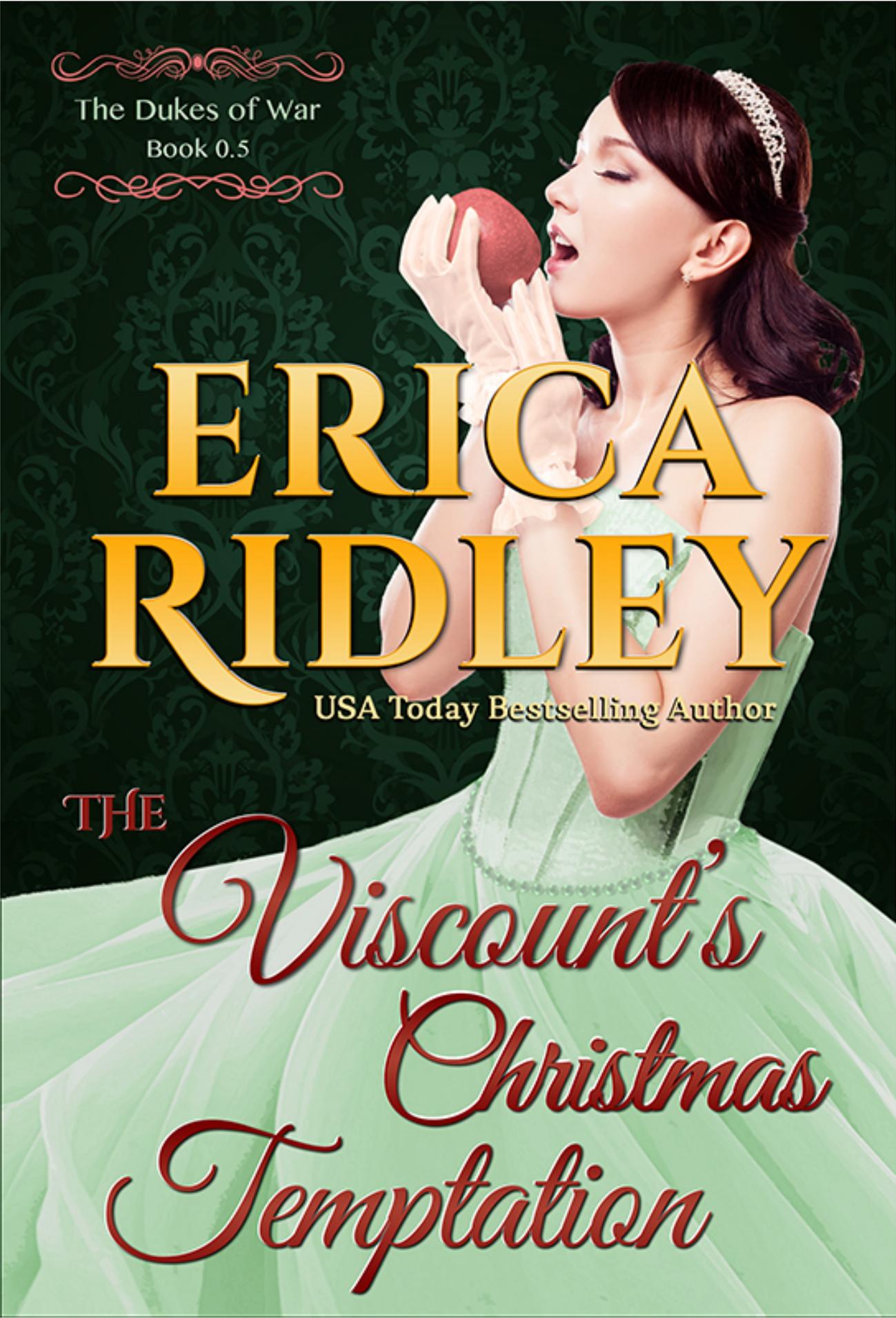




The Dukes of War
Book 0.5

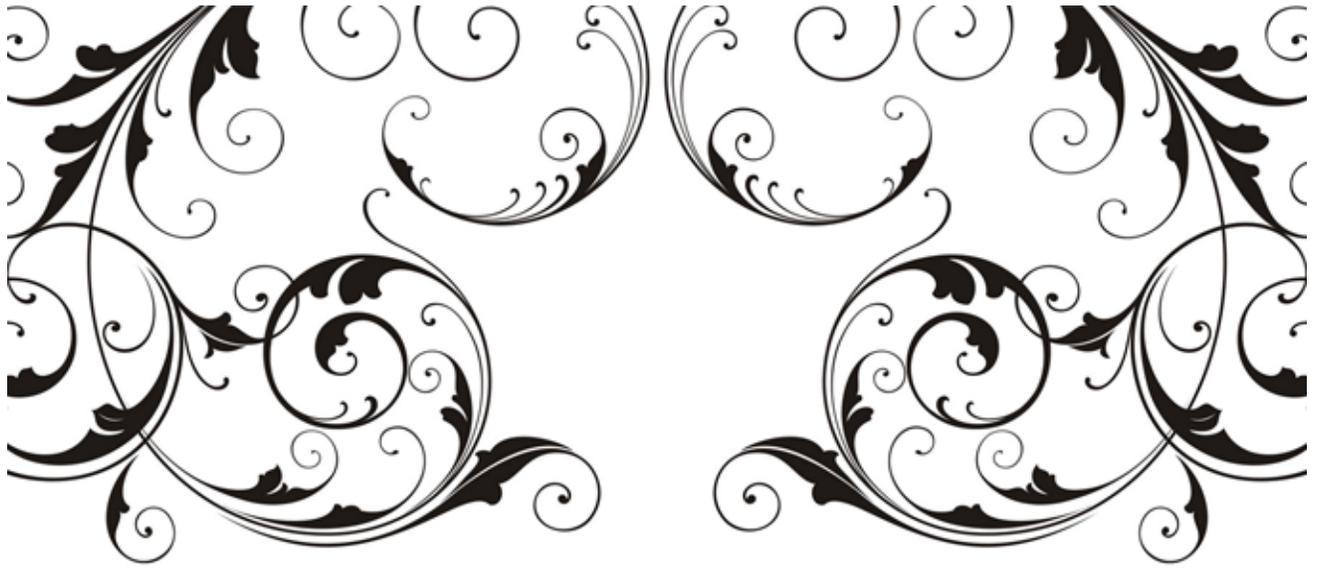


ERICA
RIDLEY

USA Today Bestselling Author

THE

*Viscount's
Christmas
Temptation*



*The Viscount's
Christmas Temptation*

DUKES OF WAR #0.5



Four left for war . . .

