone knew about himself and Lady Ibsen, again thanks to that damned gossip column. "A fellow does what he must," he said. "But that brings me to my point. I've met. . . several young ladies, and I thought you might give me a more circumspect opinion of them than I've been able to form on my own."

Halloren burst into laughter, attracting the attention of the diners at several neighboring tables. "Oh, I wish I kept a journal," he snorted. "*You asking me* for advice on women."

"Not advice," Xavier countered, frowning. "An opinion. You know more about their family backgrounds than I do, and I want to do this right."

Do it right. That particular thought had haunted him from the moment he'd walked through the door of Farley and realized that it had all just become his responsibility—the house, the land, the tenants, the crops, and the title and its future.

"All right, all right. Who's your first prospect, then?" The name on his lips wasn't that of anyone from his list, and he clenched his jaw against it. For God's sake. "Melinda Edwards," he said instead.

"Ah, she's a diamond, ain't she?" The viscount sighed. "Barely looked once at me. Her family's good enough; her granddad's the Duke of Kenfeld, you know. Her brother's got a weakness for fast horses, but nothing you can't afford, I'd wager. Ha ha. Wager."

"Very amusing. What about Miss Rachel Bakery?"

"You have an eye toward the pretty ones, don't you?"

"I'm exploring all my prospects."

"Well, that one's got her cap set at Lord Foxton." Halloren gazed at him for a moment. "You could probably change her mind."

They went on for another twenty minutes, and without exception he'd apparently picked a set of well-bred, beautiful, amiable females, any one of whom would love to or could easily be persuaded to become the Countess Matson. And he still wanted to ask about Charlotte Birling. It was nothing serious, of course, just curiosity, so what was the harm? She was an unmarried female, and dumped in with the other chits on his list, hardly conspicuous. Xavier took a breath—and a drink of port. "Charlotte Birling?"

"Who?"

"Birling. Charlotte Birling. Lord and Lady Birling's daughter."

"Oh, yes, yes, yes. Tall chit, doesn't say much." Halloren lifted an eyebrow. "Really, Matson?"

Xavier shrugged, doing his best to look uncaring and slightly bored. "Just curious."

"Well, don't bother. She's first cousin to Lady Sophia Throckmorton. You know, the chit who married Easterly twelve or so years ago. He did something dastardly—don't remember what—and left the country. Terrible scandal." The viscount leaned forward. "And the Birlings ain't going to let any such thing happen to their daughter. They're probably glad she ain't a great beauty, because that way she don't attract all the rakes. They'll marry her off to some safe old dullard before long. Anything to avoid another scandal. With Easterly suspected in that Neeley bracelet fiasco now, they're all aflutter, no doubt." He chuckled again. "So it's not as though they'd let the likes of you anywhere near her."

"Beg pardon?"

"Come on, lad. Everybody knows you've got Lady Ibsen smiling. And that's no easy feat."

With a lifted eyebrow, Xavier dug into his plate of baked ham. He wasn't disposed to comment, no matter whose private relations were being discussed. Besides, a few things about Charlotte Birling abruptly made a great deal of sense. No wonder her mother had seemed so skittish when he'd approached them.

He should have been relieved. Though he disagreed with Halloren's appraisal of her looks, she wasn't his usual sort of petite, buxom prey. And with her parents' hysteria over scandal, no wonder the rest of the men could take a glance, call her less than stunning, and dismiss her as too much trouble. But he wasn't relieved. Not a bit. Her beauty lay deeper than most, but he'd seen it. And somehow the knowledge that she was unattainable made her even more desirable. Yes, he wanted her, wanted to touch her warm skin and wanted to know what she would be like with her concern over propriety removed—along with her conservative gown and proper bonnet and overly-tight hairpins.

"So you've narrowed it down to a half dozen, then?" Halloren was saying.

Xavier shook himself. "Yes."

"Good choices, I have to say," his cousin agreed. "Difficult thing will be to decide on just one."

"No doubt." Except that he had apparently narrowed it down to just one already—and he had no idea how he might win her.

Taking a long swallow of port, he motioned for a refill. He had the abrupt urge to become very, very drunk. Jesus. It was laughable, except that he wasn't laughing.

"Oh, do come with me," Melinda Edwards cajoled the next morning, tugging on Charlotte's hands to pull her toward the door. "It's not raining, and I'll just perish if I don't take a breath of fresh air."

Although she felt the same way, Charlotte hesitated. Her mother had allowed her to visit Melinda, but she'd made it quite clear that she was only to stay for an early luncheon and then return home. Miss Edwards was known to have gentlemen paying visits in the afternoons, and heaven forbid that Charlotte should be there to bask in her friend's reflected glory and meet someone of possibly tarnished reputation.

Still, no one could call on Melinda if she wasn't even home. And they hadn't eaten yet. "Very well," she agreed. "A short walk."

"Yes, yes. Just a street or two."

Lady Edwards looked up from her letter-writing. "Take Anabel with you. And don't stay out-of-doors long. If you catch a fever you'll have to stay home for the rest of the week."

"Yes, Mama."

Once Melinda's maid joined them, they set out at a brisk pace down White Horse Street toward Knightsbridge. It wasn't raining, but it looked as though that might change at any moment. Still, it was nice to be out-of-doors without having to tote a parasol or risk ruining one's bonnet.

Melinda looped her arm around Charlotte's. "You'll never guess who came to call on me yesterday."

"Please tell me," Charlotte said with a smile. "You know I live to hear of your romantic conquests."

"Well, he's not a conquest, precisely. Not yet, anyway. He did seem quite interested, though, and even brought me white roses." Her delicate brows lowered. "He also seemed a bit... intoxicated, though I might have been mistaken."

"Tell me, for heaven's sake!"

"Xavier, Lord Matson. Can you believe it? He has the most beautiful eyes, don't you think?"

"Yes, he does," Charlotte said softly, her heart crumbling. As Melinda looked at her, though, she managed a short laugh. He wasn't for her, anyway. Everyone knew that. Not with his mottled reputation and her ridiculously clean one. Simply because he'd spoken to her twice didn't mean anything. "How exciting! Has he spoken with your father?"

"Oh, it's far too soon for that, goose. But he did ask me all about my interests, and my friends—and when I gave him your name, he mentioned that you'd met! You awful girl! Why didn't you tell me?"

For a moment Charlotte couldn't remember how to breathe or to speak, and she nearly forgot how to walk. He'd mentioned her. He'd remembered her. A tingle ran down her spine. Earl Matson had spoken her name, dull or not, destined for Lord Herbert Beetly or not, and acknowledged that they'd met.

She realized that Melinda still gazed at her expectantly. "Oh, he practically ran into me at the Hargreaves' Ball," she managed. "To say that we met—well, I think he was just being polite."

"Very well. You're forgiven, my dear. I thought it must be something like that. And when I said that you were practically engaged to Lord Herbert, he said, 'Yes, they seem quite attached.'"

Well, that made one thing clear. Lord Matson hadn't paid much attention to their two encounters at all if he thought her "quite attached" to Herbert. She could barely tolerate the man, for goodness' sake. And even though she hadn't expected anything more, it still hurt. There could be few things worse, she supposed, than having one's daydreams sink into the mud. Now she couldn't even pretend that he had a secret infatuation with—

"Good morning, Miss Edwards, Miss Charlotte." At the sound of that low, masculine drawl, Charlotte whipped her head around so fast that she nearly stumbled. "Lord Matson," she squeaked, as he slowed his magnificent black horse beside them. Of course. It was nearly ten o'clock. He was on his way to the boxing club.

Much more collected, Melinda smiled and gave a half-curtsy. "What a pleasant surprise, my lord! I hardly expected to see you this morning."

Charlotte stifled an abrupt frown. Melinda was a terrible liar. She'd absolutely expected to see the earl, which meant that he had more than one female spying on him as he rode to Gentleman Jackson's each weekday morning.

"Yes, I'm on my way to an appointment," he returned. "But since we seem to be heading in the same direction, might I walk with you for a bit?"

"Of course, my lord."

As he swung down from his horse, Melinda detached herself from Charlotte's arm, making a space between the two of them for the earl. *Oh, dear.* Mama was going to kill her. Three days in less than a week, conversing with Xavier Matson. Except that he wasn't joining them to talk to *her*, of course. He was interested in Melinda. And Charlotte could hardly blame him. Her friend was slender, petite, and blonde, with sparkling green eyes and perfect grace. And for the first time in their long friendship, Charlotte hated her.

But even though she knew he wasn't there because of her, even though he'd joined them so he could walk with Melinda, her breath stopped as he handed his horse over to their maid and offered her one arm, and her friend the other. He'd taken her hand twice before, but this was the closest they'd been to one another. Even through his caped greatcoat Charlotte could feel the warmth of him, seeping through her own sleeve and glove and into her skin. Lord Matson was tall, but so was she. The top of her head came to his chin, which would have been perfect, she thought, for waltzing. The muscles of his arm played beneath her fingers, making her want to run her palms up along his shoulders.

As he turned to engage Melinda in conversation, Charlotte couldn't help leaning in a little closer to breathe in his scent. Shaving soap and toast and leather—a surprisingly intoxicating combination.

Faded cobalt looked over at her as if he knew she'd been inhaling him. "And what are the two of you doing out here this morning?"

"Walking," Melinda answered before she could.

"So I see. You took a chance, though, coming outside in this weather."

"We're not made of sugar, my lord," Charlotte returned, trying to recover her composure. "Or at least, I'm not."

He chuckled. "No, you seem to be made up of several more subtle spices." His gaze lingered on her a moment before he turned to Melinda again. "And you, Miss Edwards? What are your ingredients?"

"Oh, heavens, it must be sugar, for I'm certain I would melt in the rain. I'm not nearly as stalwart as Charlotte."

"Don't worry, Melinda," Charlotte said, wishing she could linger on his comment about spices rather than worry that Melinda made her sound like a farm ox. "I would loan you my parasol." She risked a glance up at Matson's face. "And which ingredients are you, my lord?"

"Charlotte!"

"It's a fair question, Miss Edwards," the earl countered, his soft smile deepening. "I suppose, though, that it would depend on who you asked. My brother used to say that I was full of hot air."

Melinda gave her charming, bubbling laugh. "Oh, surely not."

"I prefer to think of myself as merely blood and sinew and bone, though I suppose that sounds rather mundane."

"It sounds truthful," Charlotte said, keeping her face turned away so the other two wouldn't see her blushing. Yes, her mother would send her away to a nunnery, but it would be worth it. She'd never expected to be able to banter with Lord Matson, much less to discover that he had a sense of humor and a quiet intelligence that quite belied his rakish reputation.

They stopped as they reached Brick Street. "We promised my mother to return home," Melinda said, her gaze making it clear that she wished him to agree to escort them the entire way.

"And Lord Matson has an appointment," Charlotte noted, unable to keep the stiff irritation from her voice. Being this close to him and having him pay attention to someone else was unbearable. Fleetingly she wondered what she would do if he did marry Melinda. It was stupid, because she had absolutely no claim on him, but she wasn't certain she could remain friends with Miss Edwards knowing who her husband was.

"So I do. I assume you ladies will be at the theater tomorrow night?"

"Oh, yes," Melinda gushed.

He detached himself and reclaimed his horse, swinging into the saddle with an athletic grace that made Charlotte ache. He tipped his hat at the two of them. "Then perhaps I'll see you there," he said, his eyes meeting hers for a brief moment. A second later he clucked to his mount, and they were off down the street.

"I think I may swoon," Melinda cooed, hugging herself.

Charlotte tore her gaze from the view. "Don't be silly; the ground's all wet."

"Oh, Charlotte, I'm just being romantic." Miss Edwards gripped her hand again. "Come along, now. I'm suddenly starving. Aren't you?"

"Yes," Charlotte answered automatically, though luncheon had become the furthest thing from her mind. No, now she had to find a way to convince her parents to go to the theater tomorrow night. Xavier Matson might very nearly belong to someone else, but at least she could still look.

"I thought you'd stay for more than dinner." Jeanette, Lady Ibsen, toyed with a candle, flicking her fingers to and fro across the flame. Her footmen had left the dining room twenty minutes ago, and Xavier knew he wouldn't see them again tonight. Jeanette had her staff exceedingly well trained.

"Dinner was magnificent, as usual," Xavier returned, setting his napkin on the table, "but I'm going to the theater tonight. I told you I wouldn't be staying."

She sighed. "Yes, I know. One must always hope, however." Leaning across the edge of the table, she licked the curve of his ear. "I am much better than *Hamlet*, Xavier."

"I don't doubt it. The play tonight is *As You Like It*, however, and you're hardly a comedy."

"Yes, but we could play as you like it all evening," she returned, shifting closer to twine her fingers into his hair.

On any previous evening since he'd arrived in London, she wouldn't have had to go to any such lengths to persuade him. Tonight, though, the sensation he was most aware of was vague annoyance. He needed to be somewhere else. "I would like it very much, I'm sure," he returned, shrugging free of her hands as gently as he could, "but I'm expected."

She straightened, the motion doing some very nice things to the front of her low-cut burgundy gown. "Who is she?"

Xavier pushed back in his chair and stood. "Beg pardon?"

"Oh, I'm not jealous," she said, uncurling to her feet with the grace of a feline, "though I am surprised. I thought we were looking for a wife who would have a certain understanding about our relationship. Whoever she is, though, she has your attention. And your interest."

Frowning, he stopped his retreat. "All I said was that I'm expected. I'm sharing a box with Halloren."

"So you haven't found a woman who piques your interest. Someone you're in a hurry to see at the

theater tonight."

"No."

"Hm. Perhaps I'll make an appearance, myself. I do love Shakespeare."

Inwardly cursing, he shrugged. Hiding this obsession of his was difficult enough without Jeanette lurking in the shadows, trying to outguess him. "Suit yourself, my dear."

"I always do, my dear." She held out her hand, and he bowed over it. "I have an idea already, you know, but I won't spoil your fun."

"Jeanette, d—"

"I told you, I'm not jealous. I like you too much to wish you ill." She smiled. "But I'll be here if it should happen that you're not. . . acceptable to her parents. You have acquired a certain reputation, after all, and will be expected to have high standards. And a roving eye."

Yes, he had acquired a reputation, though most of it was nonsense. Jeanette had said she wasn't jealous, and given the way she lived her life, he tended to believe her. "Hypothetically, how would a gentleman of questionable reputation go about winning over the parents of a proper chit?"

Lady Ibsen tucked her arm around his, speculation in her dark eyes. "Hm. How can we make you appear respectable?"

With a snort, Xavier pulled free. "I'm not that bad," he said, heading for the foyer. "I'll manage."

