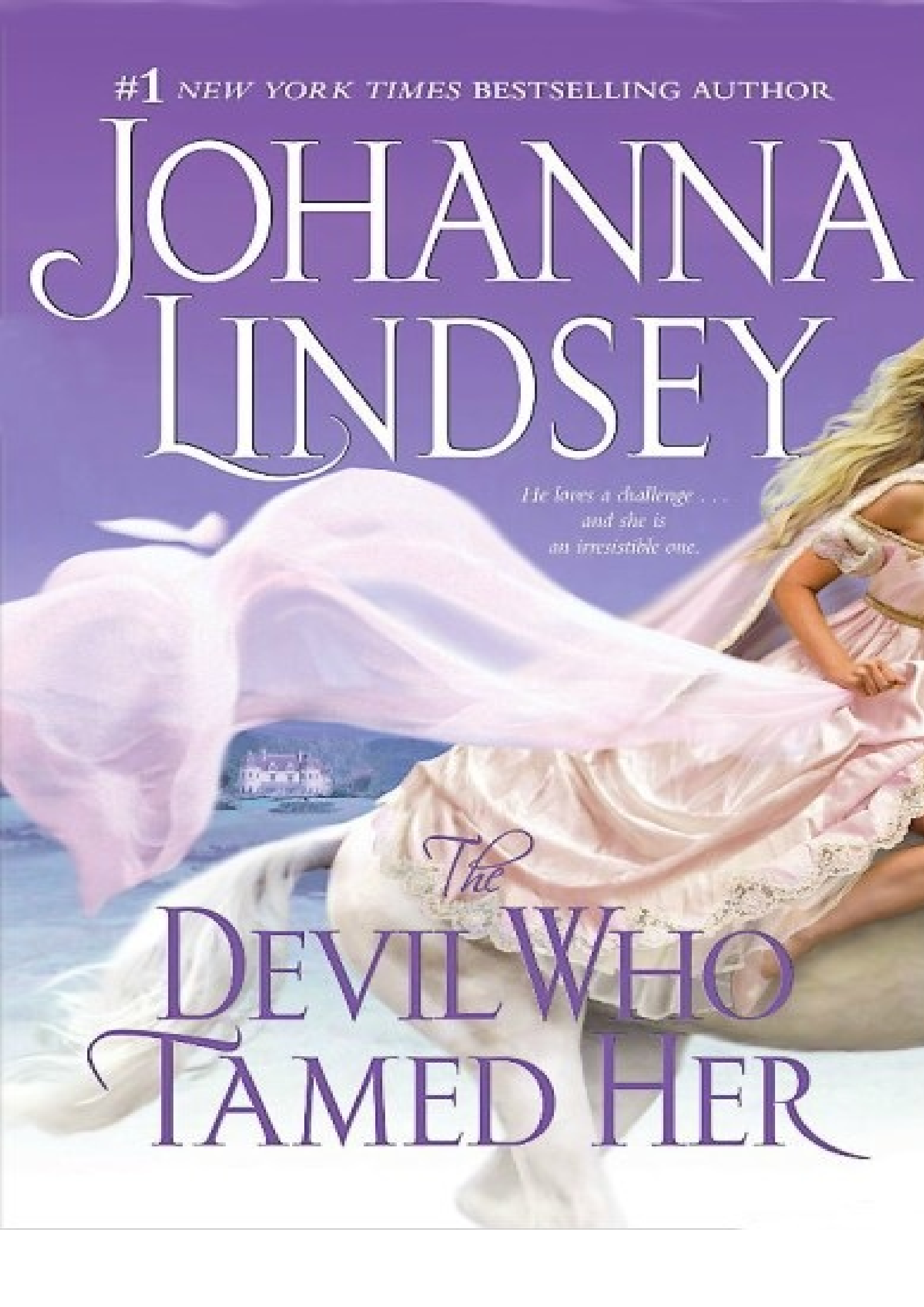


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JOHANNA LINDSEY

*He loves a challenge . . .
and she is
an irresistible one.*

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a white, flowing, lace-trimmed dress, is riding a white horse on a sandy beach. The horse is galloping, and the woman's dress is billowing in the wind. In the background, there is a large, multi-story house with a red roof and a blue sky with a few birds flying. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

The
DEVIL WHO
TAMED HER

Devil Who Tamed Her

Johanna Lindsey

Also by Johanna Lindsey

Captive of My Desires
Marriage Most Scandalous
A Loving Scoundrel
A Man to Call My Own



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*For Sharon and Douglas, who made
sneakers and mashed potatoes a recipe for memories.
Thanks for so many years of laughter.*

Chapter One

IT WAS QUITE A DISTINCTION to be the most beautiful and desirable debutante to join the marriage mart in a century, and also be the most hated woman in England. Oddly enough, Ophelia Reid had strived for that distinction, on both counts. It was her bane to be so beautiful that people behaved like utter fools around her.

The people gathered at Summers Glade, the Marquis of Birmingdale's country estate, were no different. Ophelia stopped at the top of the grand staircase. She'd hoped the foyer would be empty, but no such luck. It appeared that many of the people who had come for her wedding to the marquis's heir were gathered below, some who were, apparently, already aware that the wedding had been called off and were preparing to leave. Others appeared confused and were talking excitedly. But the moment she appeared, all eyes turned to her, and as usual the whispering began.

It might appear to the people below that she was making a grand entrance. She was rather fond of doing so and was quite practiced at it. But not this time. A grand exit was more like it, though not by her choice. She had *hoped* to leave unnoticed.

"When are you going to tell me what happened?" asked her maid, Sadie O'Donald, who was beside her.

"I'm not," Ophelia said stiffly.

"But you were supposed to get married today."

As if Ophelia could have overlooked that appalling fact. But now wasn't the time to discuss it.

"Hush, we have an audience if you hadn't noticed."

Sadie said no more as she followed Ophelia down the stairs. The whispering grew louder. Ophelia even caught a few bits and pieces of conversations.

"First they're engaged, then they're not, then they are again, and now they've changed their mind yet again. She's too fickle, if you ask me."

"The groom said it was a mutual decision to cancel the wedding."

"I doubt it, she's just hard to please, but I would be too if I looked like her."

"I agree. It's a sin to be that beautiful."

"Careful, dear, your jealousy is showing."

"—spoiled rotten if you ask me."

"Shh, she'll hear you. She has a viper's tongue, you know. You don't want her turning it on you."