One stayed home.

Chapter One

December 12, 1815

London, England

Lady Amelia Pembroke glanced up from the well-worn almanac in her lap as her brother, the Duke of Ravenwood, strode into the yellow parlor with a distracted frown.

The yellow parlor, despite being part and parcel of the winter ducal mansion, was strictly Amelia's domain. The bookcases were lined with rows of leather-bound journals containing page after page written in Amelia's small, precise hand. The cherrywood table nearest the bay windows contained the day's correspondence, stacked according to priority. The oversized basket beside her wingback chair brimmed with a week's worth of periodicals, the ink worn gray from having been handled many times.

Amelia marked her place with a crisp green ribbon and set the almanac aside. Her brother's presence could only mean he needed her wisdom on some matter. There was nothing she cherished more than the opportunity to put her mind to practical use.

Although she knew a kiss was not required of her—being an unproductive use of one's time—she rose from her chair to buss her brother's cheek. Ravenwood had always been a very solemn, duty-oriented young man, but both his smiles and his presence had been far scarcer these past few months, ever since his childhood friends finally came home from war.

Some of them, that was. A black armband never failed to encircle Ravenwood's upper left arm. She fought the urge to hug him close. Were it not for having already inherited a dukedom, he would undoubtedly have followed his friends off to war.

Less certain was whether he would have made it home.

She walked to the fire to mask her shiver.

“Good morning, brother. To what do I owe the honor of this visit?” When he didn't join her before the fire, she turned to face him. “Is anything amiss?”

Ravenwood ran a hand through his wavy chestnut hair, upsetting the careful work of his valet.

Or not. Given the popularity of the “frightened owl” hairstyle today, Amelia couldn’t fathom much effort being involved at all.

He glanced at the clock upon the mantel. “I hate to bother you with last minute changes—”

“Whatever the issue, have no fear. My plans are meticulous enough to withstand disruptions of any sort.”

“Yes, well, even you could not have foreseen this disaster, and nothing will fix it. This afternoon’s luncheon—”

Before he could complete this thought, a knock sounded upon the parlor door.

With an apologetic smile, Amelia held up a brief finger to indicate the conversation would continue shortly. “One moment, I’ve been awaiting a messenger. Enter!”

One of the lead footmen slipped into the room, his face concerned. “I was unable to fetch Miss Azzara, my lady.”

She raised a brow. “She was not at home?”

“Oh no, my lady. Were that the case, I would surely have awaited her return. I’m afraid Miss Azzara has contracted the mumps, and will not be able to perform today after all.”

Ravenwood's mouth parted in surprise. "Miss Azzara of Drury Lane? You'd mentioned we would provide musical entertainment as part of today's luncheon, but I never dreamt you meant the second-most celebrated opera singer in all of London."

"A good thing, too, since it seems it shan't happen."

"Let this be a lesson, Amelia. No plan is too meticulous for unforeseen circumstances to derail."

She inclined her head to her brother and turned to address the footman.

"Thank you. That will be all."

He bowed. But before he could quit the parlor, a second footman arrived. This one, in grand contrast, was all smiles.

"Package delivered, my lady. Butler put her in the rose parlor, with the pianoforte."

"Put . . . 'her'?" Ravenwood echoed faintly.

"Miss Catalini," the footman explained. "She's to sing this afternoon. Her man is already practicing scales with her."

"Miss Angelica Catalini?" Ravenwood swung his head back toward Amelia. "The *first*-most celebrated opera singer in all of London?"

"We promised musical entertainment," she reminded him with a smile. She nodded to the footmen. "Thank you, gentlemen. You did well."

Ravenwood continued to stare at her. “You knew Miss Azzara would contract the mumps?”

“Of course not. As I have tried to impress upon you, a smart woman plans for every exigency.”

He gestured at the footmen’s retreating backs. “And if both songstresses should have arrived?”

“Then they might have taken turns in sets, or performed a series of duets.” She steepled her fingers. “Now it will simply be an exclusive.”

Distant carriage wheels crunched upon the frozen gravel of the ducal drive.

Ravenwood turned to her in horror. “Early! I knew there was no time to change course, but cousin Blaylock can usually be counted upon to arrive a half hour late to any gathering. Under the circumstances, I would’ve supposed their pace to be even slower than usual, what with—”

“Don’t make such a kick-up. ’Tis not our guests.”

“But how can you—”

Two downstairs maids appeared at the still-open doorway, one with wringing hands and the other shooting her quick, bolstering looks.

“Peggy. Martha. Do come in.”

Both maids rushed forward, nearly tripping over each other as they curtsied. The one with the ashen face spoke first.

“I know it’s washing day, mum, and I’m much needed here, but my niece is dreadful sick—”

“*Dreadful* sick,” put in the second maid. “Hottest fever you ever did see, and her a moppet of not more than two years.”

“It’s not my day off until next week,” the first maid continued, “but Peggy’s is today, and she’s offered to switch with me—”

“No problem at all, mum, not when I been there meself—got four cherubim of my own, y’know. All been sick at one time or another.”

“If you’ll say it’s alright, that is.” Martha wrung her hands. “She’s just a baby, and as I can’t afford a doctor—Not because of you, mum! Your wages are fairer than anyone! It’s just that there’s only my mama in the house, and we had to patch up a few holes for the winter—”

Ravenwood cut a wide-eyed glance at Amelia as if he’d never heard more convoluted storytelling in his life. And why would he? She imagined this was likely to be the first direct contact he’d had with the under-servants since . . . ever. The running of a household was a woman’s job, and the running of this particular household had been her exclusive domain since their mother died, when Amelia was fourteen. If it had run like clockwork all this time, it was due to nothing less than her meticulous planning.