Yes, he'd taken a few mistresses since he'd been in London, and he'd spent time wagering rather large sums and drinking a bit too much, but he'd never claimed to be a saint, for God's sake. And after a year practically trapped in Devon, trying to wade through a tangle of papers and finances left by someone who hadn't expected to be dead at the age of thirty-one, he'd needed a little release and a little more distraction.

"Perhaps remind them that you're a war hero," Jeanette suggested as he collected his hat and coat. "Oh, or perhaps that you're determined to leave your scandalous ways behind you. In all truth, though, I doubt they will believe their daughter to be the one capable of dissuading you from your fun."

"Then you must be thinking of the wrong female," he drawled, motioning her butler to pull open the door. "Just promise that you won't interfere."

She put a long-fingered hand to her breast. "Me? If I didn't like her, perhaps. But I promise. No interference."

Xavier signaled his coach and climbed aboard. None of the chits on his list would put up any objection at all to his suit. Logic told him to simply choose one of them and get on with making an heir and re-rooting his family tree.

Logic, however, seemed woefully inadequate when he looked at Charlotte Birling. Her mere presence aroused him. But it wasn't solely a physical attraction that he could wallow away with either her or someone else. He liked being in her company; since they'd met, he'd spent more time thinking of how alone he'd become since Anthony's death, and how he didn't feel that way when he spoke with Miss

Charlotte.

But before this went any further, he needed to spend more than two minutes talking with her, and he needed to know whether she might be interested in someone with a poor reputation, warranted or not.

Chapter 4

As there is no news of the Neeley affair, This Author will once again focus on one of This Column's favorite subjects: Earl Matson.

Earlier rumors that he might be altar-bound appear to have more validity than they did earlier this week; indeed, it has been verified that he called upon Miss Melinda Edwards on Monday, and then he was seen squiring about this very same lady (and an unidentified companion) on White Horse Street yesterday. It appeared to be an accidental meeting, but as all Dear Readers know, no meeting between unmarried men and women is ever truly accidental.

LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS, 5 JUNE 1816

"Didn't you say this performance has been sold out for weeks?" Lady Birling asked, sitting beside Charlotte in their newly rented theater box.

"It has been," Charlotte affirmed quickly, hoping there was no one in the neighboring boxes to dispute that. "The weather's probably kept some of them away."

Her father shook out his greatcoat and tossed it over the chair at the rear of the box. "I wish it had kept us away," he grumbled, taking the seat behind his wife.

"You like the theater, Papa."

"Ordinarily, yes. With Easterly in Town, however, I prefer that we keep a low profile."

If her profile was any lower, she would completely disappear. "Sophia doesn't seem to mind much that he's returned."

"I believe Sophia wants to have the entire marriage annulled," the baroness countered in a lower voice,

looking about as her husband had done. "And with Lady Neeley's accusations, who can blame her?"

With difficulty Charlotte kept her silence, instead lifting her play book so she could peer around the edges at the boxes on the far side of the theater. She could defend Lord Easterly and Sophia until her breath ran out, but her parents had obviously already made up their minds about the entire episode. Truth be told, she barely remembered Lord Easterly, anyway, except that he'd been quite tall and had had a pleasant laugh.

Melinda and her family were in their seats several boxes closer to the stage. Giving her a quick wave, Melinda went back to gazing at the crowd much as Charlotte was. They were, of course, looking for the same man—and at least Melinda had reason to do so. If Lord Matson braved the weather and made an appearance, it would be because he wished to see Miss Edwards.

"Charlotte?" her mother said quietly, patting her hand. "You look sad. Are you feeling well?"

She shook herself. "Yes, I'm fine. I was only thinking of Sophia."

"Hopefully your cousin will be able to put this unpleasantness behind her. She certainly did when Easterly abandoned her before."

Charlotte wasn't so certain that Sophia had put anything behind her, but her cousin had become adept at convincing people that was so. At times Charlotte wished she could look as calm and elegant and composed. She'd never had much luck with that, but at least she did have the advantage of being able to go virtually unnoticed.

Even her parents succumbed to her near invisibility at times, though not as often now that she'd come of age and needed to be introduced to Society and a potential husband. Her older sister, Helen, had married by the end of her first Season, but then she'd been bubbly and giggly and possessed of large brown eyes and a talent for both the pianoforte and the waltz.

All of which left Charlotte with Lord Herbert. She'd attempted to complain about his lack of animation, but to no avail. Her parents wanted her to marry; she wanted to marry. In her dreams, though, it would be to someone who found her interesting and exciting—and to someone to whom she could at least say something humorous and have him laugh. In her parents' eyes, she would settle for Herbert because, well, how could she expect anything more?

"It's a shame we didn't think to ask Lord Herbert to join us," her mother said, sitting back as the curtains slid open. "Is he fond of the theater?"

"I honestly don't know," Charlotte whispered back. She tended to think not, because enjoying the theater required an imagination, and she didn't believe he had one.

She took one last look around her as the play began and abruptly spied Lord Matson. He sat in the shadows toward the back of the box owned by Lord Halloren, which was otherwise crowded with several overdressed females. Demi-mondaines, her mother would call them. She leaned forward a little to see better. He seemed to be ignoring the rest of the box's occupants, instead gazing toward the stage.

"Charlotte, stop gawking at people," her mother muttered.

"Everyone else is."

"You are not everyone else."

Charlotte sat through the first and second acts, very conscious that the earl sat somewhere back over her shoulder. Fleetingly she wondered whether she should ask for permission to visit Melinda's box at intermission, because Lord Matson would probably be doing the same thing. Oh, she was so blasted obvious.

As the curtains closed she joined in the applause. Now everyone would leave their boxes to mingle and gossip and be seen, and she and her parents would sit where they were so no one could possibly think they were anything but the height of propriety.

"Charlotte, would you have a footman fetch me a glass of Madeira?" her mother asked. "This weather is going to be the death of me."

Blinking, Charlotte stood. "Of course. I'll be just outside the curtain."

Her mother smiled. "I don't expect you to run away. We do trust you, darling. We just wish you had better judgment."

It wasn't her actions they needed to concern themselves with; it was her thoughts. Settling for a nod, she slipped around her father's chair and out through the heavy black curtains. The upstairs hallway was packed with people and light and noise, and she leaned back against the wall for a moment to get her bearings.

"Are you enjoying the play?" a male voice said softly from beside her.

She recognized the voice immediately, and while a low thrill ran through her body she faced Lord Matson, looking up to meet his faded blue gaze. "I am. And you?"

He gave a short smile. "I can barely hear it. Halloren seems to have invited every opera singer in London to join him in his box."

"They are ... colorful," she offered.

His smile deepened. "You were looking at me."

Drat. "Well, I— You see, I— You said you would attend tonight."

"So I did."

Oh, she could just gaze at him forever. In the chandelier light his amber-colored hair seemed a rich gold, faintly wavy, with a strand across one eye. Realizing she was staring, Charlotte cleared her throat. "I believe Melinda Edwards is in attendance, as well. You should find her in that direction." She gestured up the hallway.

"I know where she is," he answered. "May I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

For the first time in their short acquaintance he looked uncertain. Charlotte could sympathize. When she saw him from a distance, nervousness flooded through her. When they actually spoke, however, she

felt... heightened, but calm, as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Herbert Beetly," the earl continued, his voice even softer. "Are you betrothed?"

She blushed. "No. Not yet, anyway." "So you expect a proposal from him." His voice sounded tight, but no doubt he was thinking of his own future proposal to Melinda. Charlotte forced a smile. "Most likely. He has been my only suitor for the past year."

Matson's brow lowered. "Your only suitor?" he repeated. "Why is that?"

"Why . . ." Her blush deepening, she edged in the direction of the nearest footman. She needed to do as her mother asked and get back before her parents came looking for her. "There's no need to be mean, my lord," she said stiffly.

He caught her arm gently, but firmly enough to keep her there. "I merely asked you a question. Is it a family agreement? Have you been promised to one another since birth or something?"

"No. Don't be ridiculous." He didn't seem to be teasing her; in fact, he seemed perfectly serious. Well, he'd asked a question, and she'd never been one for illusions, no matter how painful the truth might be. "I'm . . . not the sort of female that men clamor over." Charlotte shrugged. "My father and Herbert's are acquaintances, and when no one expressed an interest in me, they came to a mutual understanding."

"So Beetly doesn't own your heart," he pursued, still gripping her arm.

Her unowned heart jumped at the serious look in his eyes. "No, he doesn't own my heart. He does make sense, though."

To her surprise, he tugged her a breath closer. "Make sense how?"

"My lord, shouldn't you be chatting with Miss Edwards?" Charlotte ventured, wondering whether he could feel her pulse beneath his fingers.

"I'm chatting with *you*, Charlotte. How does you marrying the dullest clod in London make sense?"

"We're very similar." She'd never confessed aloud how dull and ordinary she seemed to be. Until now, apparently.

"And who in God's name told you that?" he snapped, his voice rising a little. One or two of the closest theatergoers turned to look at them.

Charlotte wished she could be made of stone so she wouldn't blush and couldn't be tempted to sink to the floor and fade away. "I have a mirror, my lord," she said stiffly. "And ears. Now if you'll excuse me, I have an errand."

He started, looking around as though he'd just remembered that they were in a crowded hallway. "Will you be at home in the morning?"

"Why?"

"Because I intend to call on you. Will you be at home?"

She blanched. "You ... why?"

Brief humor touched his faded blue eyes. "Yes, or no?"

"I suppose . . . yes. But my parents—

"Leave that to me." He ran his hand down her arm to grasp her fingers. His eyes holding hers, he lifted her hand and brushed her knuckles with his lips. "Until tomorrow."

A thousand questions flooded her mind, but she couldn't think of one she could utter aloud without sounding like a complete idiot. But still... "I don't understand," she whispered.

The earl smiled. "You have very fine eyes," he whispered back, and then retreated into the crowd.

She needed to sit down. The world had just spun into an entirely new rearm. Xavier, Earl Matson, meant to call on her. *On her.*

If it was a tease, it was the crudest thing she'd ever heard of. But rakish reputation or not, it didn't seem in his character to be cruel. In their few encounters, she'd certainly never sensed any such thing in him. And if she was good at anything, it was reading people. When no one noticed you, it was easy to study them.

Charlotte concentrated on breathing as she pushed aside the curtains and returned to her chair. Now that she thought about it, when he'd encountered her and Melinda yesterday, he had seemed to spend a majority of the time talking with her. It had been politeness, though—or so she'd thought. *Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear.*

"My dear?" Her mother's voice made her jump. "You're red as a beet. What happened?"

Blast. "I looked everywhere for a footman, but I couldn't catch anyone's attention," she managed, wishing she could escape somewhere to gather her wits.

With a sigh her father climbed to his feet. "I'll see to it," he rumbled, exiting out the back of the box.

"I'm sorry, my dear," the baroness said. "I wasn't going to send you into such a crush, but your father and I worry that we're being too restrictive. You must be aware of how delicate our position is right now."

"I'm aware," Charlotte returned. But perhaps her parents weren't being restrictive enough—if they'd kept her in the box, she wouldn't have encountered Lord Matson, and he wouldn't have been able to inform her that he intended to call on her.

On the other hand, she couldn't ever recall being so excited and nervous and ... hopeful. Whatever his reasons, if he did call on her tomorrow she meant to be there, and she meant to see him. Charlotte gave a small smile. He thought she had fine eyes. Even if it only lasted for an evening, she actually felt alluring. It was a sensation, she believed, that only a mirror or Lord Matson's failure to appear tomorrow could dispel. And tonight she wasn't going to look in a mirror.

Charlotte couldn't avoid looking in the mirror the next morning as she dressed. Neither could she ignore

the high color in her cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes. "He might not make an appearance," she reminded herself sternly. "He probably won't."

Behind her, Alice paused as she pinned up Charlotte's hair. "Beg your pardon, Miss Charlotte?"

"Nothing. I'm just talking to myself."

"If I may say, you seem a bit unsettled this morning. Shall I have Mrs. Rutledge make you up some peppermint tea?"

Alice wouldn't be the only one who noticed her behavior, because since intermission last night she'd been veering between panic and euphoria. Perhaps admitting to a touch of a cold would keep everyone's suspicions away, until Lord Matson arrived. *If* Lord Matson arrived. "Tea would be lovely. I'll have it with breakfast."

Her maid curtsied and hurried from the room. Sighing,

Charlotte finished untangling last night's hair ribbon and laid it across her dressing table. If she thought about it logically, it didn't matter whether she had a caller this morning or not. Her parents would never allow her to see him. They would think he must have an ulterior motive; of course he wouldn't come by just to see her.

From her window, mingling with the tap of the rain, she heard a coach turn up the drive. Her heart seized into a tight, pounding ball. He hadn't been teasing.

She wanted to rush to the window to look out. "No, Charlotte," she told herself sternly. "You'll seem like a rabid dog."

Instead she went about finishing her hair, a difficult prospect without Alice to assist her. With one more pin to go, she abruptly stopped.

Why was she so infatuated with Xavier Matson? Yes, he was handsome and confident and athletic, but how much else did she know about him? His schedule: The way he went boxing at ten o'clock every morning when he didn't have Parliament; his preference for luncheon at White's or Boodle's; the afternoon rides in Hyde Park, weather permitting. Other than that, he was a stranger. And that was partially what she liked about him. He could be handsome and romantic and mysterious, and safely unattainable.

But now he was at her front door.

Alice burst back into the bedchamber. "Beg pardon, Miss Charlotte, but you have a caller." She tiptoed closer. "It's a gentleman, miss."

"Oh," Charlotte said noncommittally. "Help me finish my hair, will you?"

"Right away, miss." Alice swiftly repinned the work Charlotte had done. "Aren't you curious as to who it might be, miss?"

Oops. She'd forgotten; she wasn't supposed to know. "Of course I am, Alice. Where did Boscoe put him?" she asked, though she assumed the butler had shown the earl to the morning room, the usual place guests were asked to wait. Not that she'd ever had any male guests except for Herbert.

"He's in your father's office. Lord Birling didn't look at all pleased. I'm sure I don't know why, because your visitor is very . . . pleasant-looking, but it's none of my business, anyway."

It wasn't, but Charlotte was so grateful for the news that she didn't complain. She needed to hurry; if she couldn't get downstairs quickly, her father might very well send Lord Matson away before she had a chance to see him.

Finally, with Alice still practically hanging off the back of her hair, Charlotte sprinted downstairs to the first floor. The butler stood at his usual post in the foyer, but even stoic Boscoe couldn't quite mask his curiosity at their visitor.

"Boscoe? Alice said I have a caller." Practically vibrating with nervousness, she couldn't resist a glance toward the closed door of her father's office.