"Good God, she's beautiful. An angel, a—"

"—back on the marriage block. Don't mind saying how delighted I am. Gives me a second chance."

"I thought she turned you down before the Season even began."

"Me and countless others, but we didn't know she was already engaged to MacTavish."

"Don't waste your time. Your title isn't grand enough for her. She could have a king if she set her cap for one."

"Surprised her parents didn't aspire to that. They're appalling social climbers, you know."

"And she isn't?"

"She just turned down the marquis's heir, what does that tell you?"

"That her parents are going to be furious with her, as they were when—"

"Now Locke there might stand a chance as the next Duke of Norford. Surprised to see him back in England."

"He's not interested in getting married, or did you never hear that he left England just to get away

from all those marriage-minded—”

Ophelia pretended that she hadn't heard any of those whispers, but the mention of Raphael Locke Viscount Lynnfield, made her look at him. She'd known he was there in the foyer bidding some of her acquaintances good-bye, or possibly leaving as well. He was the first person she'd noticed when she reached the stairs. But then a man as handsome as the Norford heir had drawn her notice from the moment she'd first glanced at him.

She'd even considered him briefly for a husband, before she'd gotten reengaged to Duncan MacTavish. But Locke had obviously gone over to the enemy camp, the camp that thought the worst of her. What had he called her? A “spiteful rumormonger.” He'd even threatened to ruin her if she told anyone she thought that he'd been bedding Sabrina Lambert.

She *had* thought it was true. Why else was he paying so much attention to that little wren Sabrina? But he could have just told her she was mistaken, instead of insulting her. And she wished it had been *anyone* but him who'd caught her crying upstairs.

“How are we getting home?” Sadie whispered when they reached the bottom of the stairs.

“In my coach, of course,” Ophelia replied.

“Your coach doesn't have a driver. The blasted man hasn't returned yet.” Ophelia had forgotten about that. Her father's man hadn't wanted to bring her back to Yorkshire in the first place, and once they'd arrived here after much persuasion on her part, he had insisted he'd lose his job if he didn't return to London posthaste to let her parents know where she had run off to. As if she hadn't intended to send off a note to them herself. In due time. When she stopped being so furious about that slap her father had given her after Duncan had broken their first engagement and they'd all been ousted from Summers Glade.

“We'll just have to borrow one of the marquis's footmen, I suppose. That fellow bringing down my trunks will do. You can inform him while I wait in the parlor.” She would have preferred to wait outside, away from the marquis's remaining guests, but while she'd already donned her traveling coat it was designed to flatter her figure, not to provide warmth, and in the heart of winter it was simply too cold to stand outside for any length of time. But since it appeared that most of the guests were in the foyer waiting for their own coaches to be brought around, she hoped the parlor would be empty.

She moved into that room. It wasn't empty. The occupant was the one person she'd hoped never to see again, Mavis Newbolt, her onetime best friend, now her worst enemy. And it was too late to find a different place to wait. Mavis had noticed her.

“Running away with your tail between your legs?” Mavis smirked.

Oh, God, not again. Hadn't her former friend said enough when she'd arrived to prevent what everyone involved considered a tragic marriage? Apparently not.

“Hardly,” Ophelia replied, her emotions well in hand now. Her old friend was *not* going to make her cry again. “How galling it must have been for you to do me that favor today, so I wouldn't have to marry the Scotsman.”

“I told you I didn't do it for you. You're the last person I'd ever help.”

“Yes, yes, I know, you were playing the heroine just for Duncan's sake. But you still saved me from having to marry him. I suppose I should thank you.”

“Don't!” Mavis snarled, the curls on her head shaking. “No more pretenses, Pheli. We both hate each other—”

“Stop it!” Ophelia cut in sharply before the wound opened again. “You don't have your audience now to revile me in front of, so the truth if you please. You were the only real friend I ever had and you know it. I loved you! If I didn't, I wouldn't have tried to protect you from Lawrence by showing you the truth about him. But you preferred to blame me for his perfidy. And, how did you put it? That the only reason you continued to abide my presence is you were waiting all this time to witness my

downfall? And you called *me* spiteful?"

"I told you I barely recognize myself anymore," Mavis said defensively. "But that's your fault. You made me so bitter that I don't even like myself."

"No, I didn't, *he* did. Your precious Lawrence, who used you to get close to me. There, I've finally said it. I tried to spare you that too. He was begging me to marry him all the while he was courting you, but I'm done protecting you from the truth, Mavis."

"You're such a liar! And yet you branded me one in front of our friends."

"Oh, so now they're 'friends' again, those two leeches? When you pointed out today that Jane and Edith are no friends of mine? As if I don't know that? And you provoked me that day I called you a liar. You know you did. How long did you think I'd continue to put up with your catty, snide remarks without retaliating? You know better than anyone how little patience I have. But I reserved it for you. I certainly have none left for Jane and Edith, who we both know only come around because it's fashionable to be seen at my side. But you failed to mention that today, didn't you, when you were reviling me for all my faults. You claimed I use them?" Ophelia snorted. "You know very well it's just the opposite, that every one of my so-called friends use me and my popularity to further their own ends."

Good God, you used to point that out yourself, when *you* were my friend."

"I knew you'd come up with excuses," Mavis said stiffly.

"The truth isn't an excuse," Ophelia countered. "I know all my own faults, and my temper is the worst of them. But who usually sets off my temper?"

"What has that to do with how spiteful you are?"

"You're the one who brought it up, Mavis. You claimed that Jane and Edith spent all their time with me trying to soothe my ruffled feathers so I wouldn't turn my spite on them. That was quite an allegation. Would you care to discuss it now that we don't have an audience for you to impress with your vindictiveness?"

Mavis gasped. "I'm not the vindictive one, Pheli, you are. And it was the absolute truth. You've turned on them in the past, yet you had the gall to try to deny it today."

"Because you were making more of it than it was. Of course I've lost my temper with them, many times, but you failed to mention I did so, because they're sycophants. All of my so-called friends are

And it's their toadying and insincere flattery that usually make me lose my temper in the first place." Mavis shook her head. "I don't know why I bothered to point out how mean you are. You'll never change. You'll always be caught up in yourself, causing others misery."

"Oh, come now, we both know exactly why you said everything you did today. You even admitted you only continued to pretend to be my friend so you'd be around to witness my downfall."