“Of course,” she said to the maids. “Peggy, you may report to the laundry. Martha, a hack has just arrived for you and is waiting outside. In it, you will find a medical doctor, as well as a small parcel of children’s books you might read to your invalid as she convalesces. Hurry now. Return only when the fever has broken, and not a moment sooner.”

“Thank you! Thank you!” the maid gasped as she curtsied, then fairly flew down the hall.

Ravenwood gaped at Amelia. “You cannot expect me to believe that you summoned a hack, a surgeon, and a parcel of books on the off chance that someone’s niece or nephew would take ill today.”

“Don’t be absurd. I had the news half an hour ago, and would’ve sent Martha on her way forthwith had she not been racing through the manor in search of someone to switch laundry days with her. Unless you object to the expense?”

That startled a laugh out of him. “Buy the girl a library of children’s books if that’s your wish. The only thing that surprises me is that those two maids were patently *unsurprised* that you were not only aware of the problem, but had already put steps in place toward its solution.”

“Why should they be surprised? As mistress of this household, it is my responsibility to keep it running smoothly. They expect nothing less and, frankly, I’m hurt that you would suppose otherwise.”

“Hurt! You must know that I think you in possession of the finest mind in all of England. That doesn’t mean I cannot marvel at it from time to time. Nor should you fly into a miff if one of these days, something does not go according to plan.”

“Such as the reason you stalked in here in high dudgeon this morning?”

“I shall ignore the gibe about ‘high dudgeon’ and inform you of the problem at once, before another thirty servants march about like pawns upon your chessboard. Cousin Blaylock had declined our invitation because his wife is increasing, but I’ve just got a note saying that they’ll be arriving after all, and are only a posting-house away. They’ll be here within the hour.”

“That’s hardly a catastrophe. He’s the most kindhearted parson of my acquaintance, and his young wife is a dream.”

“Did you not hear me say she’s also increasing? Blaylock’s note says she wishes to join us for luncheon, but her stomach cannot abide the sight or smell of fish. I’m guessing salmon is one of the very things the kitchens have spent the morning preparing.”

“An exceedingly good guess.” Salmon was her brother’s favorite dish, and since he attended luncheons so infrequently, Amelia strove to always have it present when he did. “Just a moment, please.”

Mrs. Brown, the housekeeper, hurried toward them from down the corridor. She dipped a curtsey when she reached the parlor. “You rang, my lady?”

Ravenwood narrowed his eyes at Amelia. “You rang? When did you ring? I’ve been standing right next to you!”

“She rang a quarter past, I’m afraid.” The housekeeper’s cheeks flushed. “There was a small to-do with Miss Catalini’s tea, but it is all settled now.”

“You did quite right by attending to our present guests first,” Amelia thanked her warmly. “Now then. Please instruct the cook that we will substitute sirloin of beef instead of fish at luncheon today. The rest of the dishes will remain unchanged. I trust there will be no problem?”

“None at all, my lady. The beef is very nearly done already, and I must say it all smells delightful. Your guests will be quite pleased.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Brown. That is all.”

Ravenwood held up his hands. “When did you— How—?”

“The moment I read Aunt Blaylock’s letter.” Amelia gestured at the neatly stacked piles of correspondence atop the cherrywood table as she settled into her wingback chair. “Do have a seat.”

He sank into the chair opposite as if he barely registered its presence. “Is there anything you don’t know?”

Amelia laughed. “Reams of things. I haven’t the least idea how many attend Parliament, for example, or what the new issues will be for 1816. That is your domain. But I do consider it my responsibility to know everything there is to know

about anything that could be considered *my* domain. I believe I am quite adept at the management of people and events.”

His green eyes twinkled. “You’ve certainly managed me since the day I was born.”

“I was but three years old when you were born,” she protested. “I didn’t start managing you for at least another year.”

Before her brother could reply, the underbutler strode into the parlor with a tray bearing two biscuits and a single glass of port.

Ravenwood’s shock gave way to humor. “You’re drinking spirits now? I would too if I had to play puppet-master all day in this household. In fact, it’s quite bad of you not to have at least ordered a matching glass for me. I do intend to steal one of those biscuits. Cinnamon raisin is my favorite.”

The butler presented him with the tray. “For you, my lord.”

Ravenwood cut his gaze to his sister. “You can’t be serious.”

She arched a brow. “As it happens, the staff is on standing order to bring this specific refreshment at once, should you enter the yellow parlor while I am managing my household duties.”

The butler gave her a bow. “It would have been much sooner, my lady, had we not also been in the midst of seeing to Miss Catalini. I do beg your pardon.”

“As do I. I love these biscuits.” Ravenwood took an appreciative bite. “But why a glass of port?”

She widened her eyes. “So that you feel welcome in my little cave.”

“That is to say, why so few biscuits and only one glass? Why not a dozen biscuits and the port decanter?”

She smiled wickedly. “So that you do not overstay your welcome.”

He laughed and held up the glass in salute. “To the best sister a brother could have!”

She grinned back at him, thrumming with satisfaction.

Despite his levity, no one took duty more seriously than the Duke of Ravenwood. He’d inherited the title whilst still at Eton and, like her, had spent the rest of his life devoted to exceeding expectations. In fact, the only duty she could think of that he hadn’t thrown himself into wholeheartedly was his duty to beget an heir.

Her throat dried as her guilt came back. To beget an heir, he would first require a wife. And the most logical reason for her duty-oriented brother not to have acquired a bride was because he believed his first loyalty lay with his sister. Not just because she was (slightly) older and could have been married off years ago, but because her entire life consisted of running this household. If he were to marry, that job necessarily must go to his duchess—leaving Amelia in the cold.

Rubbish, of course, but just the sort of romantic reasoning her brother would come up with. There was only one way to disabuse him of such a loyal but wrongheaded notion. It was time to put off the inevitable. She loved sharing a home with her brother, but could not keep standing in the way of his future happiness.

She had to get a husband.

But where to begin? She stretched her slippered toes toward the fire as she considered the problem anew. Her thirtieth birthday was coming up fast—the day after Christmas! Good heavens. A young lady in her twenties sounded ever so much more marriageable than a spinster in her thirties. Nothing for it. She'd simply have to bring a suitor up to scratch before Boxing Day.