"Yes, Miss Charlotte. Your father requests that you wait in the morning room with your mother."

Until those last three words, Charlotte had been almost hopeful. Her mother, though, would have questions, and she had no idea what to answer. "Thank you," she said anyway, slipping through the half-open door.

"Did you plan this?" the baroness demanded, not pausing in her swift pacing.

"To have a caller?" Charlotte asked, keeping in mind that she supposedly didn't know who her father had trapped in his office.

"To have Lord Matson call on you."

Thankfully, hearing the name spoken aloud shook her enough that she didn't have to fake her reaction. "N-no. How could I plan such a thing?"

"I'm sure I have no idea. But you did stare at him out the window the other day, and he approached you at the Hargreaves' Ball."

"Mama, you've made it clear that I should concentrate my efforts on Lord Herbert, since no other gentleman has called on me in a year. Why would I think I *could* plan something like this?"

"But why is he here?" her mother persisted.

"He's here to call on Charlotte." Her father stood in the doorway, his expression tight and clearly displeased. "He wishes to court her."

The baroness sank into a chair. "*What? Charlotte?*"

Through the roaring in her ears, Charlotte was asking the exact same questions. Even so, her mother's reaction pained her. Yes, she was quiet and reserved and not vibrant and beautiful like Helen, but it hurt to know that her parents really did think of her as ... small, that Herbert was the best match for her.

"Yes, Charlotte. So please collect yourself, Vivian, and I'll show him in."

"But—"

"I can't very well throw him out when he came to ask my permission to call on our daughter," the baron interrupted in a lower voice. "And quite respectfully." He turned his assessing gaze to Charlotte. "Do not encourage him. His reputation is less than snowy, and yours can only be harmed."

"Yes, Papa."

Lord Birling vanished, only to reappear a moment later with Lord Matson on his heels. The earl looked as easy as if he'd been sitting about playing whist, and Charlotte could only envy his composure. Of course, it was beginning to seem very likely that Lord Matson was completely insane. She could think of no other explanation as to why he would wish to broach Birling House to see . . . her.

As his gaze found her, however, he smiled. "Good morning, Miss Charlotte, Lady Birling."

"My lord," the baroness returned with a curtsy, "what in the world brings you here?"

"As I told Lord Birling, I've found myself somewhat at loose ends here in London, not knowing many people and beginning to fall in with the wrong crowd. Your daughter's kind words and obvious decorum caught my attention."

Charlotte blinked. Good heavens, he sounded almost. . . tame. If not for the twinkle deep in his blue eyes, she would have thought a duplicate of dull Lord Herbert had strolled into the room. A duplicate with wits and a sense of humor, of course.

"In light of that," he went on, "I have asked Lord Birling's permission to call on Miss Charlotte. I had thought we might take a ride in my phaeton, since it has a covered top and will protect us from the drizzle."

A phaeton! She'd never ridden in such a sporting vehicle in her life. Charlotte practically clapped her hands together before she could stop herself and clasp them demurely behind her back instead.

"And a chaperone?" her mother pursued, her reaction much more skeptical than her daughter's.

"My tiger, Willis, is holding the team for me now. He will accompany us on horseback."

The baroness's brow lowered. "Another man? I don't—"

"I've given my permission," her father cut in. "For today. As I said, my lord, she is to be home by noon."

Matson sketched an elegant bow. "She will be." His gaze still on Charlotte, he held out one hand. "Shall we?"

It was a good thing her father had given permission, because she wasn't about to pass up the prospect of riding in a racing phaeton with Lord Matson, no matter the consequences. She nodded, trying to stifle her excited smile. "As you wish, my lord," she managed in a calm voice.

Alice appeared with a warm wrap, and Charlotte shrugged into it. Both parents followed her out the front door like vultures looking over a fresh kill, so she didn't dare take the earl's proffered hand, and instead

let her father help her up into the high seat. Lord Matson tucked a blanket around her feet under the close gaze of the baron and baroness, and in a flash they were off down the drive.

Charlotte sighed, her breath fogging a little in the cold air. "You actually came."

"Of course I did. I said I would." He looked at her. "Why do you let them talk about you like that?"

"Like what?"

"Your mother acted as though she couldn't conceive of why I would come calling on you, and your father seemed to think I meant to escort you somewhere for the sole purpose of abandoning and embarrassing you."

"Oh, dear," she muttered. "It's just. . . well, you've seen how concerned they are about proprie—"

"It wasn't that."

She kept her gaze on the street. "What do you wish me to say, my lord? That they don't understand why someone with your attractive physical appearance and your considerable income and reputation would be interested in courting their daughter? I don't quite understand it, myself."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Why not? What's wrong with you?"

Charlotte flushed. She couldn't help it. "What do you mean, 'What's wrong with me?' You aren't supposed to ask questions like that."

"I'm merely trying to understand why I'm not supposed to be seen in your company." He shifted so he could face her more fully, flicking the reins from his right hand to his left. "Do you squint?"

"No, my lord. Not unless the sun is very bright."

"Not a problem today, then. Stutter?"

"Not generally."

"Missing a finger or a toe?"

Despite her efforts, a smile tugged at her mouth. "Not as of this morning."

"Are your teeth false?"

"No, my lord."

"Two ears, approximately level with one another, one—"

"Do stop teasing."

"I'm not. I'm looking for your defect. There must be one, for them to be so nervous about exposing me to you. One nose," he continued, "slightly upturned at the tip, one mouth, with lips above and below, two eyes, which we discussed yesterday." His gaze flicked the length of her and back again. "It's nothing I'm not currently seeing, is it?"

"For goodness' sake, my lord. That is too much," she protested, not certain whether to be scandalized

or terribly amused. "You're looking precisely at part of the problem, I daresay."

"Then it must be that you're wearing a wig. You're bald, aren't you?"

Finally she chuckled. She couldn't help it. "No, my lord. My hair is my own, firmly attached." She drew a breath before he could question her eyelashes or her bosom or something. "I'm not beautiful or ebullient, and you're quite handsome and wealthy, with your choice of any single female in London. That's what they don't understand. And frankly, neither do I."

"Not beautiful," he repeated, slowly facing front again, just in time to turn them up Bond Street. With a snap of his wrist he turned the horses to the side of the street and yanked on the reins to stop them. When he faced her again his eyes glinted. "Don't you ever say that again," he said in a low, hard voice. "Is that clear?"

Charlotte swallowed at the fierceness in his gaze. "It doesn't make sense to deny anything. If I carried myself as anything but what I am, I would only appear ridiculous."

"The only ridiculous thing about you is that statement. You . . ." He trailed off, slamming a fist into his knee. "At the Hargreaves' Ball," he began again, his voice lower, "you had better reason than most to spread rumors—or to accept the rumors—of Lord Easterly's part in another scandal. But you defended him to your mother because it was the right thing to do."

For a long moment she looked at him, trying to remember the exact conversation and how he might have overheard it. "That was a private discussion," she finally said.

"That doesn't matter. I liked what you said, that one person's accusation wasn't enough to risk ruining a man's reputation. I spoke with several other chits—young ladies—that night, and not one of them voiced anything but the current popular theory. I doubt it would have occurred to them to do otherwise."

"Perhaps they spoke that way because they believed him guilty," she offered, her pulse skittering. She wasn't an idiot; he was saying that he admired her.

"If I'd said the sky was magenta and green they would have agreed with me." He sat back a little, still gazing at her. "Would you?"

"If the sky had been that color I certainly would have agreed with you."

After a moment he visibly shook himself. "The rain's stopped. What say we do some shopping?"

"You . . . This is very nice, my lord, but it won't help either of us to be seen together." Despite the relatively deserted streets, someone they knew was bound to see them, and then the rumors would start, and people would begin to wonder what was wrong with *him*, to be seen in her company.

"It will help me a great deal. Willis, hold the horses."

The liveried tiger urged his mount up to the front of the team and took hold of the nearest horse's harness. As he did so, Matson took her chin gently between his fingers and turned her back to face him. Before she could gasp or even form the thought to do so, he touched his warm lips to hers. It could only have been a few seconds, a dozen fast heartbeats, but the moment seemed to stretch into forever, the touch of his mouth to hers. Charlotte closed her eyes, trying to memorize the sensation.

"I feel better already," he murmured. "Open your eyes, Charlotte."

She did so, half expecting to see that he was laughing at her. Instead, though, the soft smile that curved his mouth left her wanting to throw herself in his arms, and damn the consequences. "My lord, this is—"

"This is the beginning," he finished for her. "And call me Xavier."

Chapter 5

It has come to This Author's attention that Lord Matson, about whom, as all Dear Readers will recall, certain altar-bound activities were reported, has been paying rather assiduous attention to a particular young lady.

This Author would be pleased to report the lady in question's name (and indeed, This Author is in possession of this name) except that it is so astounding, so completely and utterly unexpected, that This Author fears falsity.

Especially since, by all accounts, Lord Matson's attempts to woo this young lady have been soundly rebuffed.

Good heavens, is the chit mad in the head?

LADY THISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS, 10 JUNE 1816

Charlotte Birling was about to rebel. Last Thursday Lord Matson—Xavier—had returned her home before noon, just as he'd promised. The two hours previous to that had been the most glorious of her life. She hadn't expected his interest to last, but she'd intended to enjoy it while she could.

But then her parents had bid him good day, and she hadn't seen him again. No, that wasn't quite true; she'd glimpsed him through her rain-streaked window three times, and she'd heard his voice downstairs when he'd sought entrance, but as for conversation, one or the other of them might as well be residing on the moon.

And even after only three accidental meetings and one morning of chatting about nothing in particular, she missed him. She had always felt comfortable and safe around men in general because she didn't expect to be flattered or flirted with, and they seemed to appreciate her lack of vanity. With Xavier, though, it was different. He did feel comfortable, and easy to talk to, but definitely not safe. No man

had ever looked at her as he did, and shivers still ran down her spine whenever she recalled him—which was practically every second of the past week.

She could hardly be expected to put him out of her mind, of course, since he'd called every day of the last four. Rebuff after rebuff, lie after lie from her father or her mother, and still he called. She'd never heard him raise his voice, but the brief glimpse she'd had of him as he'd climbed into his coach yesterday had shown tense, straight shoulders and a fist slamming against the window frame.

"Is he going to call this afternoon?" The baroness stood in her open bedchamber door, wearing the same expression of thinly disguised displeasure she'd had since Thursday.

"Beg pardon?" Charlotte asked, quickly placing her tawdry emerald necklace back in her dresser drawer.

"Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about, Charlotte. Your father asked you not to encourage him."

"I didn't. I was being myself, Mama. And believe me, I find it as odd as you that he seems to like me."

"People are beginning to talk. Including *Lady Whistledown*"

Charlotte drew a breath. "Herbert has been in *Whistledown*."

"Only in reference to his perfect character. And speaking of Lord Herbert, he attended the Wivens soiree. Did you even notice?"

"I danced with him," Charlotte replied, ignoring the nagging thought that she'd spent more time looking for Lord Matson, and that she *hadn't* given Herbert a thought until he'd coughed and asked her to dance.

"Well, I can only hope that Matson is enough of a gentleman to realize that we've suffered through enough of his nonsense and that we don't want to see him here any longer."

Charlotte almost let her mother leave without comment. After Xavier's angry reaction to their dismissal of her, though, she couldn't do it. "Would it be so terrible if I had two men courting me? I thought the goal was to see me happily married. As for the specifics, Lord Herbert was simply the only one interested—until now."

The baroness stopped. "It's not . . . that isn't . . . Lord Matson is a rake, Charlotte. We have no reason to believe that he is sincere in his so-called pursuit of you."

"But what if I like him?" she asked in a quieter voice, fighting the abrupt urge to cry.

"You need to have more realistic expectations, my dear. Now cheer up. I have it on good authority that Lord Herbert will be visiting this afternoon. He's expressed an interest in trying out my new pianoforte."

"Oh. Splendid."

"I don't know what's going on in your head any longer, Charlotte. He'll be here any moment now. Please wear something suitable."

Her mother closed the door. Something suitable. According to her parents' thinking, that would be a

large sack. Absently Charlotte returned to fiddling with the emerald necklace. She'd tried it on once in private, and had to admit that Lady Ibsen had been correct. It made her feel completely scandalous. She wondered whether Lady Ibsen wore a similar bauble for Lord Matson—and whether he still called on the widow.

"What does it matter?" she breathed. "He certainly isn't having any fun calling here."

At that moment sunlight broke through her window. Smiling, she rose to throw open the glass and lean outside. The light and warmth after two months of cold and four straight days of rain felt glorious. She closed her eyes, basking in the glow.

"Charlotte?"

With a start she opened her eyes and looked down. Lord Matson stood on her drive, looking up at her in the window. "Good afternoon," she whispered, blushing.

"It is now. Can you arrange to meet me somewhere?" he said, his voice barely audible.

Good heavens. Now she felt like Juliet. "Where?"

He frowned a moment, then his expression cleared. "It's a lovely day to go walking in Hyde Park, don't you think?"

Yes, it was, if she could convince Lord Herbert to delay his pianoforte recital. Just how much trouble she would be in if her parents discovered what she was up to, she didn't want to think about. This afternoon, a man who stole her breath with his smile wished to see her. And she very much wished to see him. "I'll try," she called back down.

"I'll be waiting."

He returned to his carriage and instructed his driver to leave. As he vanished around the corner of the house, she took a deep breath and left her bedchamber. She really should have taken the opportunity to tell him to stop calling on her—but she couldn't be expected to deny one more chance to live a daydream.

To say that Xavier felt frustrated was quite possibly the understatement of the century. He'd put on his most conservative clothes, conversed with the wit of a damned mortician, called on Charlotte every day for nearly a week, and he'd only managed to see her once. Obviously, after the first surprise ambush, her parents had been ready for him—either that, or Charlotte had the most active social calendar in England. Even after seeing her in her window, he was tempted to knock on her door just to see where her parents would say she'd gone today: tea with friends, the lending library, visiting a sick aunt—he'd heard it all. And so, considering the fact that he'd successfully maneuvered against Bonaparte's best during the war, he had to admire Lord and Lady Birlings' skill at subterfuge.

If this had been simple lust after a simple chit, he wouldn't have cared; despite his reputation he had more than enough self-control to turn away from a female if the trouble began to outweigh the reward. This, though, was far more serious. After two hours of conversation with Charlotte, he'd gone home and torn up his list of prospective brides. It was time, then, to do some maneuvering of his own.

And so he had his carriage leave him at the edge of Hyde Park where he would be able to see anyone coming from the direction of Birling House. Who she might bring with her, he had no idea, but he didn't much care. He wanted to see her again. He wanted to hold her, to kiss her, to see her eyes light with passion and excitement at his touch.