Well, have I fallen down, my dear? I don't think so. I'll return to London and marry one of those idiots who profess to love me, but what about you? Are you happy, now that you've spilled all of your bitterness at my feet? Oh, wait, you didn't exactly get the revenge you really wanted, did you? I've merely been saved from a disastrous marriage—by you. And thank you very much. I mean that sincerely."

"Go to the devil!" Mavis snapped, and marched out of the room.

Ophelia closed her eyes, fighting back more tears. She should have just walked out of the room when she saw Mavis there. She shouldn't have rehashed that horrible scene she'd had with her old friend earlier.

"Should I applaud? And here I'd thought you two had finished the performance earlier." Ophelia stiffened. *Him*. God, she couldn't believe she'd cried on *his* shoulder today. But she'd overcome that appalling weakness and was in control now.

She turned around and raised a brow at him. “Hardly a performance when we *thought* we were alone. Eavesdropping, Lord Locke? How shamefully boorish of you.” He grinned unrepentantly. “Couldn’t help m’self, when your transformation is so fascinating. How fleeting was the damsel in distress. But I see the imperious ice queen is in true form again.”

“Go to the devil!” she shot back, borrowing Mavis’s parting line. And as her former friend had done, she marched out of the room as well.

Chapter Two

“WHAT WAS SHE TALKING ABOUT?”

“Why do I feel insulted?”

“She must have overheard you talking about her. I *told* you not to talk so loud.”

“I don’t gossip,” said a female voice with a humph.

“You were doing just that. But don’t worry about it. A pretty gel like that will always inspire gossip.”

Raphael was chuckling softly to himself as he listened to the indignant huffing in the foyer. The ice queen, the name he had given to Ophelia Reid, his friend’s ex-fiancée, hadn’t just taken her annoyance out on him for his remarks that caused her to storm off. She’d also said to the large group in the foyer,

“Don’t mind me, I’m just passing through. You can get back to gossiping about me in a moment, before she disappeared back upstairs.

The tongues had returned to wagging, just louder this time, now that they were assured Ophelia wasn’t as close as the next room. What a fascinating creature she was, much more complex than he’d first thought, when all he’d known about her was her capacity for starting and spreading nasty rumors.

Raphael hadn’t expected to make new friends in this small corner of Yorkshire. Being the Duke of Norford’s firstborn and in line for the title, he’d never lacked for friends, real or otherwise, but had lost touch with most of his chums when he’d gone abroad several years ago. He was surprised at how quickly he’d taken to Duncan MacTavish though, possibly because the Scot was so testy when they’d first met and was so easy to rile up, which he’d found quite amusing.

They were of a similar age, Raphael in his midtwenties, Duncan a bit younger. Both were tall, strapping young men, athletically built, quite handsome, though they otherwise looked nothing alike.

Duncan’s hair was an unfashionable dark red, his eyes dark blue, while Raphael was blessed with blond locks and blue eyes of a lighter shade. And their positions were identical in that they were both at the top of the list of the most sought-after bachelors to show up in the same Season, both in line to inherit esteemed titles.

Raphael wasn’t looking for a wife though and wouldn’t be doing so for a good number of years yet. But Duncan had two grandfathers who agreed that he couldn’t get started soon enough on producing their next heir, which was why so many young debutantes had been invited to Summers Glade, and why for once, Raphael wasn’t the object of their pursuit. The ton knew that Duncan wanted a wife, and that Raphael didn’t.

Oddly enough, the one female that Duncan had shown the most interest in hadn’t been invited to the gathering, Sabrina Lambert, his charming neighbor. Such an adorable chit, no beauty, but priceless nonetheless with her wonderful sense of humor that could cheer even the dourest disposition. Raphael had only been half-joking when he’d asked her to marry him himself! But he’d quickly become friends with Sabrina—how could anyone not—and had even dabbled at matchmaking, something he’d never done before, to get her and Duncan to realize they were made for each other.

“What’s all the jabbering about?” Duncan said when he joined Raphael in the entrance hall.

“Do you really need to ask?” Raphael replied with a grin, and motioned for them to move into the parlor where they wouldn’t be overheard. “Ophelia caught your guests gossiping about her and actually remarked on it.”

“She hasna left yet?”

“Just waiting for her coach I believe. But you’ll never guess what happened after the Newbolt chit was done reviling Ophelia. I’m still a bit dazed by it m’self.” Raphael had listened to most of Mavis’

earlier allegations when she'd arrived to save the day, spilling a good deal of bile that pretty much explained why she was Ophelia's enemy. Some of it he'd just heard repeated in the parlor between them, though Mavis hadn't seemed nearly as vitriolic when she'd thought she and Ophelia were alone. She'd actually seemed a bit defensive, leading him to wonder if any of them had really heard the whole of it.

However earlier, he hadn't felt that Ophelia was quite contrite enough for all the trouble she'd caused, and he'd intended to castigate her some himself. He certainly hadn't expected what had occurred when he'd caught her alone upstairs.

He didn't keep Duncan in suspense any longer. "Ophelia Reid was in my arms, crying her heart out. It was a most amazing experience!"

Duncan wasn't amazed, in fact his snort was quite loud. "So you dinna ken the difference 'tween fake tears and real ones?"

"On the contrary, they were quite real. Look here at my shoulder. My coat is still a little damp."

"A little spit, nae doubt," Duncan scoffed, barely glancing at Raphael's coat.

Raphael laughed, but then Duncan hadn't been present to see the tears running down Ophelia's pretty face. "By God, they're real, aren't they?" he'd said to Ophelia when he set her back from him after she'd collided with him in the upstairs hall. He'd even touched her wet cheek with his finger before he'd added, "And you thought to not share them with anyone? I'm impressed."

"Leave...me be," she'd barely managed to choke out.

He didn't. Awkwardly, and utterly amazed by his own impulse, he had drawn her back to him and let her make use of his shoulder. Appalling shortcoming of his, to be a sucker for tears, real ones, that is, but there it was, and he was bloody well likely to regret it in this instance.

He'd sighed inwardly, but there was no help for it. Ophelia's narrow body was trembling with emotion, and it was incredible just how much emotion was pouring out on his shoulder. Not that he thought the ice inside her was melting. No indeed. Never would he think that. The Lockes did not raise fools.

But to Duncan he said now, "What a skeptic you are, old man, but I *do* happen to know the difference. Fake tears have no effect on me, none whatsoever, but real ones manage to wrench my gut every bloody time. It's my gut that tells me what's real or not. My sister's tears, for instance, my gut tells me they're *always* fake."