She reached for a large leather volume that always rested within easy reach of her correspondence: *Debrett's Peerage*. The perfect resource for thinning the chaff. A fortnight should be plenty of time to make a selection.

Her brother glanced up from his second and final biscuit. “What are you reading?”

“Catalog.”

As expected, his attention immediately returned to savoring the last biscuit. If that was the pinnacle of happiness in the man's life, then by God, was he in want

of wife! She would turn her mind to him next, but not until she was no longer his perceived responsibility.

She opened the *Peerage* to the first page. The book did not include likenesses of the peers of the realm, but physical beauty was not something that interested her. Nor was the state of a man's coffers. She would bring her husband a sizable dowry, made all the more impressive due to her having removed it from the five percents at a young age, choosing her own stocks for the principal and investing the interest elsewhere. The already grand sum had tripled over the past decade alone.

It was time to find someone to spend it on. She flipped through the pages. Earls, marquesses, dukes . . . What was her pleasure?

She had, of course, studied the matter thoroughly. A title was important insofar as planning for the futures of any offspring. Young people who were called Lady This and Lord That quite simply had more advantages than those who were not. Which meant barons and viscounts need not apply.

Nor would it do to be *bored*. While the gold in her husband's pockets was immaterial, a large household was paramount. While her spouse was off doing lordly things, she would pit her wits toward restructuring their household as efficiently as possible. Once it fairly ran itself, she would set about providing heirs,

who would doubtlessly offer a lifetime's worth of situations to be managed. Just think of all the strange new problems she'd be likely to face! Absolutely brilliant.

“That's not a catalog.” Her brother set aside his empty glass and plate to peer across the maplewood table. “Why the devil are you reading *Debrett's Peerage*?”

“It most certainly is a catalog, and the most expedient one at my disposal. I've decided to take a husband. His name must be within these pages.”

“You can't husband-hunt in a book!”

“Perhaps you cannot. I intend to make a sensible match. How do you feel about the Duke of Lambley? Relations of his are diplomats somewhere in China. I can't think of anything more practical than a marital alliance with ties to the Silk Road.”

“Lambley?” Ravenwood exploded. “I forbid you from even considering an unrepentant rake such as—What am I saying? Do not suck me into your stratagems, Machiavelli. I will not be involved.”

“Machiavelli was a narrow-minded egoist, and I'll thank you not to compare us a second time. I should be shocked to discover 'self-centered' among the words that best describe me.”

“Don’t fly into one of your starts, I was just quizzing you. If you were at all self-centered, it wouldn’t have taken you thirty years to come up with the idea of getting married.”

“Twenty-nine, puppy!”

“Nonetheless, while I recognize that I cannot fathom by what means you realize your various plans, I cannot think that one’s life love is to be found within the pages of a book.”

She snorted. “*You* might be susceptible to poetry and long walks in the garden. Falling in love is for people who don’t know how to plan. But if you insist I apply my efforts toward men I already know, I shall choose from among your friends. The Earl of Carlisle might do. I hear his estate is an absolute nightmare.”

“You stay away from the dukes of war!” he thundered. “I would not have any one of them toss their handkerchief at my sister.”

Dukes of war, indeed. Trust Ravenwood to coin such a flowery phrase—and use it so disparagingly. “I thought they were your closest friends?”

His eyes shuttered. “They were.”

“Ease your mind. I’m not a debutante whose head is turned by a pretty face and smart regimentals. I’m looking for someone less . . . elemental.” She held up the *Peerage*. “I obviously won’t know which of these fine gentlemen is to be my

future husband for at least another week, but you cannot deny it is an excellent resource for trimming the names down to a manageable list.”

“And *then* what? Gad about knocking on doors?”

“Of course not! First impressions are key. Which means an elaborate gown, an intricate hairstyle, and dim ballroom lighting.”

Ravenwood leaned back in his chair. “Are you saying you’ll contrive to get all these paragons of eligible bachelorhood under one roof?”

“That unparalleled efficiency has already been done for me. In twelve days, everyone in this book will be at the Sheffields’ seventy-fifth annual Christmas Eve ball.” She set down the *Peerage* in order to flip through the tallest stack of correspondence. She frowned when she could not easily find what she sought.

“The invitation must be in here somewhere . . . Viscount Sheffield always sends them out by the first of December, and today is the twelfth.”

“Well, you’re half right. Today is the twelfth. But there’s not going to be a seventy-fifth annual Christmas Eve ball this year.”

“What do you mean, ‘this year’? This is the only year he can have a seventy-fifth annual ball. Next year would be the seventy-sixth, which won’t count a button if he skips years willy-nilly in-between.”

Ravenwood shook his head. “Not willy-nilly. Canceling wasn’t his choice.”

“Oh, stuff. He’s only the viscount, and the sole master of his affairs. Does the holiday conflict with his pleasuring this year? I’ve heard he’s quite a rattle for hunting parties or Gentleman Jackson’s. Don’t tell me he’d rather spend the evening at some gambling hell than continue tradition.”

“I can’t rightly say where he’d rather be, but the man loves parties. A stroke of lightning took the matter right out of his hands. You can claim his family’s holiday party as a London institution all you wish, but the orchestra stage is nothing more than ashes and the whole of the interior stinks of smoke.”

“When did this occur?” she demanded. “I didn’t hear a word.”

“A fortnight ago. He kept it out of the papers. Between the weather and the holidays, renovation won’t be completed until spring.”

She sniffed. “I’m sure *I* could have had it ready by Christmas, had I been consulted when the incident first occurred.”

Her brother laughed. “You mean if you had any say whatsoever in Viscount Sheffield’s business? In any case, it’s too late now. You said it yourself—even *you* couldn’t restore the venue in time for Christmas.”

She arched a brow. “Who said the soirée needs to take place in the same old ballroom? All we need is a new venue.”

“*We?*” Ravenwood reared back, horrified.

“Not you, dear brother. Viscount Sheffield and I.”

“Does the poor flat even know who you are?” Ravenwood burst out.

Her smile turned calculating. “He’s about to.”