He waited in the shade of an elm tree while the park grew more crowded around him. Apparently everyone meant to take advantage of the sunlight today. Good. It would make Charlotte's attendance less suspicious to her parents.

He wondered what his brother would have said, seeing what a muck he'd made out of his hunt for a bride. Probably the first thing Anthony would have done was laugh at him for concocting a list, for thinking that he could make himself into the perfect nobleman and landowner by finding the perfect wife, as if that would resolve all of his frustrations at leaving behind a promising military career and his worries that he could never fill the boots of his new station. But Anthony would have liked Charlotte. Xavier knew that instinctively. His brother had always had a good eye for character.

He shifted, looking for a more comfortable position against the tree. Blast it, if her parents refused to let her go out-of-doors, he was going to resort to kidnaping. Just as he was beginning to formulate a plan, though, she appeared. Her maid trailing behind her, she walked with her hand around the arm of her escort—Lord Herbert Beetly.

"Bastard," Xavier muttered, though he was more angry at her parents. Marrying Charlotte to Beetly would be like chaining a butterfly to a beetle. Despite himself he smiled a little. Beetly the beetle.

So now he had to figure out a way to get her away from the insect for at least a few minutes, because if he couldn't kiss her this afternoon, he was going to explode. They began a stroll along one of the paths, and he shadowed them from the shrubbery. Herbert continued droning on about some sort of allergic reaction he had to grass. After Xavier nearly brained himself on a low-hanging branch, he began contemplating doing the same thing to the beetle.

Luckily for Herbert, however, an open carriage rattled by. "It's Lady Neeley and that companion of hers," Beetly commented, angling to keep them in sight. "I hear she wants to have Bow Street arrest Easterly for the bracelet theft."

"Nonsense," Charlotte replied, pulling her hand free.

Xavier slipped up behind her maid. Covering Alice's mouth, he signaled for her to be silent, then led her directly up behind the couple. He placed Alice's hand on Beetly's arm, and in the same motion grabbed Charlotte and tugged her backward into the bushes.

Charlotte stumbled, and he caught her up against him before she could fall. "Shh," he breathed, leading her further away from her escort. When they'd reached the relative privacy of a small glade, he stopped. She was out of breath, her bonnet fallen back on her shoulders, and she wore a smile of genuine delight. God, she was fascinating.

"This will never wor—"

Xavier took her by the shoulders and leaned down, covering her mouth with his. She stiffened under his grip, then relaxed into him, giving a soft, throaty moan that made him hard. "Now that is a proper greeting," he murmured, kissing her again.

"No, it's an improper greeting," she corrected, her fingers digging into his sleeves.

It would be so easy to ruin her, to lay her down in the grass and make her his *Patience*, he ordered himself, releasing her reluctantly. She was proper and terribly worried about appearances, and he didn't want to frighten her. This wasn't about an afternoon's satisfaction; it was about a lifetime of it.

"Lord . . . Xavier . . . I'm not... I don't play this sort of game well," she stumbled, her gaze still focused on his mouth. "If that's what this is—a game, I mean—I do wish you would tell me."

Sometimes men were such fools. He'd nearly been one himself, looking at faces and popularity and shades of hair as though that mattered a whit. "It's not a game, Charlotte," he said quietly. "But if my character displeases you, or if you have your heart set elsewhere, please let me know so—"

With a small breath she wrapped her fingers around his lapels, leaned up along his body, and kissed him again. Well, that answered that. He slid his arms around her waist, holding her close.

"Let's make the most of our escape, then, shall we?" he murmured, shifting his attention to her jawline.

She frowned. "I do seem to be better protected than the king, don't I?"

He chuckled. "Don't worry. You can tell Beety you wandered off and thought he was right behind you."

"You're very devious."

"When I need to be."

Charlotte stepped back a little, meeting his gaze with her warm brown eyes. "I have a few questions for you, Xavier."

His heart stammered a little. "Ask them, then."

"Are you courting Melinda Edwards? Because she's my friend, and I don't want to be put in the middle of anything that might hurt her."

He could make up something flip, he knew, but she'd probably see through it. And besides, there was something so ... forthright about her that he couldn't help wanting to respond to it. "I consulted a friend of my own," he said slowly, "because I hadn't been to London for quite a while and I wanted to know which lady might best suit me."

" 'Suit you?' " she repeated.

Xavier smiled a little. "You *don't* like games, do you?"

"No, I don't." She sighed. "It sounds silly, and I'm really not that delicate, but it's happened several times, that I'll be out somewhere and a man begins to pay attention to me so his friend can speak with Melinda. I don't like being the distraction."

He touched her cheek, running a finger along her smooth skin. "No, you're distracting," he corrected. "And very refreshing. And I'm not playing games. I'm here to find a wife. Yes, Melinda Edwards was originally on that list. She isn't, any longer."

Color fled her cheeks. "But—"

"I was in the army, you know," he interrupted, not wanting to hear her say something ridiculous like he couldn't be seriously considering her, "and I had quite the career. I'd begun as a lieutenant, and after two years I'd been promoted to major. I was quite happy with that being my life. England's always fighting a war somewhere."

"What happened, then?"

"My older brother, Anthony, died last year. I was summoned home and arrived just in time for his funeral. Some sort of influenza." He cleared his throat, wondering if she could hear how angry being abandoned by his closest friend still made him—and how lonely he still felt. "Anthony hadn't married and had no heirs, which left me with the title." He forced a chuckle. "Compared to being an earl, war was easy."

"Why me?"

"Why you?" he repeated, touching her again because he couldn't seem not to. "You defended your cousin-in-law to your mother."

"But—"

"Not only against popular opinion, and not because you knew whether he was innocent or guilty, but because nothing had been proven. That, my dear, takes a great deal of character."

"So you like my character."

"Charlotte, do you like being required to behave as you do? Do you enjoy your time spent with Lord Herbert? Do you expect you'll be perfectly happy saying yes when—and I do mean *when*—he asks you to marry him?"

Her face folded into a frown. "Of course I don't like any of that. I don't like having my behavior scrutinized by my own parents as a result of a supposed scandal that had nothing to do with me and that occurred when I was seven years old. Who would like such a thing?"

"I have no idea. But I do know that I never expected to have this life thrust on me, and that I would have been perfectly happy to have caught the fun at Waterloo and have had Anthony still alive and shouldering all the responsibility. Except for one thing."

"And which thing would that be?"

"You."

Charlotte looked at him. She'd viewed him from a distance, imagining what brave things he'd done in the war, admiring his self-confidence and ease in talking to and with other people. She'd never imagined that he might be unhappy, or lonely, or especially that he would ever look in her direction. But he had looked, and apparently he saw them as kindred spirits, two people not entirely comfortable with where they'd found themselves and trying to make the best of it. The oddest thing was, she could see it, too.

Oh, my. "I need to walk," she blurted, striding off in a direction roughly opposite of where Herbert

should be.

In a second he'd caught up to her. "I didn't mean to upset you," he said in his quiet voice.

"I'm not upset. I'm thinking."

"Thinking in a good way, or a bad way?"

An unexpected chuckle escaped her lips. "That's what I'm trying to de—"

Someone smacked into her, and before she could gasp, she lay sprawled on the ground, her nose inches from—

"Charlotte!" her friend Tillie Howard gasped. "I'm so sorry!"

She sat up, grateful to find that at least her skirt hadn't flown up past her waist. So much for her dignity. "What were you *doing*?" she demanded, pulling her bonnet back over her hair.

"A footrace, actually," Tillie muttered, looking embarrassed. "Don't tell my mother."

"I won't have to." With the park this crowded, someone else was bound to have seen. "If you think she's not going to hear of this—"

"I know, I know," Tillie said, sighing. "I'm hoping she'll chalk it up to sun-induced insanity."

"Or perhaps sun-blindness?" Xavier put in, helping Charlotte to her feet. She thought he looked amused, but then he hadn't been the one knocked to the ground.

Still, her mother would have an apoplexy at her own behavior today, so who was she to judge anyone or anything? "Lady Mathilda, this is Earl Matson."

"Pleased to ..." Tillie trailed off as a tall, dark-haired man skidded up beside her.

"Tillie, are you all right?" he asked.

Lady Mathilda answered and received help to her feet, but Charlotte's attention was on Xavier. He'd stiffened a little as the other gentleman had appeared, and he'd immediately taken a step closer to her, keeping her hand in his. A thrill ran through her. Was he actually jealous? And *on her* behalf?

Tillie introduced her to Peter Thompson, but before she could introduce Xavier in return, Mr. Thompson interrupted her. "Matson," he said, nodding.

"You already know each other?" Tillie asked, before Charlotte could.

"From the army," Xavier answered.

"Oh!" Tillie exclaimed, her red curls bobbing. "Did you know my brother? Harry Howard?"

The expression in Xavier's eyes changed for just a moment. Charlotte couldn't read it, but something in that faded cobalt made her grip his fingers just a little tighter.

"He was a fine fellow," he answered after a moment. "We all liked him a great deal."

"Yes," Mathilda agreed, "everyone liked Harry. He was quite special that way."

The earl nodded. "I'm very sorry for your loss."

"As are we all. I thank you for your regards."

Charlotte glanced at Mr. Thompson, then looked again more closely. He was eyeing Xavier the same way the earl seemed to be sizing him up, like two stallions each protecting a mare from a rival. *Oh, dear.* "Were you in the same regiment?" she asked, trying to distract them.

"Yes, we were," Xavier returned, "though Thompson here was lucky enough to remain through the action."

"You weren't at Waterloo?" Tillie asked.

"No. I was called home for family reasons."

"I'm so sorry," Tillie murmured.

Abruptly Charlotte wished her friend didn't look quite so attractive, with her bosom heaving and her cheeks glowing from the footrace. *Tan.* "Speaking of Waterloo," she broke in, "do you intend to go to next week's reenactment? Lord Matson was just complaining that he missed the fun."

"Charlotte," Xavier murmured, too quietly for the others to hear.

"I'd hardly call it fun," Mr. Thompson muttered.

"Right," Tillie seconded in a too-cheery voice. Obviously she also wished to be elsewhere. "Prinny's reenactment! I'd quite forgotten about it. It's to be at Vauxhall, is it not?"

"A week from today," Charlotte said, nodding, and beginning to wish she'd just kept her mouth shut, as her mother kept telling her to. "On the anniversary of Waterloo. I've heard that Prinny is beside himself with excitement. There are to be fireworks."

Peter didn't look terribly excited at the prospect. "Because we want this to be an *accurate* representation of war."

"Or Prinny's idea of accurate, anyway," the earl added coolly.

"Perhaps it is meant to mimic gunfire," Tillie said tightly. "Will you go, Mr. Thompson? I should appreciate your escort."

Charlotte shifted uncomfortably. Obviously the subject was even more sensitive than she'd realized. She opened her mouth to change the subject as Tillie and Peter continued debating whether they should attend or not, but Xavier tugged on her hand. When she looked up at him, he shook his head slightly, his gaze on Tillie and surprisingly compassionate. "Leave be," he muttered, glancing down at Charlotte.

"But—"

"Very well," Mr. Thompson was saying to Tillie, though his lips tightened.

"Thank you," Mathilda replied with a grin. "It's very kind of you, especially since—"

At her friend's abruptly uncomfortable expression, Charlotte shook herself. "Well, we must be going," she said, "er, before anyone—"

"We need to be on our way," Xavier finished smoothly.

"Terribly sorry about the footrace," Mathilda said, reaching out to squeeze Charlotte's other hand.

Smiling, Charlotte squeezed back. They were still friends, after all. "Think nothing of it. Pretend I'm the finish line, and then you've won."

"An excellent idea. I should have thought of it myself."

When Xavier tugged her backward, Charlotte didn't protest. Herbert was probably scouring the park for her by now, and whatever row he caused would be her fault.

"You have interesting friends," he said after a moment, leading her into thicker undergrowth.

"So do you."

"I wouldn't exactly call Thompson a friend."

As she realized he'd managed to once again find a glade sheltered from all other occupants of the park, she pulled her hand free. "I need to get back to Herbert."

"I know." He closed the distance between them with one long step. "And I hope you know that while I've been making every attempt to behave myself for your parents' sake, I have earned my somewhat... colorful reputation."

Her heartbeat quickened. She'd begun to find new levels of boldness since their first encounter, herself. "Oh, have you?"

Reaching out, he took both of her shoulders in his hands and yanked her up against him. As his lips found hers, Charlotte felt heat rush from their point of contact down to her toes, with a warm, unexpected, tingling between her thighs. He meant it. He was serious in his interest. As wondrous as it was, a small, logical part of her mind still wanted to know why. Why her? Why not someone lovely and collected and sophisticated like Melinda? Why—

His hands trailed down her arms, brushing the outside of her breasts while his thumbs stroked across her muslin-covered nipples with just enough authority to let her know that he'd done it on purpose, and that kissing her was only the beginning of what he wanted.

"Xavier," she gasped, leaning into him.

"Shh."

"Charlotte!"

She started, her passion-clouded brain taking a moment to register that Herbert's voice was not right behind her but rather was far enough away that he couldn't possibly have seen anything. "Let go, Xavier," she murmured, unable to resist pursuing his mouth for a last rough kiss.

"You need to break with Herbert," the earl said, his voice harder.

"And what reason would I give?" she asked, equal parts thrilled and frustrated. "I've already mentioned my dissatisfaction with his exciting character to my parents. In response, my father accepted his invitation to escort me to Vauxhall."

"We'll see about that," Xavier replied. "I'll tolerate this sneaking about for a while, but my patience does have a limit, Charlotte." He cupped her face in his hand. "And Lord Herbert will not be escorting you to Vauxhall. *I* will be. You can wager on that."

It would make things worse, and for once Charlotte didn't mind. As Herbert drew closer, Xavier faded back into the shadows. She gave the excuse he'd suggested, that she'd wandered off and been surprised to find him gone. Being a man of no imagination, he believed the tale. And from Alice's amused expression, the maid wasn't going to give anything away, either.

Xavier had said his patience wouldn't last, and she could only wonder what would happen then. One thing, though, was for certain. She was going to Vauxhall next Wednesday.

Chapter 6

Very well, the secret is out. The object of Lord Matson's affections is none other than Miss Charlotte Birling, whose name, This Author must confess, has never before graced the pages of this column.

The pair in question were seen arm in arm yesterday in Hyde Park, looking rather cozy, indeed.

LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS, 12 JUNE 1816

Charlotte hummed as she faced the mirror. She'd barely eaten dinner last night, and she'd barely slept, but even so she felt... energized, as though electricity ran just under her skin. Along with it, she became

aware of the alarming feeling that nothing could go wrong. That should immediately have alerted her that everything was about to go to hell.

At least her parents allowed her to finish her morning toilette and come downstairs to breakfast in blissful ignorance before they pounced. "Good morning," she said, sweeping into the small breakfast room and breathing deeply the scent of fresh-baked bread.

"Good morning," her mother replied, looking up from her perusal of the new *Whistledown* column. "Wait until you hear this."

"I don't care what anyone else is doing or saying." Charlotte selected a peach and a thick slice of bread from the sideboard. "I don't even care if it's probably going to rain again today."

Her father lowered *The London Times* to look at her. "And what is the reason for this new, careless Charlotte?"

Something in his voice caught her attention, but she pretended to ignore it. She'd changed in the past few days; she couldn't expect that they had. But they would, because she needed them to if she meant to have any sort of future with Lord Matson. And she meant to. "You'll laugh at me."

"We won't laugh," her mother returned. *Don't say anything more*, the little sensible voice inside her head began urging. This morning, though, the giddy voice, the one that wanted to sing and waltz across the room, was much louder. "I feel like I've been a caterpillar, and now I'm a butterfly."

She took her seat, and it was a moment before she noticed that neither the baron nor the baroness had commented on her metaphor. As she looked up, they were gazing at one another. Something had happened. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Slowly her mother slid the gossip column over in front of her. "You may think you're a butterfly," she said quietly, "but that would imply that you've become independent, and that your actions—"

"—and that your actions reflect on no one else," her father finished. "I think we can all agree that you are in error."

Swallowing, Charlotte looked at the *Whistledown* column. *Oh, no*. "I—"

"Consider carefully which lie you intend to tell," the baron interrupted again. "You and Herbert have already regaled us with the story of how you two became separated in the park yesterday. Matson's name did not come up in that conversation."

For just a moment Charlotte closed her eyes. Back to caterpillar again in one second. And now she'd never be allowed out of her cocoon. Ever. Unless she forced it open herself. "I like Lord Matson," she said quietly. "I think you would like him, too, if you would give him a chance."

"We didn't make his reputation, Charlotte. He did that on his own. And he must face the consequences of it—on his own."

"What about my reputation?" she protested. "You decided when I was seven that every breath I took could ruin me, and so I haven't had an opportunity to do anything. Yes, I'm in *Lady Whistledown*. But am I ruined? No."

"That remains to be seen. Did you intend to see him in the park, or was it an accident?" Her mother took the column back. Undoubtedly it would go into a box so she could pull it out every time she wanted to make a point about something.

Charlotte lifted her chin. "It was on purpose."

"Charlotte!"

She pushed to her feet. "I'm not beautiful or vibrant, Mama. Believe me, I know that. And when I'm with Lord Herbert, I feel plain, and ordinary, and small. But when Xavier looks at me and talks with me, I feel... attractive. Don't expect me to ignore that. He's a good man, trying to take a place in Society when he never expected to have to do so."

"So he tells you flattering lies and now you're ready to let him use our good name to improve his own standing."

"Papa, it's not—"

"It's not like that? Can you think of another reason why he might be courting you?"

So that was it. In their eyes, she truly was ordinary. Why would someone as handsome and wealthy as Xavier Matson want to associate with her, unless there was something tangible in it for him? "Oh," she said quietly, her voice catching.

"Edward, there's no call for that." To Charlotte's surprise, her mother stood and put an arm across her shoulders. "We don't want to hurt you, but you need to consider that not everyone is as good-hearted and honest as you are."

"And that whether you live under our roof or not, your actions reflect on us and our reputations." The baron's mouth pinched.

"I'll keep that in mind, Papa. May I go to my bedchamber now?"

"Lord Herbert will be taking you to luncheon. Until then, yes, I suggest you retire to think about the consequences of your actions."

As Charlotte clomped back upstairs, she wondered how long Xavier would remain interested in her if her parents never allowed them to meet again. In him she'd found a companion spirit, but while hers was still tethered, his was free.

His actions reflected on no one but himself, and being both a man and wealthy, most anything he did would be excused. As for her own actions, her father was correct. She lived under their roof, shared their name, had been presented to Society by them. And she could accept all of that.

What bothered her was that the standards of conduct expected of every proper female in London didn't apply to her. Or rather they did, but threefold. And she didn't have the awe-inspiring beauty or daring to counter the strict walls put up around her.

Xavier hadn't seemed to notice her faults, but she knew that he was frustrated with her situation. And Melinda Edwards, Rachel Bakely, Lady Portia Hollings, and a half dozen other young ladies were all out to catch his eye—while she sat on her bed, grumbling about her fate in solitude.

"Charlotte?" Her mother's knock sounded softly against the closed door.

"Come in."

The baroness entered the room, closing the door behind her, then strolled over to take a seat at Charlotte's dressing table. She didn't look angry, but Charlotte kept silent, anyway. She certainly didn't want to precipitate another confrontation.

"I had a letter from Helen yesterday," her mother said.

"Good. How are she and Fenton and the children?"

"All doing well. She hopes to come to Town next month, though they won't be able to remain long."

"It'll be nice to see her again."

Lady Birling nodded. "She was twelve when Sophia broke with Easterly, you know."

"Yes, I remember."

"But since she and Fenton had been promised to one another since her second birthday, we weren't worried about the scandal damaging her hopes in Society."

"And I wasn't promised to anyone."

"No, you weren't." The baroness smoothed at her skirts.

"We didn't mean to make you feel like a caterpillar. We just wanted to take any steps necessary to make certain you could marry well."

Charlotte fiddled with the rich embroidery on her bed covering. "I understand that. But I hope you know me well enough to realize that I would rather not marry than marry someone I hold in no regard."

"You mean Herbert."

"He's nice, I suppose," Charlotte returned, seeking anything that could be considered a compliment. "And neat. And I understand that you consider us to be well matched. I... I just don't agree with that."

"How seriously is Lord Matson pursuing you?"

She looked up. Her mother gazed at her in the dressing mirror's reflection, her expression somber. "I'm not entirely certain," she answered slowly. "But I do know that he's not using me to step up the ladder. Heavens, someone with his looks and wealth could do much better than me."

"Don't say that."

"Why not? You always do."

"Charlotte, I'm trying to be sympathetic. Pray don't throw insults at me."

That surprised her. "Sympathetic? In what way?" She slid off the bed to her feet. "You mean that you might permit Xavier to call on me?"

"Our situation hasn't changed, daughter. I mean that I might speak to your father about discouraging Lord Herbert. If you truly would rather be alone than married to him."

"I truly would," Charlotte said vehemently.

"You understand that you may not have another opportunity to marry. Each year you remain single, your chances will decline a little further. And don't rest your hopes on Lord Matson. Whatever his interest in you, as you said, he has other choices. You won't."

"Mama, don't think I haven't considered everything you said every day for the past year. I know who I am, and I know that I don't take young men's breath away. And Herbert will never see me any differently. If I ever marry, I would hope that it would be to a gentleman who, if he doesn't see me as beautiful, at least doesn't see me as dull."

The baroness rose. "And how does Lord Matson see you? Or do you have no idea of that, either?"

Charlotte smiled. "He says I have fine eyes."

"I'll speak to your father." Lady Birling walked to the door and pulled it open. "If he agrees, Lord Matson may call on you here. You will not go anywhere with him, and he will not court you in public. Not until this mess with Sophia has blown over, anyway. Is that clear?"

Her heart beat so fast that for a moment Charlotte thought she might faint. "Very clear," she answered, doing her best not to grin. She would at least get to see Xavier again.

By the time Xavier made his daily afternoon call at Birring House, he was revisiting his kidnaping plan. It had been twenty-four hours since he'd spoken with Charlotte, and he felt stretched tighter than a bowstring. By now he'd given up trying to figure out what it was about her that drew him, but he could no more stay away than he could stop breathing. Anthony was probably having a good laugh at his expense right now.

He tapped the knocker against the door. As it opened he held up the bouquet of red roses, ready to hand them and his card over to the butler when he was once again refused entry. Instead, the liveried servant stepped back.

"If you'll wait in the morning room, my lord."

For a moment Xavier thought he'd called on the wrong house. Recovering himself, he followed the old man into a small, comfortable sitting room and watched the door close. Perhaps Lord Birling meant to lock him away—but no key turned in the door. He gripped the flowers and paced to the fireplace and back. The baron could warn him away again, but he would return. And he would keep returning until Charlotte herself told him to go away.

The door opened again. As he faced it, Charlotte walked into the morning room. He was halfway across the floor before he registered that her maid had entered behind her. Cursing silently, Xavier brought himself to a halt. She was there; he didn't care whether she'd come accompanied by circus performers.

"Good afternoon, my lord," she said with a curtsy.

Inclining his head, he finished closing the distance between them at a more sedate pace and handed her the bouquet. "Good afternoon. I... trust you are well?"

"Yes, thank you. Won't you have a seat?" She lowered her face to the rose petals, glancing up at him from beneath dark lashes. "And thank you for the bouquet," she continued, handing them to her maid, who backed to the doorway and passed them off to a footman.

She seated herself on the couch. He wanted to sit beside her and take her hand, but whatever this was, it appeared they were to act with propriety, and so he took the chair directly opposite her. "You're most welcome."

"May I offer you some tea?"

Xavier sat forward a little. "What the devil is going on?"

Her lips twitched. "You are to be permitted to call on me."

His heart flip-flopped. "I am? Then what—"

"But there are rules."

"Rules," he repeated, settling back again. "What rules?"

"I cannot leave the house in your company, and you may not be seen pursuing me in public."

"May I be seen dancing with you in public?"

"No."

"Then I suppose kissing you is out of the question."

Color flooded her cheeks. "Yes, it is."

"Why the change? Not that I'm complaining, of course." Actually he did have a few complaints, but since they now seemed able to converse, he supposed the rest could wait a short time. A very short time.

"We were in *Whistledown*."

He nodded. "I saw, blast that woman—whoever she is. What did you tell your parents?"

"That I'd gone to the park to meet you."

Xavier lifted an eyebrow. Something had obviously changed for the better, and if he had to guess, he would say it had much to do with the fetching young woman seated across from him. "You simply told them?"

"Yes." She lowered her voice. "They made me a bit angry."

"It seems to have worked to our benefit."

"Partially, at any rate."

"And Lord Herbert?"

Charlotte grimaced for a moment. "He's not to know, either."

This agreement seemed to be even less advantageous than he'd thought. "So I'm not considered a serious suitor. And then once your engagement is announced I simply go away?"

"Xavier, they know I don't wish to marry Herbert, but my father insists that your intentions may not be... sincere, and that my chances at matrimony in the meantime shouldn't be ruined."

After he'd won her once and for all, Xavier intended to have a little chat with Lord Birling about underestimating the value of his daughter. Before he could win her, however, he would obviously need to receive permission to at least dance with her in front of other people, damn it all.

"It's a lot of rules," she continued, glancing at him and then away again. "After all, there are other single wom—"

"I can tolerate the rules," he returned sharply. "I can even tolerate damned Herbert. But I am sincere in my intentions, and I will make your father understand that."

"You are?"

"Of course I am." Relenting a little, he forced a smile. "After all, I learned a great deal about strategy in the military. I don't pursue a campaign unless I have a good expectation of succeeding."

"And all this because I defended Lord Easterly?"

A chuckle escaped his lips. "That turned my head in your direction. My ears and eyes and mouth took care of the rest." As had his heart, he was beginning to realize, but making her aware of how special she was remained a difficult enough prospect without his frightening her to death with declarations. Hell, hearing him say it aloud would give *him* an apoplexy. Xavier the rakehell falling for a quiet, restrained, witty, intelligent female.

Her lips quirking, she glanced at her maid. "I admit I have felt the effect of your mouth, my lord," she said in a low voice.

This looking and not touching was going to kill him. "You haven't begun to feel the effect of my mouth, Charlotte," he murmured. "And you're causing my patience with this nonsense to shorten considerably."

She gazed at him for a moment. "You're completely serious, aren't you?"

"About you? Yes, I am." He knew what she was asking, and he knew what his answer meant. To his surprise, though, it didn't unsettle him in the least. Rather, he felt . . . complete. And content. Or he would, if he could figure out what in damnation it would take to get her parents to agree to take his suit seriously.

"I apologize if I sound incredulous, Xavier," she continued slowly, "but my father had to go out and

find Lord Herbert when they decided I needed to marry. No man has ever pursued me. I—"

"Until now," he interrupted.

Charlotte looked down at her hands for a moment, then gazed at him again. She always looked him in the eye, he realized. He liked that about her—in addition to the other things he was swiftly coming to appreciate about her character.

"My older sister, Helen," she said after a moment, "is stunning. She had suitors practically climbing through windows to court her. And much as I love Helen, I have to say that I noticed things—the way she hated reading, couldn't bear to discuss anything but gossip and fashion, wouldn't attend the theater unless escorted by someone she wished everyone to see accompanying her—she knew how to be popular, and well-liked, and nothing else interested her."

"It's a common theme among young ladies," he returned, reflecting that he'd known dozens like her sister, and no one like her.

"But not for me," she countered, as if reading his thoughts. "None of the things that interested her, interest me. And I think I told myself that my refusing to play those games was the reason I never had any gentleman callers. But I know the truth. I'm not stunning, and I'm not exciting. And I... I want to be certain that you aren't in pursuit simply because my parents' suspicion of your motives has made this some sort of challenge to you."

He smiled slowly, unable to resist running a finger along her cheek. "You are a challenge. And please don't blame me because a shipload of very stupid men looked at you once and declared you uninteresting. I looked at you twice, and I saw what you are."

Color crept up her cheeks. "And what is that?"

"Mine."

"Xavier—"

The baron and baroness swept into the room with enough speed that they'd probably witnessed him caressing her. Damnation. Straitlaced, and spies. He couldn't imagine a worse combination.

"Good afternoon, Lord Matson."

He stood, sketching a bow. "Lord and Lady Birling. Thank you for allowing me to converse with Charlotte."

"We remain unconvinced of your intentions," her father said bluntly, "but Charlotte won't come to her senses without proof of your passing interest."

Beside him, she stiffened. At least she seemed to notice now her parents' low opinion of her desirability—and at least now it annoyed her. "Lord Matson knows all about the rules," she said tightly, "and he's agreed to follow them."

No, he hadn't. "I'm afraid that you are going to be disappointed, my lord," Xavier replied, wondering what they would do if he offered for her on the spot. He wouldn't— couldn't—take the risk, however. If they refused him, as he was fairly certain they would, he'd be put in the position of defying them

directly. While he had no qualms about that, he knew that Charlotte would.