"Tears from Ophelia would imply she was hurt by that verbal lashing Mavis gave her, but I've proof tae the contrary," Duncan said.

"What proof?"

"When I was thinking I'd be stuck wi' the lass, I feared it would be impossible for her tae change that she was tae far gone in her self-absorption. I was sure it was a lost cause. So I confronted her. I told her that I dinna like her ways, dinna like the spite she was capable of, dinna like the way she treated people, as if nae one matters but herself. But I was desperate, so I told her we could live in peace only if she could change. D'you think she agreed tae try?"

"If you really did say all that to her, she probably got defensive," Raphael guessed.

Duncan shook his head. "Nae, she merely stated what she truly believes. She said there is nothing wrong wi' the way she behaves, and she even stressed the *nothing*. And there's your proof. That shrewish beauty will ne'er change her ways. I'd be staking my life on it."

"I wouldn't want your life in the pot, but I'm always game for a friendly bet. Fifty pounds says you

're wrong. Anyone is capable of changing, even her."

Duncan chuckled. "Make it a hundred pounds. I love a sure bet. But she'll be returning tae London now tae cause trouble there, and I'm hoping I ne'er lay eyes on her again, so how will we be settling

this bet?"

"I'll be returning to London as well, or—hmmm..."

The thought that occurred to Raphael was so surprising, it shocked even him, so he certainly wasn't going to voice it aloud. He needed to dissect it carefully and consider the ramifications.

"What?" Duncan asked impatiently.

Raphael shrugged nonchalantly to put his friend off. "Just a thought that needs further examination, old chap."

"Well, now that I've been saved from a fate worse than death—having tae marry that shrew!—I'm

just glad I'll be seeing the last o' her. I'll be asking the right woman tae marry me now, the one I love." Raphael knew his friend was referring to Sabrina Lambert, and he took it for granted that her answer would be yes. From Duncan's grin, he could see his friend did too. Sabrina might have professed they were only friends, but it was obvious that she was in love with Duncan. "I'm not sure yet where I'll be staying, so send the wedding invitation to Norford Hall. They'll know where to find me." Duncan nodded and went off to find his grandfathers to give them the good news. Alone in the parlor, Raphael considered the amazing idea that had occurred to him, but he only had a few minutes to decide whether to act on it or to discard it as ridiculous. Ophelia's coach would be outside soon, which left him no time for a thorough deliberation. He either had to act immediately or not at all.

Chapter Three

O PHELIA STARED OUT THE WINDOW of the coach at the harsh winter countryside as she and Sadie traveled south through Yorkshire on the way home to London. The grass was all brown, the trees mostly barren, though a few still held on to their brown leaves. It was a scene as bleak as her own thoughts.

Had she really thought it would be different, her actual come-out? That the men she met wouldn't be dazzled by her mere glance? That there wouldn't be another hundred proposals to add to the countless ones she'd received before she had even reached a marriageable age. And why did they do it?

Did even one of them love her? Of course they didn't. They didn't even know her!

Her so-called friends were no different, liars the lot of them. God, how she despised such leeches.

Not one of them was a real friend and never had been. They only flocked to her because of her popularity, which was merely because of her beauty. The fools! Did they really think she didn't know why they called themselves her dearest friends? She knew why. She'd always known it. If she didn't look the way she did, they wouldn't keep coming back to receive the brunt of her bitterness.

She despised the way she looked, and yet she took it for granted that no other woman could compare to her, and that pleased her. But two such opposite feelings had never sat well with her, had always pulled her one way or the other, causing her discomfort.

Mirrors were her enemies. She loved them and hated them because they showed her what everyone else saw when they looked at her. Light blond hair with no dark streaks to mar its perfection, ivory skin without a blemish, arched brows that were ideal with a little plucking, blue eyes that weren't remarkable except that they were set in a face with exquisite features. Everything about her face, the narrow, straight nose, the high cheekbones, lips that weren't too lush, but not too thin, the firm, little chin that only jutted stubbornly when she was being stubborn—very well, that was most of the time, but it still completed the package that had dazzled every person she'd ever met, with the exception of two, but she wasn't going to think about *them* anymore.

Ophelia glanced at her maid sitting across from her in the coach. It was her personal coach, not a large one such as her father's, which had the crest of the Earl of Durwich emblazoned on its doors, but big enough to carry her two large trunks of clothes and Sadie's portmanteau on top of it, and seat four comfortably. It suited her well enough, with its velvet, cushioned seats, which she'd cajoled her father into having added, and a brazier to provide warmth. Sadie kept a lap robe over her short legs, but then she didn't wear as many petticoats as Ophelia did, and it was quite chilly outside, deep into winter as it was.

"Are you ready to tell me what happened back there?" Sadie asked.

"No," Ophelia replied adamantly.

Sadie tsked and said knowingly, "Of course you will, dear, you always do." Such impertinence! But Ophelia didn't say this aloud. Even her maids had fallen under the spell of her beauty, afraid to touch her exquisite blond hair, afraid to run her bath in case it was not to her liking, afraid to lay out her clothes in case they wrinkled them, afraid even to speak! She had dismissed them, one after the other. The count had risen to a dozen when this one applied for the job.

Sadie O'Donald wasn't the least bit in awe of or intimidated by Ophelia. She scoffed at a sharp tone, she laughed at a severe look. She'd raised six daughters of her own, so there wasn't much that could disturb her in the way of theatrics, as she called most of Ophelia's displays of temper. Middle-aged and plump, with black hair and dark brown eyes, Sadie was frank, brutally so sometimes. She wasn't actually Irish as her name implied. She'd once confessed that her grandfather had merely

borrowed the name when he'd wanted to change his own.

~~For once, Ophelia didn't react to Sadie's silence as she usually did, by telling all. Most people who knew her knew she'd get right to the point if they stopped asking questions. She detested this appalling flaw of hers, but then, she detested all her flaws.~~

But without the answer forthcoming, Sadie's curiosity got the better of her. After all, there was supposed to have been a wedding this morning, Ophelia's, yet Ophelia had found Sadie and told her to have them both packed and ready to leave Summers Glade in no less than five minutes, because they were going home to London immediately. It had taken twenty minutes to pack, but that was still probably the fastest Sadie had ever thrown clothes into a trunk.

"Leaving him at the altar then, are we?" Sadie pressed.

"No," Ophelia said stiffly. "And I really don't want to talk about it."