“It’s impossible!” Her brother gestured wildly. “It’s not just a question of venue. It’s finding a great number of staff to work the holiday, an exorbitant amount of food, an army of chefs to prepare it, an orchestra for dancing, any number of other entertainments, all at the last minute, then sending out handwritten invitations to everyone in that cursed book of yours informing them of the new details and praying they haven’t made alternate plans. . .” He shook his head. “I’m sorry, Amelia. It would take more than a miracle. There’s only twelve days left.”

She pushed to her feet. “Then there’s no time to lose.”

Chapter Two

Benedict St. John, Viscount Sheffield, had a complicated relationship with his pocket watch.

He wasn't married to it, of course. Besides being a silly notion, he still held the same view on marriage as he had for the past five-and-thirty years: Not yet. He simply had no *time* for a wife.

No, the problem—or the joy, depending on one's vantage point—of his relationship with his pocket watch was that eight o'clock occurred twice a day. Benedict cleaved to that magic number, for it demarcated two very different aspects of his life.

From eight in the morning to eight in the evening, he was focused, take-no-prisoners Lord Sheffield, with nary a second's thought spared on women or horseflesh or merrymaking. At precisely eight in the evening, however, the sands shifted.

Woe betide the fool who brought business matters to Benedict's ears during the precious hours when he distanced himself from the relentless weight of his duties as lord! For as assiduously as he focused his entire being on taxes and tenants and politics and land during his working hours, he threw himself just as wholly and as recklessly into mind-numbing entertainments during his evening hours.

It was the only way he *could* be breakfasted and at his desk by eight of the clock every single morning. He just had to throw every fiber of his being into his affairs until the clock tolled eight, whereupon he could finally throw every fiber of his being into his . . . well, also his affairs. The more pleasurable kind. Which he oughtn't be thinking about at the moment, because there was almost half an hour of office time left. If he kept his mind sharp, he could balance one more table of accounts before heading to the theater, where he intended to select a new mistress for a private season of off-stage performances.

Accounts. Right. Focusing, he dipped his pen into the standish and began totaling the first row of sums. He made it through the first few pages before his butler appeared in the doorway.

Benedict frowned. *No one* called upon him during working hours without prior arrangement. "Yes, Coombs?"

“I’m afraid there’s a Lady Amelia Pembroke here to see you, my lord. She was most insistent.”

“I trust you informed her that I was not receiving, and refused to let her in?”

“Of course.” Coombs hesitated before continuing, “She said she would simply wait until you are receiving.”

Benedict put down his pen. “Wait where, pray?”

“Upon the front step, my lord. I’m afraid the lady brought . . . the lady brought . . . a *book*. She cannot be budged.”

Benedict tilted his head, impressed. Rather than attempt to barge her way in, she’d come prepared to wait him out—on the front stair, where every eye in every townhouse in the whole crescent was likely watching her. Intrigued despite himself, he tugged at his fob and checked the time on his watch.

A quarter ’til eight. Damn.

“Did the lady mention whether she was calling for business or for pleasure?”

“Both, my lord.”

He coughed. “Both?”

“She would not elaborate. She said . . . she said explaining the intricacies of her design to a butler would be a waste of both our valuable time, and that each of us would operate far more efficiently minding the tasks in which we’re

experienced. Then she pulled out a book and a pair of spectacles and sat down on the front step to read.”

Benedict mentally canceled his plans for the theater. He loved actresses, found them endlessly diverting in fact, but was forced to admit he’d never once been *intrigued* by one. They were beautiful, simple creatures, which was precisely what he liked about them. After a long day of arguing in the House of Lords or negotiating business contracts or managing tenant properties, he liked to disconnect his brain and let the rest of his body reign for a few hours.

At least, he’d always thought he liked that. He was beginning to suspect he liked being intrigued even more. He consulted the hour again.

Still a quarter to eight.

A sudden thought occurred to him. “Do you mean to say we’ve got a *lady* with her *derrière* freezing to ice atop our slush-covered concrete?”

Coombs shook his head. “Not at all, my lord. She brought several rugs and a warming brick, and had her coachman clear off the steps before she settled in. He’s got eyes on her, even if he can’t talk her back into the carriage.”

Benedict drummed his fingers atop his leg. She hadn’t just been prepared in case she had to wait—she’d known it would happen! She’d planned for the lost time, for the denied entry, for the slush upon the stoop, for the inclement weather .

..

He shoved his watch back into his pocket.

Business *and* pleasure, the chit had said. He certainly hoped so. “By all means, Coombs. Show the intrepid lady in.”

He returned to his sums until footsteps sounded out in the corridor. Eight o’clock. Perfect timing. He sheathed his pen.

Let the games begin.

He pushed to his feet the moment the lady appeared in his doorway.

Her hair was a rich brown and her eyes a clear green, but despite the fine cut of her gown or the becoming flush upon her cheekbones, those were not the aspects of her appearance he found the most incredible.

She was *dry*.

There wasn’t a spot of snow on her pristine slippers. No hint of dampness to her velvet-and-ermine pelisse. No sign of the book or the warming brick or the infamous rugs. She had not only planned to be kept out, she had also planned to be let in!

“Who *are* you?” he found himself asking, his tone at complete odds with his usual charm and decorum.

She dipped a pretty curtsy. “Oh dear, I have you at sixes and sevens. I am Lady Amelia Pembroke, sister of Lawrence Pembroke, whom you perhaps better know as the Duke of Ravenwood.”

He peered behind her. “Where is your chaperone?”

“*Elder* sister,” she enunciated crisply. “At nine-and-twenty, I find myself *being* a chaperone rather than requiring one. If you suspect I have come to trap you to the altar, have no fear. Once our brief partnership has concluded, you will have no need to lay eyes on me anew. In fact, interacting in person need not happen beyond just this once. It would be far more efficient for us both if I were allowed to handle our business from here on out.”

He leaned back. “What, may I ask, is the nature of our business?”

She inclined her head. “Just so. It came to my attention earlier today that you had canceled the seventy-fifth annual Christmas Eve ball. I would have called upon you immediately, but I’m afraid a prior engagement tied my hands until this very moment.”

He tried to make sense of her words. She was apologizing for not descending upon him more promptly for a meeting he’d never in his wildest dreams anticipated?