"Charlotte is practically engaged to Lord Herbert Beetly," her mother put in.

"You've made that clear, my lady. With all respect, she has neither been proposed to, nor has she accepted any such offer. She is therefore available to be courted, and wooed."

The baron actually blinked. "True, I suppose, but if you are sincere, you are also late to the race. I have confidence in Lord Herbert and his impeccable character. I am much less certain about you."

"You won't have any doubts by the time I'm finished." He would have pushed harder, but Charlotte's face had grown pale, and she practically shook with tension. Xavier took her hand and brushed his lips across her knuckles. "I have a few errands to run. I'll call on you tomorrow, Charlotte."

"Xavier."

He could feel her pulse beneath his fingers, hard and fast. That encouraged him, far more than her parents' obvious disapproval could lower his hopes. As he strode past the Birlings and out their front door, he made a silent vow to himself. He would marry Charlotte Birling. And from then on, anyone with an unkind word for her would have to answer to him.

Chapter 7

Lord Matson continues to face resistance in his pursuit of Miss Birling.

But is it Miss Birling who is doing the resisting, or the young lady's parents?

Given Lord Matson's fine form and figure, one can only imagine that it is the elder Birlings who are proving to be anti-romantic. Miss Birling is made of stern stuff, to be sure, but surely not that stern.

LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS, 14 JUNE 1816

"I thought we had an agreement." Charlotte paced back and forth in front of her mother's writing desk. "Lord Matson was supposed to be allowed to call on me."

"Charlotte," Lady Birling replied, setting aside her pen, "he has been allowed to do so."

"Then why haven't I seen him?"

"Lord Matson is obviously a man with many business and social obligations. I told you that we doubted the depth of his commitment to you. And better to discover that now, before the gossips can make it look as though he led you on and then tired of you."

◇ That thought had occurred to her from time to time, especially at night, alone in her bed, but in the daylight her penchant for reality thankfully won out. "How can he tire of me when we never see one another?"

"Perhaps he has done so already." Her mother gave an obviously forced smile. "Now, don't you have a luncheon today with Melinda Edwards? You shouldn't be late."

Charlotte hid a sudden frown. Over the past few days she had been frighteningly in demand. She'd attributed it to her mention in Whistledown, but friends, relations, her mother, all seemed to require her presence for eating or shopping or strolling in between drizzles. Now she abruptly began to wonder whether her parents were attempting to keep her out of the house so that Xavier *couldn't* see her. He'd been given permission to call on her, but no one had said she must be home to see him. *Drat*. "Melinda sent over a note this morning begging off," she lied. "I believe she has the sniffles."

"It's this atrocious weather." Lady Birling stood. "We don't want you coming down with anything. Why don't you go upstairs and get some rest?"

A short time alone to think up a strategy seemed a very good idea. "Yes, Mama."

Not certain whether to be angry at the machinations going on around her or elated that Xavier might not have been avoiding her, Charlotte made her way upstairs to her bedchamber and sat in her reading chair. Beethoven jumped into her lap, but after a glance at the pensive look on her face, changed locations to the windowsill. So that was how her parents meant to deal with Xavier. Give their permission, make her unavailable to him, and then push Herbert into making a proposal without delay.

Her window rattled. With a yowl Beethoven leapt down and scooted under the bed, while Charlotte whipped her head around. Clinging to the window frame, a scattering of flower petals and pollen across his hair and shoulders, was Xavier.

"Let me in, Charlotte, before I break my neck," he muttered, his voice muffled through the glass.

Gasping, she unlatched the window and shoved it open, grabbing an elbow to help haul him through the opening. "What in the world—"

Sprawled on the floor, he pulled her down across his lap and kissed her hard and deep. Charlotte sank into his embrace. Her mother might call it a fantasy, but she was finding it real enough. And so intoxicating that she could hardly bear not being able to see him.

"Hello," he said after a moment, running a thumb across her lower lip.

She blinked, trying to pull herself back into a logical realm. "What are you doing here?"

Now he was stroking her fingers, concentrating on each appendage as though it were something precious. "I called at the front door first," he said in his low drawl, "but your butler said you had an

influenza and couldn't be disturbed. You're not ill, are you?"

It was a terrible lie to tell, especially to someone who'd lost a family member to the same illness. "No, I'm not ill." Relief touched his face.

"Good. But why have you been avoiding me, then?"

"How can I avoid you when you're not about?" she returned.

He gazed at her. "I've called on you every day. You're the one who's been elsewhere. Hence my trellis-climbing today."

Charlotte drew a breath. "You've called every day?"

"I told you I would."

"They told me you hadn't been by. And I've been ... sent out visiting with everyone. Even aunts I barely knew I had." Slowly Xavier nodded. "It seems some people are so convinced we don't suit that they've been attempting to force reality to match their convictions." Brushing her cheek with gentle fingers, he kissed her again.

"But it didn't work. You climbed up my trellis." Enveloped in his embrace, Charlotte carefully brushed some of the flower refuse out of his tawny hair.

"And nearly broke my neck. It doesn't look as though anyone's used it as a ladder before." She smiled. "No one has."

◇ "Well, if this nonsense continues, I'm going to bring some carpentry tools with me next time and make some repairs."

Charlotte could imagine it; Xavier slipping into her bedchamber, into her bed, in the middle of the night, while her parents thought they'd successfully thwarted any encounters at all. Warm damp started between her thighs, and she shifted closer to him, sliding her arms around his shoulders. "That would be nice."

"I suggest you not move around like that," he said, his voice more strained. "I'm not here to ravish you. Not this time, anyway."

She had no idea what to say to that. It sounded very wicked, and it sounded as though her parents were going to have to take stronger measures if they wished to keep Lord Matson away from her. Of course first they would have to find out that he'd begun calling on her in a more direct manner—and she had no intention of informing them.

"So your parents gave permission for me to call, then made certain you wouldn't be here to see me, all the while telling you I must not be interested."

Charlotte drew a breath. "They're not... evil or anything, you know. They think I'm becoming too attached to you, and that you don't return the sentiment."

Xavier lifted an eyebrow, realizing that he was perfectly content to sit there on her floor with her for the rest of the day. For the rest of his life. "They're wrong."

She sighed. "And they'll never acknowledge that fact. I'm sure they'll have Herbert proposing by Vauxhall."

Anger tore at him. "No, they won't." Setting her back a little, he touched her cheek, gazing into her soft brown eyes for a long time. "Marry me, Charlotte," he whispered.

She opened her sweet mouth, then closed it again. "I can't. Not without their permission."

Reminding himself that he liked her in part because she was at heart a good, proper chit, he took a breath. "Say for a moment that I had their permission."

"But you don't. And you won't. I love them, aside from their disbelief that I would attract anyone on my own, but they won't agree to something they think could put a blemish on the family, even if it's only in their own imaginations. No matter how much I might want it."

That was what he wanted to hear. "You would say yes, if not for that."

Slowly she nodded. "Yes."

"Then I'll manage the rest."

With an exasperated look, she plucked the last bit of pollen off his jacket. "I know you're probably used to getting what you want, but it won't—"

He stopped her argument with another kiss. Kissing her seemed the very best thing ever invented. Or the second best thing, rather. It occurred to him that if he ruined her, her parents would probably be happy to marry her off to him. But he didn't want to resort to that—though he would keep the option open. Nothing was going to prevent him from having her. He would find a way around this, because he refused to lose her to anyone else. And especially not to damned Herbert Beetly.

They talked for nearly an hour before Alice scratched at her door. With a yelp Charlotte scrambled to her feet. "What is it?"

"Lady Birling wishes to see you, miss."

"I'll be right down."

"I could hide under the bed," Xavier suggested, rising behind her.

"You could, but eventually you'd starve to death." She smiled, feeling giddy despite the poor prospects for the two of them. He'd asked her to marry him, for heaven's sake.

"Promise me something, Charlotte," he said softly, drawing her into his arms again.

"What?"

"Promise me that whatever your parents or Beetly say, you won't give in. I'll make this right."

Because she couldn't help it, she leaned up and kissed him. Could it be enough that her heart soared at this moment? Even when she knew he was bound to fail? Of course there was always the slight chance that he'd actually succeed. "I promise."

He slipped back out the window, cursing at the condition of her trellis as he descended. Charlotte watched him go over the back fence, before she joined her mother downstairs, only to discover that, of all things, her cousin Sophia had invited her to spend the night.

"Am I permitted?" she asked, eyeing the invitation. Despite their age difference she'd always enjoyed chatting with Sophia, but since Easterly's reappearance she'd barely set eyes on her.

Her mother sighed. "Your father and I have been discussing her invitation since yesterday. I don't like it, but she is family. And hopefully no one else will find out about it. But you're not to discuss Matson. That nonsense never happened, as far as we're concerned."

And obviously her mother, at least, had begun to realize that something more substantial than a luncheon or a shopping excursion would be needed to keep her unavailable to gentlemen callers. Next would probably be a surprise week in Bath with Grandma Birling. Well, she'd be as discreet as she could, but with Sophia she'd always felt like she could discuss anything. And she was desperate for a friendly ear where Xavier was concerned. "Yes, Mama."

All the while she packed her overnight bags she wondered whether Xavier would try to visit her again tonight, and then break his neck on the trellis when no one came to open the window. *Oh, dear.* Unsettled as she was, the only thing she could do about it was pack twelve times and eat the entire plate of pastries Alice had fetched for her to snack on.

Finally she dressed in her favorite blue visiting gown with matching hat and ribbons, and dove into the family coach as soon as it pulled onto the drive. When she arrived at Sophia's twenty minutes later, her cousin was waiting for her in the foyer. Lady Sophia Throckmorton always looked cool and collected and completely in control, and this afternoon Charlotte envied her for it. As aggravating as Charlotte's situation with Xavier was, Sophia had at least as many worries with her husband returning to London just as she'd decided to marry another man.

The footman had barely taken her bags when Sophia came forward and gave her a sound hug. "I'm so glad you could come!" she exclaimed. "I am in dire need of good, logical, feminine conversation. Are you hungry yet? I ordered a light dinner to be served at seven."

Now Charlotte was beginning to regret her pastry snacking. "That's fine," she replied. "I just had tea and couldn't eat another bite."

"Excellent. I'll have it brought to my room. I've been so looking forward to seeing you, but I must tell you that I have set a rule for this visit."

Charlotte lifted her eyebrows. "A rule?"

Unexpectedly Sophia hugged her again. She probably felt the need for a friend herself, Charlotte reflected, feeling guilty that she hadn't been a better cousin. "Yes, a rule," Sophia continued. "We can discuss clothes, hats, gloves, hemlines, jewelry, shoes, carriages, horses, balls, food of all sorts, women we like or don't like, and which of the latest dances we most enjoy, but we are not going to say one word about men."

Damnation. Charlotte forced a smile. "I think I can do that."

"Perfect!" Taking her arm, Sophia led her to the stairs. "Come and see the new gown I just purchased. It is blue with Russian trim, and it's just the loveliest thing. Oh, and I have a pale pink silk gown with delightful red rosettes that I think would be just the thing for you."

It sounded lovely, but abruptly Charlotte wondered whether Xavier would ever see her wearing it, and what he would think. "For me? I couldn't—"

"You can and will. I purchased it on a whim last month, but it is just not for me, and I so hate to waste things."

As they went to look at the gowns and have a nice long coze, Charlotte wondered what it would be like to be able to see a gown, decide she liked it, and just purchase it—without having to worry whether it made her look fast, would draw too much attention from possibly scandalous men. She jumped when the housekeeper scratched at the door to announce dinner was being brought up.

Chatting had been nice, but as they finished eating and Sophia poured tea, she had to admit that it had done nothing to distract her from Lord Matson. She so wanted to talk about him, to know if Sophia would understand how she felt and agree that it would be worth it to risk nearly everything to be with him.

Their conversation trailed off. Charlotte was beginning to debate whether to break Sophia's rule or not when her cousin opened her mouth to speak, then changed her mind.

Charlotte paused with the teacup halfway to her mouth. "Yes?" she prompted.

"Nothing. I was just—it was nothing."

Blast it. Charlotte went back to sipping her tea. Now she had no distraction at all, and faded cobalt eyes and a warm, soft smile seemed to lurk in every thought. It wasn't fair, that her parents' doubts over her allure and their fear of scandal could ruin her one chance at a happy life. Especially when she knew that if they would take the time to know Xavier, they would realize that he wasn't a rakehell at all—he'd been sad and lonely, and had decided to enjoy himself a little when he'd arrived in Town. It wasn't his fault, and it wasn't hers. And then there he was, stating that he could single-handedly set everything to rights, while Lord Herbert Beetly stood at the ready.

Sophia's cup clinked into her saucer. "What are you thinking about so seriously?"

Charlotte blushed. "I was thinking of—" No, no breaking the rule unless Sophia did it first. "Nothing really. I was just daydreaming."

"Your parents are at it again, aren't they? Trying to wheedle you into marrying. I vow, I would shake my Aunt Vivian until her teeth rattle."

"Oh, she means well, but—"

"They all mean well, but that doesn't mean they are right. Perhaps I should speak with Aunt Vivian and Uncle Edward about the dangers of being wed too soon. Do they not see my sad state of affairs as a warning? That every woman should wait until she is at least twenty-five to make such a decision?"

Charlotte blinked. "Twenty-five?" She wanted to marry a different man than her parents had chosen, not merely push back the beginning of her misery.

"Or older."

"Older? Than twenty-five? But that would be six years! Surely—I mean, if you met the right person, that is, if you *thought* you'd met the right person, there would be no reason to wait."

While Charlotte tried not to look too pitiful, Sophia gazed at her. "No, I don't suppose there would be any reason to wait if you'd met the right person. The problem is that there are no guarantees. I married for love, you know. Sometimes even that is not easy." She paused. "Perhaps we should suspend our rule and speak frankly about—a man, a particular man, just to give an example."

"No names, though," Charlotte broke in, remembering her mother's warning. "You know how my mother hates me gossiping." This way at least she could keep Xavier's identity a secret and still talk about him—and receive an honest opinion and advice, which she desperately needed.

"Agreed," Sophia stated.

Charlotte grabbed Sophia's hands, so grateful she felt near tears. "How nice to be able to speak frankly!"

"So it is! I believe that is why men manage to dupe us poor women so often; we do not share our feelings about them in an honest and frank manner." Sophia gave her cousin a knowing gaze. "But you know what I mean when I say that *men* are prideful, difficult creatures."

And very arrogant. "Yes, yes, they are."

"All of them." Sophia paused again, obviously choosing her words—and her advice—carefully. "And stubborn men are the worst."