"But you said you'd have to marry the Scotsman, that there was no getting out of it after Mavis caught the two of you in your bedroom alone. I know that pleased you well enough when it happened since you wanted him back, if only to end the gossip that occurred when he ended your first engagement.

Then you changed your mind and wanted no part of him—"

"You know why!" Ophelia cut in sharply. "He and his grandfather were going to turn me into a country bumpkin. The very idea! No entertaining, no time for socializing. Just work, work, work! Me!"

"You were resigned to it, dear. What—?"

Ophelia interrupted again, snapping, "Did I have a choice, when Mavis was going to ruin me if I didn't marry that rude barbarian?"

"I thought you agreed that he wasn't really a barbarian? You were the one who started the rumor before you had even met him, just so your parents would hear of it and break off the engagement for you."

Ophelia glared at her maid. "What has that to do with anything? That was before, not now. And it didn't even work! They still dragged me to Summers Glade to meet him. And look how that turned out.

One little thoughtless remark on my part and he's so insulted *he* breaks off the engagement. But I didn't intend to insult him, you know. It wasn't my fault that he shocked me when he came into the room wearing a kilt. As if I'd ever seen a man wearing a kilt before," Ophelia ended with a huff.

"As if you wouldn't have said exactly what you did if you *had* thought about it," Sadie countered, knowing her too well.

Ophelia almost grinned. "Well, probably. But only because I was desperate by then. They said he'd lived his whole life in the Highlands. You know I feared he really would be a barbarian, or I never would have gotten the idea to brand him one in the gossip mills."

"But you finally agreed he'd do very well as a husband."

"Honestly, Sadie, you aren't usually this obtuse," Ophelia said with a sigh. "Yes, he suited me just fine until his grandfather outlined the long list of duties they expected of me. All I ever wanted was to be a social matriarch, to give the grandest parties London has ever seen. My balls would be the only balls worth attending. That's what I want out of my marriage, not to rusticate out in the country, which is what Neville Thackeray had planned for me."

"So you're running away?" Sadie finally guessed.

Ophelia rolled her eyes. She would have thrown up her hands in disgust too if they weren't so toasty warm in her white fur muff.

To shut Sadie up, she said, "If you *must* know, Mavis arrived to save me from that horrid marriage so we're merely going home."

She said no more, didn't even want to think about it anymore, but unfortunately, Sadie knew very well that Mavis wouldn't do her any favors, that Ophelia's onetime best friend despised her now. The maid knew all of Ophelia's friends quite well from the countless times they'd all gathered at Ophelia's house. She didn't judge. If anything, she was probably the only person who really understood Ophelia and accepted her, faults and all.

But Ophelia really didn't want to talk about it and so she tried to change the subject. "I'll be so glad to be back in London, but I suppose my father isn't going to be pleased when he finds out, for the second time, that he isn't going to have a marquis for a son-in-law."

"That's putting it mildly, dear. He was the happiest man in England when Lord Thackeray contacted him about the match. They probably heard him crowing about it down the block." Ophelia wasn't surprised by the derision she heard in that remark. Sadie didn't like the earl very much. But then neither did Ophelia. Yet she winced, remembering how furious he'd been when they had all been kicked out of Summers Glade, the precious engagement he'd been so delighted with quite broken. He'd actually slapped her, blaming it all on her.

"If he'd just listened to me from the start, or even paid attention to the rumors I started and pulled me out of that match himself, then all of that unpleasantness could have been avoided. He didn't need to snatch up the first offer that suited him. I would have done just fine finding a prominent son-in-law for him, one that was *my* choice, but he never gave me a chance to."

"I hate to say it, dear, but you know why he was so sure you'd never make a choice in the matter of husbands."

"Yes," Ophelia said bitterly. "Because for three years he's been trotting men, young and old, before me, showing me off like the bauble he thinks I am. Good God, I was still in the schoolroom, much too young to think about marriage yet, but he wanted me to show a preference in men I wasn't the least bit interested in."

"Impatience runs in your family, I think."

Ophelia stared at Sadie blankly for a moment, then laughed. "Do you really think I get that from him?"

"Well, it certainly didn't come from your mum. Lady Mary, bless her, would take a year to make up her mind about something if someone wasn't prodding her along." Ophelia sighed. She loved her mother, even though Mary had never been able to stand up to the earl about *anything*, least of all anything to do with their only daughter. But she should have known it wouldn't do any good, talking to either of her parents, but her father especially. She was merely an ornament to him, a useful tool to advance his social position. Her feelings didn't matter to him one bit.

"He probably doesn't even know yet that I was reengaged to Duncan," Ophelia remarked in speculation. "That cowardly driver of his only went home to tell him that I was back in Yorkshire visiting the Lamberts, which was the case before I was invited back to Summers Glade."

"You didn't send him word about it, but surely Lord Thackeray did."

"Yes, but I doubt he would even open a letter from the marquis, as angry as he was over being kicked out of Summers Glade."

"You're thinking our homecoming will be quiet, without all the yelling this time?"

"At least until my father hears about it—actually, I think I'll tell him myself if he doesn't know."

"Why?"

"Because if he'd just listened to me in the first place, none of this would have happened."

"I don't think I'd be risking another slap just to tell him, 'I told you so.'"

"But I would."

Sadie shook her head and glanced out the window at the late-afternoon sun peeking through a bank of dark clouds. Ophelia was sure she'd successfully avoided the subject she *didn't* want to discuss and

settled back in the seat determined to put every part of the disastrous experience at Summers Glade behind her. ~~But she should have known better. Sadie could be quite tenacious.~~

As if they hadn't even just been discussing something else, Sadie remarked, "Mavis wouldn't be that generous, to help you. I warned you long ago to stop letting her come around. She's too bitter these days and especially after you finally let it be known that she's a liar."

"She provoked that," Ophelia said quietly. "I never would have mentioned it if her snide cattiness didn't snap my temper that day."

"You don't need to explain, dear. I know very well how she is. I'm the one who told you that the bad feelings she harbored for you would spill out and burn you eventually. You suffered her bile far too long just for the sake of the friendship you once had with her." Ophelia's voice got even softer with emotion choking her again when she said, "She was the only real, honest friend I ever had. I'd hoped she'd forgive me eventually for the wrong she thought I did her, when all I tried to do was protect her."

"I know," Sadie said, and leaned forward to pat the fur muff covering Ophelia's slim hands. "The man she fancied was a philandering fool, the worst sort of blackguard, just to use her to get close to you."