“I didn’t cancel it,” he found himself protesting. “The ballroom burned down. There’s nowhere to *have* a party.”

She beamed at him. “So you agree!”

He blinked. “I agree with what?”

“That the problem is the venue, not the soirée. It’s settled, then. You may return to your business. I shall handle all the arrangements. We’ll be ready to announce the new location by the end of the week.”

“We . . . What new location?”

“I haven’t decided yet, of course. I didn’t wish to undertake any investigations until having spoken with you. Not only would that have been presumptuous, it would have been a shocking waste of time if you and I weren’t in agreement that the party must not be canceled.”

He shook his head. “We’re in agreement?”

“Wonderful.” She clasped her hands together. “Now, lest you think I am in any way out to swindle you, let’s have done with the subject of money once and for all. Neither of us hurt for coin, so in the interest of expediency, I am prepared to finance this year’s soirée from my own pocket. You’re a very busy man, and I am certain you wouldn’t wish me to hound your doorstep at all hours of the day, begging for pin money for this florist or that sous chef.”

“No, of course I . . . *Stop.*” He held a finger close to her lips. “No—don’t open your pretty mouth until I’ve had a moment to think.”

She returned his gaze with the most placid of expressions. He wasn’t quizzed for a moment.

As he considered his extraordinary guest, it belatedly occurred to him that he'd forgotten to bow. Well, it was too late for that. The introductions, such as they were, had done. But it wasn't too late to take hold of this quickly deteriorating situation before it spiraled completely out of hand.

He hoped.

Lady Amelia was apparently so determined that his family party take place, she was willing to organize it herself and finance the entire endeavor.

Unfortunately for her, those were the two arguments least likely to sway his mind.

Unlike most peers, Benedict had inherited his title not from his father, but from a distant uncle. He had not been raised with the expectation of inheriting so much as a shilling, much less groomed for the role of viscount. He hadn't even been next in line. One day he'd been a happy-go-lucky poor relation, and the next he was attending a mass funeral after a devastating outbreak of scarlet fever.

Everything he knew about the viscountcy, he'd had to teach himself.

Everything he now owned, every penny the estate was now worth, came from ten years of hard work. If there was one thing he was constitutionally unable to do, it was relinquish any control of his hard won self-sufficiency. And there was perhaps nothing more closely entrenched in the viscountcy itself as the annual Christmas Eve ball.

If there was a second thing he was constitutionally unable to do, it was allow some other *parti* to finance any aspect of his personal or business affairs. To allow outside help might suggest Benedict unable to perform his duties, but to incur a debt of any kind would *prove* it.

Plainly speaking, there was no chance in hell Lady Amelia would get her way.

On the other hand, it was after eight o'clock at night and Benedict saw no point in longwinded explanations or upsetting the lady. The best course of action was to act receptive until after she quit his townhouse, and then send an elegant note of apology on the morrow, indicating (in writing!) that after thinking it over, he had no wish to pursue the holiday party, nor was there any need for her further involvement. There. It was settled. He had only to humor her until then.

“That is a very interesting proposal,” he said aloud, careful to keep his smile engaging but his tone noncommittal. “If we were to pursue such a route, where would you relocate the festivities?”

Her response was brisk. “The most obvious choice is Ravenwood House, my brother’s Hyde Park estate. While most aristocratic families winter in townhouses just like this one, I don’t believe I’m exaggerating if I say that the ducal grounds boast the same square footage as this entire crescent. While nothing can replace

what you've lost, the Ravenwood ballroom can certainly accommodate the correct number of guests in a comparable level of luxury and style."

He was no longer surprised to hear she had a ready, well-reasoned answer. If anything, he was pleasantly surprised to find himself capable of scotching it.

"As generous as your offer is, I cannot accept it. I'm certain it is the sin of pride at play, but I could not in good conscience allow a Sheffield ball to take place under the Ravenwood roof. The guests would quite properly consider it the first annual Ravenwood ball, which, as it happens, is not a poor idea. Why don't you pursue that instead?"

"Because it is at odds with my goals. I have put together many successful events over the years, but frankly, no invitation carries the prestige and sense of tradition like one with 'Seventy-fifth Annual' embossed across the top. My soirées are well-attended. But yours? No one wishes to miss a fête their family has attended for three generations."

He tried to look sympathetic. "In that case, I am very sorry that it didn't work out."

She frowned. "Of course it will work out. All we've done is agree that it cannot be at your estate, and it cannot be at mine."

"You *agree* that it cannot be at Ravenwood House?"

“Tis not my party. The location deserved to be mentioned, however, since it *is* the most convenient. Which brings us to independent venues. The expense of finding and staffing such a location is much greater at this late date, but the advantages are threefold. First, it is a neutral location, untainted by any other family’s title. Second, the very fact of not being a traditional ballroom increases the possibilities for alternate forms of entertainment, which will be an even bigger draw to your guests. Third, choosing a fashionable location will ensure the attendance of those who wish to see and be seen. The more attractive the entertainment and the easier it is to attend, the greater the chance of realizing the entire guest list.”

Another rational, well-thought-out answer. He crossed his arms. “Why are you doing this?”

She smiled benignly. “I manage things. You have a project that needs managing.”

His spine snapped up straight. “I’m quite capable of managing my own affairs. I’ve done so for the ten years I’ve been viscount—”

“Yes, yes, and you’ve done a marvelous job.” She patted his arm. “No one is doubting your ability to improve upon tradition and somehow make every year’s Christmas Eve ball even better than the last. What I do doubt is that you have the

next fortnight free to do nothing more than apply yourself to relocating this year's soirée without sacrificing any of the cachet."

"Exactly! I love Christmas and deplore the idea of breaking tradition, but I already devote twelve hours a day to far more pressing matters, and cannot possibly drive myself mad undertaking something so easily skipped." He crossed his arms. "The ball may be a highlight of the season, but it's necessarily a low priority. It's as simple as that."

She tapped a finger to her cheek. "Are you . . . laboring under the misapprehension that you are debating me? To my ears, it sounds very much like we arguing the same side. You want the holiday party. I want the holiday party. You don't have time to devote to it. I have all the time in the world. What am I missing?"