Charlotte nodded. "Especially those who refuse to listen to reason, even when they have to know you've been completely logical."

Sophia's expression became more enthusiastic. "You are so right!"

"I also believe that some men enjoy causing disruptions simply so they can charge in to set things right again. Or think they can."

"That is certainly true. I also hate the way some men are forever trying to get us to—" Sophia blinked, her color deepening. "I'm sorry. Perhaps—"

"No, you're right." Her own cheeks heated, but this was the best chance she was likely to have to discuss Xavier frankly. "They are always stealing kisses. And in the most inappropriate places, too. And all you have is their word that it means anything at all." What if she was just an infatuation for Xavier, after all? What if she managed to turn Herbert away, and then Xavier turned his back a week later, once the game was won?

Her cousin stood, her expression somber. "I'd rather have Lady Neeley's horrid parrot than any man I know."

Oh, now Charlotte was making Sophia feel bad, too. "Or that monkey Liza Pemberley is forever carting about," she said, trying to cheer them both up. "I heard that it bites."

"Does it?"

"I've never seen it do so, but it would be lovely if it did," Charlotte returned with a slight smile. "I can think of at least one person I'd like that monkey to bite." Lord Herbert. Then if nothing else, at least he might change his expression for a moment.

Sophia's lips twitched. "It would be quite handy to have a trained attack monkey at one's command."

"Better than a dog, because no one would see it coming." And perhaps if she owned a monkey, not everyone would think her so dull and ordinary. She sighed. "I daresay the monkey doesn't even really bite. It always seemed quite a docile creature to me."

"Yes, but one never knows with monkeys. Or men."

"So I've noticed." She frowned. "I've often thought that...*men* ... always seem to think they know best."

"Pride. They are swollen with it, like the Thames after a rain."

Something prinked against the window. Charlotte sighed again. Splendid. More rain.

Sophia glanced at the glass, then turned back. "I also hate it when certain men refuse to admit when they are wrong. I—"

Two taps came this time. For a bare moment Charlotte wondered if Xavier had found her, but she quickly shrugged off the thought. He wouldn't risk causing her a scandal by climbing through someone else's window. "Is it raining? *What's* that?"

The sound came again. "That is not rain," Sophia declared. "It sounds more like a fool standing outside my window, throwing rocks."

She didn't seem all that upset about it, but then Sophia was poised to be married as soon as she and Easterly reached an agreement. "Ah, it must be Mr. Riddleton," Charlotte said. "He's quite infatuated with you, isn't he?"

"I don't believe he is as infatuated with me as you might think." Before Sophia could elaborate, a shower of what had to be pebbles hit the window.

"Goodness!" Charlotte exclaimed, frowning at the window. It wasn't Xavier; she was certain of that. And Sophia seemed to have a good idea, anyway. "He sounds a bit determined. I think he is using larger pebbles."

Her cousin sighed. "Perhaps I should see what he wants, before the window—"

The window shattered. The guilty rock rolled up to Sophia's toes.

"Blast it!" Sophia grabbed the rock and made her way through the broken glass to the window, looking as though she meant to hurl the stone back at the perpetrator. "I cannot believe Thomas—" She stopped, leaning out.

"What is it?" Charlotte asked, her breath catching. It wasn't Xavier; it couldn't be.

Sophia, though, seemed to know exactly who it was. Leaning further out the window, she began a low-voiced conversation with the vandal. Charlotte listened for a moment until she realized it must be Easterly himself. Now if her mother found out, she'd never be allowed to go anywhere to visit.

But if Lord Easterly had had to resort to breaking Sophia's window in order to get her attention, maybe their situations weren't that different. At least Sophia could decide who and when she wanted to see all on her own. Charlottewanted to see Xavier, wanted to kiss and be kissed by him, wanted things that he'd only hinted about, and everyone told her it was impossible. Everyone but Xavier, but she had much more experience with her parents than the earl did.

She fingered one of the rosettes on her new silk gown. He might convince the baron and baroness to let them wed, but she doubted it. The Birlings were wealthy enough that she didn't need to marry for money, and they certainly considered that Lord Herbert would add more respectability to the family than Xavier could.

It shouldn't even have been a question—and she abruptly realized why she refused to give up hope. She loved him. She loved Xavier Matson. Since she'd set eyes on him she'd been infatuated, but since they'd spoken she admired him. And now that she'd come to know him, she loved him.

" 'Ere now! Whot ye doin' throwin' rocks at a lady's winder?"

"Oh, thank you, Officer!" Sophia called.

Charlotte jumped, scrambling to her feet. Peeking over Sophia's shoulder, she could make out Lord Easterly surrounded by three men wearing the uniforms of the watch. Someone was in trouble.

Lord Easterly glared up at them, not looking very pleased. "You tricked me, you—"

" 'Ere now, guvnor! Not in front o' the ladies. Come along. It's to gaol wit' ye."

"Do you know who I am?"

Charlotte smothered a giggle. She didn't think the watch would care who he was, considering. Perhaps she and Xavier were luckier than Sophia and Easterly and Riddleton. At least she and Lord Matson wanted the same thing. Her cousin, though, seemed to want her estranged husband dragged off in chains.

Strange as the thought was, it left her feeling more hopeful. She and Matson wanted the same thing. He meant to do something about it. What could she do, then?

Chapter 8

Lord Herbert Beetly or Earl Matson? Really, ladies, which would you choose?

LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS, 17 JUNE 1816

Xavier arrived at the Birling House door just as Lord Herbert's coach turned up the drive. For a moment Xavier considered returning later, but he had a few errands to run this afternoon, and he needed to arrive at Vauxhall before Charlotte and her escort. Besides, he had no intention of setting up camp in the middle of enemy territory. He'd already chosen his field of combat.

The butler pulled open the door, nodding twice to acknowledge both men as Herbert joined them on the front portico. "My lords."

Beetly eyed him. "You're not welcome here, Matson." "Perhaps not," Xavier returned, lifting his bouquet of roses and handing it to the butler before anyone could tell him that of course Charlotte wasn't home—not for him, anyway, "but my flowers are nicer than yours."

"I didn't bring any flowers."

"No, you didn't, did you?" Xavier tipped his hat. "Good afternoon."

He hated leaving Beetly there; Charlotte had promised she wouldn't do anything hasty, but he knew that in the face of her parents' criticism and Beetly's mediocrity it wouldn't be difficult for her to forget that not only was she better than that but she also *deserved* better than that.

It killed him every time he went to that door, knowing that her parents would have removed her from his grasp. But he went anyway, to make certain the Birlings knew that he wasn't about to give up. She already knew that; he hoped she believed it.

At least he could tell himself that he only had to wait until tonight. From what he'd been able to discover, thousands would be attending Vauxhall, all to witness the reenactment of the Battle of Waterloo on the occasion of the battle's one-year anniversary. Prince George had apparently managed to spend thousands of quid on the event, money he'd had to borrow and would never repay. Considering that he would be able to see Charlotte there, however, Xavier was willing to forgive the extravagance.

"Lord Matson!"

Xavier jumped, slowing his mount as he looked in the direction of the feminine voice. "Good morning, Miss Bakely," he greeted, tipping his hat.

She approached him, two of her female friends clutching hands behind her and audibly giggling. "Good morning. Do you attend Vauxhall tonight?"

"I plan to, yes."

"It's going to be a sad crush, they say. With fireworks and a battle on the lake!"

"So I've heard." Though what an aquatic battle had to do with Waterloo, he wasn't entirely certain. "I assume you mean to attend, as well?"

"Yes, I do."

"Perhaps I'll see you there, then." She was angling for an escort, obviously, but he had other plans. Having to entertain some flighty, tittering chit while he longed to have Charlotte in his arms didn't seem a very pleasant prospect.

"My parents have rented a box on the east side of the rotunda. I'm sure they would love to see you again."

◇Hm. Showing up there once she'd invited him was a sure way to the parson's mousetrap. And the odd thing was, a few weeks ago he probably would have gone along with it: She'd been on his list, and back then he didn't care whom he married, as long as the process was painless. His feelings had obviously changed. "I'll manage if I can," he hedged.

Charlotte said that she liked him and enjoyed being in his company. Her only objection to his marriage proposal had been that her parents wouldn't approve. Xavier decided to take her agreement to heart—if *he* could get her parents to go along with the marriage idea. That particular problem continued to bother him. He'd tried being polite and reserved, and they hadn't given an inch of ground. Suave and charming hadn't worked, either. He could elope with Charlotte, he supposed, but he doubted she would willingly go so far against her parents' wishes. What he did know was that touching her, hearing her voice, had become as necessary to him as air.

Cursing under his breath, he turned his gelding south. Whatever happened, he would be ready for it; as long as it entailed Charlotte becoming his.

It took Lord Herbert's carriage twenty minutes to go from the borders of Vauxhall Gardens to the water bridge entrance. Herbert sat back in his deep leather seat looking bored, but Charlotte perched at the coach's small window peering out at the huge mob of citizens. Lords and ladies, merchants, demimondaines, actresses, shopkeepers—everyone who could afford the two-shilling entrance fee milled at the entrance for their chance to cram inside.

"I've never seen so many people all in one place," she exclaimed, telling herself that she was looking to see how many of her friends were present, and not to determine if Lord Matson was there. He'd said he would attend, but that had been days ago. He hadn't even climbed into her window since Friday, and though she'd avoided exile to Bath, her parents had seen to it that she hadn't been home to receive any of his visits.

"The crowd would be more manageable if the proprietors would raise their entrance fee," Herbert commented. "Hold tightly onto your reticule; even pickpockets pay to get into festivities like this."

"I'm certain I don't have anything to fear in your company," she said. If she was stuck with him for tonight, perhaps she could at least pretend he was gallant and dangerous.

"I'm not doing anything foolish because you can't be bothered to look after your own valuables," he replied, stepping down as the carriage stopped and helping her to the ground. "I thought you didn't like those silly games."

"I don't. What's the sense of me having an escort, though, if you don't intend to perform any action on

my behalf?"

"I'm escorting you; that's my duty. And it's your duty to stay out of trouble."

Charlotte freed her hand from his as soon as she could. "That doesn't sound gallant at all."

He gazed at her for a moment. "I might feel more gallant if I didn't know you were encouraging Lord Matson behind my back."

So Herbert did have an ounce of intelligence. "I haven't done anything behind your back."

"Hm. Next you'll be trying to buy those idiotic paste necklace baubles."

Ha. If he only knew. She carried her idiotic emerald bauble in her reticule tonight, just because it made her feel a little scandalous and free. "You seemed to admire the one Lady Ibsen wore."

Color stained his cheeks. "Nonsense. But I didn't come here to argue with you. Let's find our box and order dinner. The fireworks are supposed to be spectacular."

"So I've heard."

With Alice close behind them so they wouldn't be separated in the crowd, they pushed into the main clearing at the center of the Garden. If possible, the rotunda and pavilion were even more crowded than the periphery. The one good thing Charlotte could say about the massive crowd was that at least it created a little warmth; the evening was quite cool.

She'd worn the pink gown with the rosettes that Sophia had given her. Of course her parents had disapproved of the low neckline and the eye-drawing material, but she had to admit that she'd never felt more sensual and alive. All she needed to make the evening completely perfect would be to have Xavier by her side instead of Herbert.

"I've got us a prime box," Herbert went on, as though they hadn't been disagreeing about anything. "I daresay we'll have the best seats of anyone at the Gardens."

"How lovely," she returned. "I'm a bit hungry. Shall we take our seats?" "Of course."

Already the *faux* French and British soldiers were lined up on opposite sides of the field, awaiting their cue to begin the battle. Closer to the rotunda both Prince George and the Duke of Wellington had taken seats, though with the crowd around them she would wager that they wouldn't see much of the fight.

By the time the footmen arrived with platters of their paper-thin slices of cold chicken and ham, it was nightfall. The orchestra in the main rotunda began playing, and she sat back to watch as, with a crash of cymbals, the gas lights hung along the walks and in the trees all went on simultaneously.

Charlotte joined in the applause, still eyeing the huge crowd for a familiar, handsome face. Nothing. Her whole life had felt like this, she realized, accepting mediocrity and all the while waiting for something—someone—exciting to come along and make everything better. Maybe it was time for her to stop waiting.

"Before the battle begins, I need to freshen up," she said, rising.

"Someone will take our box," Herbert complained, scowling. "Stay here. Alice will accompany me. I'll be right back." Shortly after she stepped down from the box she heard the flurry of trumpets announcing the commencement of battle. Everyone began surging toward the field, calling encouragement and clapping with excitement.

"We'll miss Waterloo, Miss Charlotte," Alice said, crowding close to her.

She opened her mouth to answer that she didn't care, when she saw him. Wearing black and gray, Xavier stood at the entrance to the darkened Druid's Walk, gazing at her. Her heart sped. He'd come.

"I need a breath of air, Alice," she said. "Why don't you wait right here against the fence, and I'll be back in a moment."

"I can't leave you alone here! Lord and Lady Birling will sack me!"

"They'll never know. I promise. And this way you can watch the battle. I'll be fine. I promise."

"Oh, Miss Charlotte, this is not a good idea."

"It's a wonderful idea. Wait here."

Still looking terribly uneasy, her maid nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Charlotte received a few curious looks as she crossed the pavilion, but she scarcely noted them. Tonight she didn't feel like herself. Tonight she felt like someone wild and reckless and free, someone who would leave her attendant to go walking along a dark path with a handsome rake.

"You look lovely," Xavier said in a low voice as she reached his side.

"My cousin Sophia gave the gown to me."

"It suits you."

"I feel half naked."

Faded cobalt drifted down her low neckline and back up to her face again. "Not nearly naked enough," he murmured.

My goodness. He had that predatory look in his eyes, the one she'd seen in Hyde Park when his kisses had practically devoured her. Charlotte swallowed. "I'm glad you came."

"I want you to walk with me," he said, his gaze intent on her face. "But I also want to warn you. If you join me, nothing will ever be the same again. So choose carefully, Charlotte. I'm certain Beetly's waiting for you in his box. He's safe. I'm not."

"I've been safe my entire life, Xavier," she returned, then forced a nervous smile as she gazed down the path past his shoulder. "Other than the fact that it's dark, what's so spectacular down that way, anyway?"

His lips curved up in a slow, sensual smile. "Come and find out."

They weren't alone along the Druid's Walk. In several dim alcoves along the path, above the nearby

sounds of battle, she could hear whispers and the unmistakable sound of lips touching lips. Her mother would have an apoplexy if she knew her daughter was visiting one of Vauxhall's infamous dark walks, much less in the company of Earl Matson.