You tried to warn her repeatedly. She wouldn't listen. I probably would have done exactly as you did under the circumstances. She needed the proof set before her eyes. You gave it to her."

"And lost her friendship for it."

"But she came to her senses today? Is that why she saved you?"

"Oh, no," Ophelia replied, her tone turning bitter now. "She only did it for Duncan's sake, but not before she reviled me in front of him and Sabrina and Raphael Locke. She said there's nothing but blackened, bone-chilling ice beneath my pretty surface."

Sadie gasped just as Ophelia had done when she'd heard it. "And that wasn't even the worst of it," Ophelia added, and repeated most of that horrible encounter for her maid, the painful memory still so fresh in her mind.

After Mavis had finished lambasting Ophelia the first time and assuring her that she didn't have a friend in the world, as if she didn't already know that, Ophelia had slipped away unnoticed, unable to contain her emotions any longer. And having just repeated most of that to Sadie, she felt that self-pity welling in her chest again and trounced it soundly. She'd cried. How appalling to let *those* emotions get out of control like that. It had never happened before—well, not since she was a child, but she would *not* think about that. She'd strived her whole life to make sure she'd never be hurt again and she'd succeeded—until today.

But Sadie, dear Sadie, she understood too well. She'd listened without interrupting, and now she merely opened her arms wide. And that cracked the dam again.

Chapter Four

RAPHAEL SNAPPED THE REINS to get a little more speed from the horses pulling the fancy coach he was driving. He was enjoying the experience, it being a new one. Carriages, in good weather with a single horse, he was quite used to driving about town, but he'd never tried to drive a large coach before.

He usually traveled nice and warm inside them, as the occupants of this coach were doing.

It was cold. The wind whipped his blond hair about his shoulders and into his face, reminding him that he needed a haircut. He wouldn't get one where he was going.

He wasn't sure if he'd come up with a brilliant plan to win the bet with Duncan, or the most stupid idea imaginable, but he'd acted on it nonetheless and could only hope now that he wouldn't live to regret it. There was still time to change his mind. Ophelia was so absorbed in her self-pity that she didn't even know yet that she and her maid weren't on their way to London or that he was driving her coach. But the truth was, he didn't want to change his mind.

He'd been intrigued by her reaction to receiving her comeuppance at Summers Glade. Tears from the ice queen made that monicker a misnomer. Had she been hurt by what was said? And if so, why? Or had her tears been no more than an expression of self-pity? And then that amazing transformation in her when she spoke with Mavis in the parlor, where she was self-contained and imperious again, showing no trace of resemblance to the woman who'd cried in his arms. He'd assumed the worst about her. They all did. Yet what he'd heard in that second conversation implied there might be more to it than what he'd thought. He didn't like being wrong, so he wanted to find out the answers for himself.

But that was just one of several reasons why he'd impulsively acted on his idea. There were benefits other than just winning the bet with Duncan, if he succeeded in his plan. Performing a miracle and turning Ophelia Reid into a likable woman would be doing everyone who knew her a favor. He rather liked that notion. Playing the hero, as it were.

But it wasn't even just that that motivated him. If he could believe everything her ex-friend Mavis had said about her, and he had no reason not to believe it, then Ophelia, despite her beauty, was despised by one and all, aside from the besotted fools who didn't really know her, and those idiots didn't count. Oddly enough, that made her the underdog. And it wouldn't be the first time Raphael had championed the underdog.

Of course, there was also his desire to win the bet, and Duncan had been right, Raphael wasn't going to convince Ophelia to change her ways in London. He could follow her around to every party she attended, but to what purpose? She knew he didn't like her. He'd made that clear more than once. So he couldn't very well pretend an interest in her now. She wouldn't believe it. He wouldn't be able to pull it off anyway. Pretense of that sort was beyond him. Besides, if he even looked at a woman twice, the London gossip mills somehow had them engaged. He'd been unable to enjoy his first foray into the London social whirl because of that. In fact, that was why he'd gone abroad. So he'd as soon not be

“seen” with Ophelia.

He had enough reasons now to settle it in his mind. For good or bad, he was going to make his best effort to help Ophelia see the error of her ways and change for the better, and then even she could make a good match and find happiness eventually. Quite the challenge, but then Raphael loved a good challenge. And if he succeeded, everyone would be happy, even her.

It was growing late, the sun beginning to set. Her coach wasn't designed for night travel, at least not out in the country where no lampposts lit the way. Raphael debated whether to take a chance and find an inn for the night, or to continue on and hope he could find Alder's Nest in the dark.

It was one of the many properties he'd inherited from his grandfather, one so remote that he'd only been there a few times over the years. A retreat, the old man had called it, while Raphael's father had scoffed that a cottage would have done well enough for a mere "retreat," that his father didn't need a bloody manor out in the middle of nowhere. The previous duke had merely laughed and said, "Me? In a cottage? Preposterous!"

So he'd built his large retreat out in the wilds of Northumberland, and he'd even enjoyed his solitude there quite frequently. None of the other Lockes ever did. The consensus of the family was that Alder's Nest was too far from *anything*. But the Nest was still hours away. And the occupants of the coach Raphael was driving were no doubt getting as hungry as he was. Nor had they even crossed into Northumberland county yet; he was sure they were still riding through Durham. But inns were few and far between, even in Durham, and the farther north they went, there'd be even fewer.

He'd stayed at his aunt's house the last time he'd come this way. Esmerelda was the oldest of his father's many sisters. She'd married a Scotsman, but had insisted they live in England. Her husband had agreed, but only if it was a short jaunt back to Scotland, and in fact he'd wanted to live right on the border! They'd settled on Durham, one county farther south, but still a long way from London.

Esmerelda could have moved back closer to the family when she became a widow, but she'd lived long enough in Durham to come to love it there. And Raphael was a dunce for not thinking of her sooner.

Her house was only a few more miles down the road if he wasn't mistaken, at least the side road leading to it was. If he hadn't passed it already. He'd go back, though, if he had passed it. Ophelia wouldn't be hearing from anyone there that they were in Durham, north of Yorkshire, rather than halfway to London down south as she assumed. Come to think of it, his aunt would make a much better chaperone for Ophelia than Ophelia's maid would, and he didn't doubt his aunt would be pleased to join them at Alder's Nest for a while. He did need to assure that no scandal whatsoever resulted from his impulsive plan, after all.