"That I don't want *you* to do it," he blurted out. "I don't need your money, nor do I wish my family tradition to be altered by someone who is not family."

"Ah. Why didn't you say so at once? That's the easiest of all things to resolve."

He blinked. "How?"

"You'll pay for every penny of it, of course. You'll have full approval of the venue. And I'll submit a change request log to you every morning in writing, to which you can respond by dashing quick checks or Xs next to each line."

A rushing sound filled his ears. “Change . . . request . . . log?”

“I have attended every one of your Christmas Eve balls since my come-out twelve years ago.” She held up a hand. “No—don’t apologize for not recognizing me. It is the one time a year we are under the same roof, and they are infamously glorious crushes. You’ll be pleased to know that I took extensive notes every single year, and am reasonably confident that if your venue had not burned down, I could have recreated the exact experience to a button.”

He stared at her. “You took extensive notes? On my holiday parties?”

“I would’ve been foolish not to. I was mistress of my brother’s ducal estate by then, and what better example to copy than the most celebrated fête of the year?” She waved a hand in the air. “My point is that I, of all people, am uniquely qualified to not only follow your family traditions as closely as possible without draining your time with direct supervision, but I can also recognize when elements must be unavoidably altered, and provide you with a detailed list in plenty of time for final decision-making.”

He couldn’t believe his ears. “Christmas Eve is two weeks away! How is that plenty of time?”

“Twelve days, to be precise. I doubt I will require half of that if money is no object, and you respond to my daily missives within . . . three hours. Does that sound like an efficient plan?”

He narrowed his eyes at the casually dropped *three hours*. He'd bet his left arm that, if asked, she could recite compelling reasons why three—not two and not four—hours was ideal turnabout. He was equally certain that she'd purposefully framed her final yes-or-no question as asking whether he believed the concept to be efficient, instead of whether he wished to go forward with it.

Clever, clever girl.

“How about I let you know what I think after I've had a chance to consider these independent venues, as you put it. I suppose you have that chosen as well?”

“Not at all. I have narrowed it down to three. I won't be able to provide you with a recommendation until I have visited them all, with an eye specifically turned to replicating your family tradition as faithfully as possible whilst taking advantage of the new location's unique assets.”

“I see. And I suppose you intend to start on this first thing in the morning?”

“I intend to make significant progress in the next few minutes. My coachman is awaiting me outside because my next engagement begins promptly at nine. You can expect my report on the Theatre Royal to arrive sometime before dawn.”

The theatre. His lips quirked. How ironic. “And if I wished to be present on this investigative expedition?”

She arched a brow. “Do you?”

He was startled to find that he did. "I do."

"Then grab your coat. They're expecting us backstage within the hour."

Chapter Three

Benedict eased down from his carriage onto the slick winter street and strode just in front to the Ravenwood coach, where its tiger was opening the door for the intriguing lady inside. Benedict stepped between the groom and the open door, and offered his own arm to help Lady Amelia out of the coach. The fact that she likely didn't need his or anyone's assistance only made him less willing to let go. Her potent mix of brains and beauty was difficult to resist. He half-marveled that she had not had the foresight to contract all the street sweeps of London to clear the ice from the curb leading to the theatre door.

Then again, given her polite but firm set-down to his butler, the lady was likely to view such an extravagance as an inefficient use of the street sweepers' time.

Lady Amelia rested one gloved hand in the crook of Benedict's arm and used the other to raise her skirts a safe distance from the inch of slush coating the muddy streets. He was treated to a brief flash of shapely ankles and leather half-

boots—the same ones she'd undoubtedly worn whilst reading her novel on his front stoop. On the other hand, was this woman truly the sort to “waste” time on a novel?

He tucked her closer to his side as they hurried toward the theatre entrance. He hunched against the icy breeze out of habit. He'd ceased feeling cold the second Lady Amelia's fingers curved about his arm. “My butler informs me you had a book on your person when you came to call.”

She did not look up. “His vision is excellent, my lord.”

“Was it your journal?” he pressed. He wondered if she kept a diary as well . . . and what she might write about him. He hoped something scandalous. He'd love to make it come true. “With your notes on my holiday parties?”

“Journals, plural.” Her clear green eyes met his. “And, no, it was not.”

“Journals, *plural*?” This new intelligence was so startling that he completely abandoned all interest in whatever tome she'd brought earlier. “How many can you possibly have?”

“Five, plus a slimmer volume for indexing each cross-reference. All six are in the carriage, should you wish to verify their comprehensiveness for yourself.”

“There is no need.” He did not doubt their presence. What he could not comprehend was what the devil she'd managed to say about his parties for five indexed journals. “Did you carry parchment and ink with you about the ballroom?”

The corners of her plump rosy lips quirked. “That would be highly impractical.”

“To be sure! Then how did you remember whatever on earth it is that you have annotated in five journals?”

Her eyes widened. “I stored the details in my memory pantry. As I fully intend to do tonight.”

An usher swung open the doors to the theatre and bustled them out of the cold and into the gilded reception hall.

Benedict scarcely noted the sudden warmth, so intent was he on the tranquil woman at his side. “In your *what?*”

“My memory pantry.” She eased into one of the plush lobby chairs to accept a fresh change of shoes from her groom.

Benedict tried not to be distracted by the much longer glimpses of her silk-stockinged ankles.

She handed her sodden half-boots to her groom then turned her piercing gaze back to Benedict. “There are twenty-six fruits, for example. A is for Apple, B is for Blackberry, and so on. I memorize facts by picturing each new detail with a pantry item. The sillier the juxtaposition, the better. It’s no challenge at all to recall vivid imagery later.”

“No challenge at—Yes. Thank you.” He relinquished his greatcoat to the usher and accepted his own change of footwear from his tiger. The lady was ingenious! “That is quite a trick. Even so, I cannot credit that five journals can spawn from twenty-six images, no matter how vivid.”

“Memory *pantry*, my lord. Not memory *shelf*.” She brushed out her skirts. “Those were the fruits. My pantry also contains vegetables, meats, drinks, pies. . . More than enough to fill a simple journal. I daresay I’ll run out of facts to record before I run out of ingredients to assign them to.”