They rounded another curve, the gloom lit only by sporadic fireworks signifying cannon fire. "Are you sure you want to miss the reenactment? You weren't there for the original, you said."

"That's the past," he returned, guiding her beyond a low overhang. "I've recently discovered a new hope for the future." He meant her. If her heart beat any faster, it would fly from her chest. This was where she needed and wanted to be, and he was the man she needed and wanted to be with. "How far are we going?"

His soft chuckle sent a shiver down her arms. "Just here." They angled off the path to a small glade set off from the rest of the Gardens by artfully hung blankets. He'd been planning. "What if someone sees?" "I've taken precautions. Wilson?"

"Aye, my lord."

She wasn't surprised to see one of his footmen standing at the edge of the trail, gazing back in the direction they'd come from. "How long have you been planning this?" she asked, hoping her voice sounded less nervous than she felt inside.

"A few days. I've been thinking about it since we met, however." Inside the shelter of the blankets he faced her, drawing her into his arms. "I told you I was a good strategist," he murmured, tilting her face up to kiss her.

Charlotte moaned, let the soft pull of his mouth send her heart soaring. With no one to see, no one to interrupt, they could do as they wanted. She knew what he wanted; her. And she wanted him as well, with a strength and passion that a few weeks ago she would have thought she didn't even possess. Still, if her parents found out... ..

"Is this wise?" she whispered, shivering as his mouth moved slowly along the line of her jaw.

"No. But I can't help myself. Forget everything outside of this place, Charlotte. Just be with me. If you want to."

"I want to." So badly, it would hurt to walk away. She remembered the bauble in her reticule and pulled it out.

"Lady Ibsen recommended this to me," she said unsteadily.

He took it from her fingers. "Jeanette? When?"

"A few days ago. Herbert said it was tawdry, and she said that was the point."

A slow smile curving his sensuous mouth, Xavier fastened it behind her neck, then drew his fingers down along the length of chain to where the emerald rested between her breasts. "Not quite," he whispered, moving behind her. "What do you—"

Her gown loosened and then slid from her shoulders. Gasping, Charlotte held the front up over her bosom. *What was she doing?* She'd gone insane, obviously. But any thought of flight vanished as he

stopped in front of her again for another deep, satisfying kiss. As if of their own accord, her fingers relaxed, and her gown slid to her feet.

From the distant shouting and cheers and explosions, the Waterloo reenactors and audience seemed to be having a fine time, but she doubted it could compare with hers. Herbert would probably begin to wonder where she was, unless the bright lights distracted him, but she didn't care. Not tonight, not now. Not with Xavier.

All that stood between her and the night breeze was her thin shift. She expected to be cold, but as he slipped his fingers under the shoulders and softly peeled the cotton down her arms, she was only aware of heat and excitement and arousal. His kisses grew harder, more demanding, and she swept her arms around his shoulders to pull him closer.

"Xavier," she panted, kissing his throat as he'd kissed hers, "I refuse to be the only naked party in this."

He moaned. "I want you," he breathed, allowing her to push his jacket down his shoulders. His cravat followed, sinking to the ground in a wilted lump. With his gentle tugging her shift crept down her shoulders, exposing her breasts and then her belly and her legs to the dim moonlight and flashes of fireworks. Xavier tapped the emerald bauble again where it hung heavy and cool now against her bare skin. "Now that is how you should always wear it."

His deft fingers brushed across her breasts, and she gasped again, arching toward the pressure. "Good heavens." Xavier chuckled, rolling her nipples between his thumb and forefinger. "Do you want to sin tonight, Charlotte?"

"That's why I'm here." She drew another unsteady breath. "But please hurry, because I don't want someone to stop us before . . ." She wanted to say *before she could be satisfied*, but that sounded completely wanton and scandalous.

She tugged his shirt free of his trousers and ran her hands up the warm skin of his chest. Smooth, and yet she could feel the steel beneath. His muscles jumped beneath her touch, and she realized that she affected him as much as his touch affected her.

With her help he pulled the shirt off over his head, and then he lowered them both to the blanketed ground. It excited her even more to know that he'd gone to such lengths to be with her. She wanted to ask what would happen tomorrow, after his male lust had been satisfied, but as he shifted her onto her back and then took her left breast into his mouth, she didn't care what might happen after tonight. She felt hot and coiled inside, growing tighter and tighter, waiting for something only he could provide.

His suckling deepened, and she wrapped her fingers into his tawny hair, pulling him harder against her. The faint mewling sounds she made hardly sounded like her, but none of this was like her. With his free hand he undid his trousers and shoved them down, then leaned down along her to kiss her deeply again.

His arousal felt big and hard against her thigh, and she coiled still tighter inside. "Xavier, now," she demanded, shifting uncomfortably.

He nudged her knees apart and settled between her legs. "Say you'll marry me," he demanded, his own voice shaking at the edges.

"But I—"

"I don't care what anyone else thinks, Charlotte," he interrupted, easing forward so that she could feel him pressing intimately between her legs. "Say you'll marry me."

She could barely form a coherent thought, much less a coherent sentence. "Yes," she rasped, rifling her hips.

Slowly he thrust forward, entering her. Charlotte yelped, but he muffled the sound against his own mouth. "Shh. Relax, my sweet. Just relax."

The pain subsided, and he resumed his slow slide deep inside her. Nothing she'd ever felt could compare to this— so ... satisfying, and yet leaving her wanting so much more. "Xavier." In a moment he began to move, his slow, steady rhythm drawing her tighter and tighter. With a loud cheer the fireworks exploded into a celebration of faux victory. She moaned in time with his thrusting, while faded cobalt, nearly black in the dimness, gazed closely at her. Fireworks, cheering, heat, sweat, the weight of his warm, muscled body, filled her until with a surprising rush she shattered. "You belong to me," he growled, following her into release. "Me."

For several long moments Xavier didn't want to move. In advance the plan had seemed abysmally stupid and desperate. Actually planning a rendezvous and securing a secluded glade for it. But then she'd appeared, looking for him, and it had worked.

While his breathing and heart slowed to normal and before he became too heavy for her, he buried his face in lavender-scented hair. This was where he was supposed to be; not at Waterloo gaining glory at the expense of thousands of lives, not sitting alone in Farley Park wishing Anthony were there to shoulder the burdens of the estate and title, not sitting in the smoky dark wagering or sinning with someone just so he wouldn't have to face going home alone.

Charlotte brought something into his life, something he'd known he lacked but had never been able to put a name to. In her company, with her in his arms, he felt... content. And indescribably happy.

The pavilion's main orchestra began playing Handel's *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, and more multicolored rockets began shooting into the sky. They'd been here too long; Charlotte's escort would be missing her. The problem, Xavier reflected, was that he didn't want to give her back, even temporarily.

"I don't suppose we could live here in Vauxhall Gardens," she said, echoing his thoughts as she slowly ran her hands along his back. "Like Robin Hood and Maid Marian?"

He chuckled as he reluctantly shifted off of her, sitting up to run a hand through his hair. "It's tempting, but it seems a bit extreme."

"I suppose so."

She shivered a little, and he reached over to grab her wrist. "We need to get you back before you freeze to death."

"Being in Herbert's company doesn't precisely warm my heart," she returned.

At the edge of frustration in her voice he leaned in and kissed her, long and deep. "That won't last any longer than tonight," he said. "You made me a promise."

Soft brown eyes met his gaze. "Short of my complete ruin, I don't see how my promise will persuade

my parents." Charlotte brushed her lips against his throat. "It probably would have been better if you'd never noticed me."

His heart lurched. The thought bothered him sometimes, that he'd nearly passed her by without a thought. "No. You belong with me, Charlotte. And for that reason I'll be forever grateful to Lady Neeley and her missing bracelet." He helped her on with her gown, unable to resist kissing the nape of her neck as he fastened the back of the dress.

"Oh," she moaned softly, bowing her head.

That was that. He wouldn't be able to stand parting from her. "Charlotte, what would it take, truly, for your parents to stop this idiotic plan with Herbert? Short of my murdering the bastard, of course."

"I don't know. I've run out of logic, Xavier. They don't believe in me. And you can't force faith."

"You can encourage it, though," he stated, pulling the emerald bauble free from her gown and setting it between her breasts again. God, she'd bought that because she wanted to be scandalous, with him. And he wasn't about to abandon her to mediocrity. "As far as I'm concerned, you've married me already."

"Oh, Xavier," she breathed, eyes wide, "once again there seems to be a huge chasm between fact and faith."

"I'll bridge it, Charlotte. I'll find a way," he returned, shrugging into his trousers. "I play to win."

"But my parents—"

"I'm not in love with them, Charlotte," he said quietly, watching as she unhooked her necklace and dropped it back into her reticule. There she was, the portrait of propriety again. Except that he knew better. "I'm in love with you."

"You ..." She drew a breath, gazing at him for a long moment. "I'll be at the Frobisher ball tomorrow night, Xavier. Will you be there?"

"And what will change between now and then? We're going to see your parents tonight."

"No. Give me one more chance to reason with them."

"Charlotte—"

"Have a little faith in me, Xavier," she said, smiling softly.

If it had only been trust in her, he would have acquiesced without hesitation. Risky as the delay was, he could see in her eyes how important this was to her; more important than even he probably realized. "I have faith in you, Charlotte. *That is a fact.*"

With a last, lingering kiss, he took her hand and guided her back out to the path. His servant would fold up the blankets and remove all traces that anyone had ever been there. As they neared the end of the walk, the glow from the fireworks and the noise of the crowd increased.

"Look, they've set the pagoda on fire," she commented, leaning into his shoulder with an ease that made him want to reconsider relinquishing her to damned Herbert even for a moment.

"At least it's warmed the evening up some. Charlotte, I will take care of this tonight, if you wish."

"I know. But you've done so much for me. Now it's my turn." She leaned up to whisper in his ear. "I'll see you tomorrow night."

"I'll be there."

Chapter 9

Although the burning pagoda attracted the most attention last night (more, This Author is afraid, than did the actual reenactment), This Author could not help but take note of Lord Herbert Beetly, who sat through the entire spectacle alone in his box, with a decidedly angry expression on his visage.

And in a decidedly uncharacteristic display of emotion, Lord Herbert heaved a chair out of his box, smashed it to the ground, and strode away, his grand departure marred only by his unsure footing, which saw him sprawled in the grass, and then, sadly pelted by a meat pie.

This Author is told that the offending pastry was lobbed by a raucous cockney.

LADY WHISTLEDOWN'S SOCIETY PAPERS, 19 JUNE 1816

"Obviously the solution is not to let you go anywhere without one of us as your chaperone," Lord Birling said, handing his greatcoat over to the Frobisher footman. "And getting lost at Vauxhall could have been serious. There are pickpockets and highwaymen everywhere along those paths, you know."

"And that Chinese pagoda burned to the ground! Thank heavens you weren't anywhere near it," her mother put in.

Charlotte closed her eyes for a moment. They'd been chewing this same subject for the entire day. She'd been as direct as she'd dared in her statements that she had no intention of marrying Lord Herbert Beetly, and that someone else had caught her heart. Her mother seemed to understand, but neither of her parents appeared to be able to believe that someone as spectacular as Xavier Matson could return the sentiment.

She felt less sympathetic with their nonsensical panics and doubts now, knowing just how honorable Xavier's intentions were. A man—*theman*, as far as she was concerned—desired her, wanted her in his life, as much as she wanted to be a part of his.

And since logic had obviously run as far as it could before expiring, more drastic measures had become

necessary.

Of course, those measures would require Xavier's presence— and in that moment, she saw him. He stood to one side of the crowded room, gazing at her. The deep blue of his jacket brought out the blue in his eyes, and he looked like some long-forgotten Greek god come to the Frobisher ball to walk among the mortals. Her heart pounded. He'd said she belonged to him, but the reverse was true, as well. He belonged to her.

"Charlotte, I am not going to warn you again. Do not gawk at that man."

"Yes, Mama," she said absently, shrugging out of her shawl and starting across the room toward him. She'd said it was her turn to take action, and now was as good a time and opportunity as she was likely to find.

As soon as she moved, he left his post and came toward her. Her parents would never understand that she didn't care about a stupid bracelet, or Sophia's scandal, or anyone else's opinion. She behaved as she did because it was the right thing to do, not because her misbehavior would bring down London Society or the Birling family.

"Hello," she said, slowing as they met in the middle of the ballroom.

"Good evening," he returned, his gaze sweeping her from head to foot. "Any luck?"

"Not a smidge," she returned.

Brief anger and frustration flashed in his gaze. "Then perhaps you should wait here, and your parents and I will have a chat."

Charlotte shook her head. "I have a better idea."

He lifted an eyebrow. "And what might that be?"

"I love you," she whispered, taking a small step closer, her heart pounding so hard she thought it must burst through her chest. *You can do this*, she told herself. She had to. For him, for them, for her.

"I love you," he replied, tilting his head a little, obviously trying to gauge what she had in mind.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, she went up on her tiptoes, splaying her fingers along his shoulders for balance, and kissed him. All around them guests gasped and roared and tittered in a deafening cacophony. She didn't care.

She felt his stiff surprise, and then his immediate response as he deepened the kiss before lifting his head to look down at her with glinting eyes. "You are in so much trouble," he whispered, then smiled. "And so brilliant."

Xavier took her hand, turning her to face her parents. "Lord and Lady Birling, thank you for not making us wait to announce our betrothal," he said in a carrying voice, strolling in then" direction, "and thank you again for giving me Charlotte. She is..."

His voice actually faltered a little, and Charlotte looked up at him, squeezing his hand. "We're very happy," she put in.

The baron's mouth hung open, and with visible effort he snapped it closed again. "Yes, well, we knew you didn't wish to wait to make an announcement," he stumbled, white-faced.

"Nor do we wish to wait to marry," Xavier put in, a slow grin warming his eyes. "I was at Canterbury this afternoon, securing a special license for us. I would like her to be my wife before the end of the week. I love Charlotte with all my heart. If not for her fondness for you, I think we might have eloped."

Her mother came back to life. "Well, thank heavens you didn't do that. I couldn't imagine the scandal."

Charlotte couldn't help her chuckle. She'd won. Yes, her parents—or her father, at least—would be angry, but she had a feeling that Xavier could be as persuasive with them as he'd been with her. And nothing anyone said could keep them from being together.

"Charlotte," he said softly, while a crowd of well-wishers surrounded them and her parents—who seemed swiftly to be adapting to the situation, "you are remarkable."

"You make me that way," she replied.

Xavier shook his head. "Perhaps I made you see it, but that's all. You excite me, and intrigue me, and I can't imagine being anywhere but with you."

"Just be quiet and kiss me again," she demanded, and with a chuckle he complied.