Fortunately, he'd already taken care of the only obstacle that he had foreseen. Ophelia's parents. He'd jotted off a brief note to them when he'd made his decision and had pulled aside the footman that had been enlisted to drive her, to have him deliver it posthaste. Two birds with one stone, as it were, since he assured the man that he'd find someone else to drive Ophelia.

Her parents were far too impressed with titles more lofty than their own. That they had arranged her marriage to the marquis's heir against Ophelia's wishes proved it. So he had no doubt at all that they would give their wholehearted approval to her sojourn with his family. He'd implied he'd taken her under his wing. If they assumed that meant he had an interest in her himself, he could hardly be blamed for such an errant notion.

It was five miles farther on the main road and another thirty minutes down that side road to his Aunt Esme's house. It was full night, by then, but light flooded out of the front of the house from a long bank of windows off the parlor, enough for Ophelia to see that it was no inn they were stopping for the night.

Raphael braced himself for an unpleasant scene when he opened the door to the coach and offered his hand for the lady to step down. She took it without even glancing at him. A footman, as she assumed he was, would be beneath her notice, after all.

But he caught himself staring at her as she alighted and he sighed mentally. Even ruffled from the ride, and drowsy by the look of it, or maybe her eyes were just puffy from so many tears, her exquisite beauty still took his breath away. He'd been bowled over when he'd first clapped eyes on her at Summers Glade. Fortunately, he'd been across the room from her, so by the time he actually stood next to her when she'd joined Sabrina and him for introductions—*intruded* was more like it—he'd

had his amazement well in hand.

~~She turned back now to say something to her maid and gasped when her eyes passed over Raphael~~ then abruptly returned to him. “What the deuce are *you* doing here?” she demanded. “Following me back to London?”

“Not at all. You took it for granted that one of the marquis’s footmen would drive you all the way to London, but as it happens, they would have only driven you as far as Oxbow to find a driver there.

They aren’t paid to be away from Summers Glade for days, unless the marquis himself sends them off.

So I’m doing you a favor, dear girl, since we happen to be going in the same direction.”

“*You’re driving us?*”

“Amazing, ain’t it?”

She huffed, possibly because of his jaunty grin. “Don’t expect any thanks, since I didn’t ask you to do this.”

He didn’t usually lie. Couldn’t tolerate people who did. But the alternative would have been to tell Ophelia he was absconding with her, and that wouldn’t have gone over too well, he was sure. She still had no idea that they weren’t traveling toward London, and he’d just as soon reach their destination tomorrow before she figured that out.

With a huff she walked toward the front door, but her step slowed and then stopped completely when she finally realized they were at someone’s residence, not a hostelry as she’d assumed.

She glanced over her shoulder. “Where are we?” Her tone was merely curious now.

He helped her maid down from the coach before he strolled past Ophelia and rapped on the door.

Keeping her waiting for an answer wasn’t intentional. He didn’t yet know how impatient she was. He just wanted to be careful for the time being with every word he said to her. So when he turned, he was rather taken aback to find her glaring at him. It took him a moment to recover and assume his usual jaunty air.

“Erm, I have a *large* family spread across the breadth of England. Makes it quite convenient, for me anyway, when traveling. My aunt Esmerelda lives here. Esme, she prefers to be called. We’ll be staying the night. Much softer beds than an inn could supply, I do assure you.” The door opened before he finished. Old William stood there, squinting at them through his narrow spectacles. As blind as Esmerelda was deaf, William was the butler she’d stolen from her father when she’d left home to marry all those years ago. At least that was how the previous duke told it.

“Who’s there?” William asked.

The spectacles obviously didn’t help the old butler much anymore. He knew Raphael well.

Perhaps if there was daylight, he would have recognized him. Then again, perhaps not. Esmerelda was getting up in years herself, and William, quite her senior, must be eighty by now.

“It’s Rafe, old chap. Just stopping by for a little hospitality before we continue on in the morning.”

We’ll need three rooms, and some food would be nice. Is my aunt still about, or has she retired for the night?”

“She’s up, in the parlor, attempting to burn the house down she’s got so many logs crackling in the fireplace.”

Raphael grinned at the complaint. Esmerelda took chill easily in the winter. His grandmother was the same way. Most of the family dreaded visiting Agatha Locke because she kept her suite of rooms in Norford Hall so warm. But William would never admit that he needed that extra warmth at his age as much as Esmerelda did.

“I’ll let her know I’m—,” Raphael began, only to be rudely interrupted.

“I’d like to be shown to my room, thank you,” Ophelia said as she marched into the entryway.

“And I’ll take my meal there as well.”

“Certainly, my lady,” William replied promptly by habit. ~~With his bad eyes he couldn’t probably~~ see the finery she was draped in to know she was a lady, but her imperious tone must have been sufficient indication that she was an aristocrat.

Raphael shook his head, watching Ophelia climb the stairs. She’d taken it for granted that William would be following her to show her to a room. Not likely at his age, and in fact he rushed off to find the housekeeper. Apparently, she’d also dismissed Raphael from her mind and didn’t intend to say another word to him. He wasn’t used to being ignored. While her disdain was helpful in that it kept him from having to lie again if she asked how much longer it would take to reach London, her complete dismissal of him actually annoyed him.

“Apparently I’ll see you in the morning, then,” Raphael said to her back.

“Early,” she replied without turning to look at him. “I don’t want to spend another entire day on the road.”

He disappeared into the parlor before she finished. He *hoped* she’d turn around and see that, but she probably wouldn’t. Damned haughty chit.

Chapter Five

“W HAT D’YOU MEAN, YOU’VE KIDNAPPED her? Speak up, boy. I must have misheard you. Raphael patted his aunt’s hand. He wasn’t going to shout. He didn’t need to because he was sitting next to her on her left side and her left ear was still in moderately good working order. But she currently had her neck *and* ears bundled in a scarf. A thick shawl was about her shoulders too. He was surprised she wasn’t wearing gloves as well.

Good God, the parlor was hot. He loosened the neck of his shirt. He’d been nigh frozen after driving the coach all day, but not two minutes in the room and he’d had to remove his jacket.

“You didn’t mishear me. But it’s not what you’re thinking. In a few days I’ll have her parents’ full approval to keep her as long as I like.”

“They’re selling her to you?”

“No, no, nothing of the sort. They’re just going to think that I have matrimony in mind, and I do, just not for me. The chit is the veriest shrew, rude, mean-spirited by all accounts. She spreads lies without the least care that someone might be hurt by them.”