Incredible. He offered her his arm. He would not be letting her go any time soon. “But—”

Before he could complete his question, the theatre manager himself appeared in the lobby and lowered himself in a deep bow. “Lady Amelia! Lord Sheffield! I am honored to provide a small tour of the theatre. I would love to show you about for as long as you wish, but the next show begins in an hour, and I cannot postpone the performance. Patrons have already begun to arrive.”

Amelia nodded thoughtfully. “How much money would it take for you to agree to do so?”

“Cancel the show?” the manager gasped. “Now? Tonight? But it is Grimaldi himself, in *Robinson Crusoe*!”

“Not tonight,” she said soothingly. “Christmas Eve. Could you reschedule that to another time?”

“Could I reschedule—*Christmas Eve*—” the manager choked, his face purpling.

She spoke more slowly. “Is there a performance scheduled for that evening?”

“Yes, of course! Since the theatre is closed on Christmas, Grimaldi’s last performance as Friday is to be that evening, and Miss O’Neill will be reprising her role as Juliet earlier that afternoon. I couldn’t possibly—”

“Splendid. By simply moving Mr. Grimaldi’s performance one day forward, we have solved all logistics without any hassle. Mind you, we still haven’t decided if we will select this establishment. We’re simply ensuring there are no impediments.”

“But Lady Amelia, *Grimaldi!* The gentry can have no argument with postponing at your ladyship’s convenience, but—the dukes! The earls! ’Tis impossible, my lady.”

“They won’t have to alter their plans one whit,” she replied calmly. “’Twould be a different event, but held at the same time and place. I can’t think of anything more convenient to our needs.”

The manager sent an imploring look in Benedict’s direction.

Benedict could do little more than lift a shoulder in empathy. It was plainly apparent that if Lady Amelia set her mind to bringing about a given circumstance, no force on earth could slow her down.

“Come now,” she said briskly. “The next performance begins in less than an hour. I believe you wished to give us a brief tour of the less public areas?”

“Yes, I . . . Of course, of course.” He bowed. “My lady had enquired about evacuation routes in the event of a fire, and what steps must be taken to ensure hot foods are served hot, and cold dishes cold.”

Benedict stared at her. “Are you this exacting every time you go to the theatre?”

“Don’t be absurd. I *am* fastidious when the responsibility for my guests’ safety and enjoyment falls upon my shoulders. Your shoulders, that is.” She fixed him with wide green eyes and a slow blink of thick chestnut lashes. “We can skip safety and enjoyment if you like?”

He tucked her hand closer to his side. “By all means, madam. Let’s have our inspection.”

In short order, he found himself intimately acquainted with the proscenium arch (opulent), the stage floor (enormous), the dining possibilities (atrocious), the actresses (lovely), and the famous harlequin Joseph Grimaldi himself (an unparalleled genius).

“Do say we’re staying for his performance,” he murmured into Lady Amelia’s ear. Her skin smelled of rosewater. He leaned closer, then jolted upright when he realized he’d all but asked for permission, as if he were leg-shackled to the chit instead of gammoning her until he could cancel upon the morrow.

To her credit, Lady Amelia raised no brow over the gaffe, and responded with an indifference that rankled worse than toad-eating. “You may do as you wish, of course. Since I’ve only previously viewed the stage from the private Ravenwood box, I haven’t the least notion of the sightline or acoustics from the side balconies, front galleries, parterre, or lower stalls. I shall stay just long enough to note the differences in sight, sound, and general comfort from each strategic location.”

“Just long enough to—” He didn’t bother to hide his amusement. “In other words, you don’t intend to relax and enjoy the performance?”

She stared at him as if she’d never heard the terms *relax* and *enjoy* before in her life. It was more than a little concerning.

“Of course not.” She turned toward the stairs leading to the highest boxes. “Once the performance begins, it should only require a few moments in each locality to ascertain its suitability as a vantage point. I should be home in bed with my report already dashed off to you in a matter of hours.”

“Your report to *me*?” he repeated, trying not to picture her reclining in a bed.

“Aren’t I standing right here with you?”

Her brow knitted. “Clearly. But my notes will be an invaluable resource once we’ve multiple venues to compare.”

He shook his head in disbelief. “No.”

She bristled. “Of course they—”

“Obviously your report will be the finest and most comprehensive treatise ever written about the Theatre Royal on the subject of ballroom appropriateness and guest safety. But as the manager said—it’s Grimaldi! He makes an astonishing Friday.” Benedict laid his hands upon her arms in sudden realization. “Have you never attended *Robinson Crusoe* for fun?”

“Fun?” she repeated blankly. She tilted a baffled gaze up at him. “Why would I do that?”

Why, indeed. He stared at her with something akin to horror. Had he been feeling sorry for himself for nineteen long years of twelve-hour workdays? He far preferred his stolen hours of mindless entertainments to the idea of never being entertained at all. It was pitiable, really, that a woman this clever should not know what it was to disconnect her wits for a moment to simply enjoy the world about her. Something ought to be done! And he was just the man to do it.

Deuce take it, the fetching Lady Amelia needed him even more desperately than the Christmas ball needed her.

Which, he recognized wryly, meant he was going through with her party scheme. He smiled. It also meant he had twelve nights to teach Lady Amelia to enjoy life.

“How can you say with certainty whether any activity delivers the proper level of guest delight, if you do not allow yourself to experience pleasure for pleasure’s sake?”

She blinked.

He grinned, inordinately pleased with himself for having phrased *come enjoy this evening with me* in such a way that she could not possibly refuse. “I shall permit you to drag me all over Town in search of the perfect venue if you allow me the pleasure of escorting you about said venue, with a goal no more profound than to enjoy whatever pleasures the location has to offer.”

She pursed her rosy lips. “These are the terms of your acceptance?”

“Indeed.”

“Very well.” She sighed. “Shocking waste of time, but at least there are only two more left to visit.”

He smiled at the challenge in her eyes. Silly chit. He’d already won.

He could not attend to her during the days, of course—rules were rules, and his daytime hours were already spoken for. His evenings, however . . . The lady didn't know it yet, but for the next fortnight, his evenings belonged to her. They would both part ways richer for the experience. He would enjoy an unbroken streak of Christmastide soirées, and she . . .

She would be introduced to pleasure.

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