“And half of London doesn’t?” Esmeralda remarked with a snort.

Raphael laughed. “At least they think they’re spreading the truth when they pass a rumor around. Ophelia knows full well the rumors she starts are lies.”

“Then what the deuce are you doing with her?”

“I’ve taken it upon myself to turn her about. Her beauty is unparalleled. Imagine if she were just beautiful on the inside.”

“Then she’d be good enough for you?”

“Don’t turn your matchmaking tendencies on me, Aunt Esme. When you meet her, you won’t like her a’tall, I do assure you.”

“But you’re going to be turning her about, so I’ll ignore first impressions.” He shook his head. “Why is it women always look on the bright side?”

“Because you men are such pessimists that you never do. Well, I’ll allow you might be the exception, since you seem to think you can change this gel for the better.”

“It’s a hope, certainly not a foregone conclusion. But if it does happen, I’ll sponsor her m’self in London, to assure she makes a good marriage. It won’t be with me, though. I have quite a few more years of grand debauchery to enjoy before I even think of settling down.”

“Then why even do this?”

“If you must know, it’s a bet. A friend of mine is convinced that Ophelia Reid is a lost cause. I’m not so sure. So we bet on it.”

“I should have known,” Esmeralda said in disapproval. “That’s a bad habit you have, m’boy, of taking up the challenge so easily. And why does it sound like you’ll be cheating in this case?”

“Me?” He grinned. “Never say so. I’d merely call it an edge. But someone needed to take up the gauntlet. The chit isn’t going to give over her bad habits without some assistance, not when she doesn’t think she *has* any bad habits. By the by, I do intend this to be on the up-and-up, so what would you say to joining us at Alder’s Nest? You’d make a splendid chaperone for her.”

“Why don’t you just stay here?”

He gave that a moment’s thought, but then shook his head. “Your home isn’t remote enough. You have neighbors too close by.”

“So?”

“So I don’t intend to keep her under lock and key. But I do want to assure that she won’t be

walking away from this little sojourn in the country. Can't very well help her if she flies the coop, as were."

"As you wish," she said with a shrug, then admitted, "I *have* always been curious about my father's folly, as my sisters and I called it. Never been to Alder's Nest m'self. He didn't exactly invite the family along when he went there to get away from all the noise we created at Norford Hall."

"Never say so. You? A rambunctious child?"

"I said no such thing," she huffed, but her brown eyes twinkled. "It was always my sisters Julie and Corinthia who did the screaming—well, the loudest anyway. But your father was the instigator, you know. A day wouldn't go by that he wasn't teasing one of us, or chasing us around the house, or pulling his pranks on us. At least he finally outgrew those terrible tendencies." Raphael wondered if he ever would. That was one habit he'd picked up from his father that he still enjoyed. He loved teasing his sister, Amanda. But then the darling was so gullible that he simply couldn't help himself.

"We'll leave early in the morning," he said as he rolled up his shirtsleeves and wiped his brow.

"And don't let on to Ophelia where we're going. She still thinks we're on our way back to London." Then he finally had to ask as he glanced at the fireplace that was still roaring, "Are you really so cold, Aunt Esme?"

"No, I just want William to feel useful," she admitted in a whisper, in case the old man was eavesdropping. "He was talking about retiring. I'd miss the old boy too much if he did. We get so few visitors up here, so he doesn't man the front door like he used to. But he does pile on the logs for me." Raphael laughed. "Mind if I open a window for a few minutes?" She grinned at him. "Please do."

Chapter Six

IT HAD SNOWED DURING THE night, not enough for it to stay on the ground for long, though. But for a little while, it would be lovely. Which was another of Ophelia's contrary opinions. She loved the snow, but she couldn't tolerate the aftermath when it began to melt and became quite dirty. Of course, she was only used to seeing it in London after heavy traffic turned it to sludge. Hyde Park was usually especially pretty after a snowfall, but that never lasted long either, with so much soot in the city. But she'd surely be able to enjoy the snow this morning at least, before it began to melt.

Her driver—it still amused her to think of the Locke heir as that—was waiting in the foyer for her. She'd donned her prettiest traveling ensemble just for him, the same one she'd worn for Duncan MacTavish when she'd tried to patch things up with him at that inn in Oxbow. With a white fur cap about her blond head and a powder-blue velvet long coat with a short cape trimmed in the same white fur, she knew she looked her best. The mirror upstairs said so.

She'd dazzled Duncan in this outfit, though not enough to soften him up. The insult she'd dealt him by calling him a barbarian had cut too deep apparently. Such a tricky situation that had been, and one of her finer performances, if she did say so herself. She had wanted him to forgive her so they could get reengaged to put an end to the gossip, then end their engagement amicably, as they should have done with their original engagement. But she'd also wanted to assure that he didn't revise his negative opinion of her too much and fancy himself in love with her like all the other men who met her. That wouldn't do a 'tall.

She'd carefully balanced her contrition with his already bad opinion of her, and he'd offered her the perfect solution—her own conceit. His last remark had been “I dinna think I'd care tae be competing wi' m'wife for her own attention.”

That had annoyed her at the time, though she found it rather amusing now that she'd been extricated from that horrid match and could find amusement in things again. For instance, it was amusing that the handsome, wealthy Lord Locke was acting as her driver. It *was* rather nice of him, she supposed, or at least she'd briefly considered it so. But after she'd given it some thought last night, she'd wondered why the man would take on such an arduous task when he didn't even like her.

He'd made that abundantly clear in the few conversations they'd had at Summers Glade. As for him driving her, she'd finally concluded that he must have found himself stranded there after his sister had returned to London without him. So he probably wasn't doing her a favor a'tall, as he'd implied. Which was just as well. She did *not* want to feel indebted to *him*.

But she wouldn't mind having her name linked to his, which would happen if anyone she knew saw him driving her coach once they reached London. And the people she knew looked for her coach—well, the men did anyway. That could only be to her benefit, as esteemed as his family was. She did still have to find a husband for herself, after all, and preferably before the Season ended.

Without the threat of an unwanted “arranged” marriage hanging over her head, she could devote the proper attention to finding the right man for her this time. Her criterion wasn't that unrealistic. She merely wanted, needed, to meet one man who didn't worship her beauty instantly, one man who would make an effort to know her, the real her, one man who didn't profess undying love ad nauseam when he couldn't possibly love her—yet. Not too difficult at all, she thought bitterly.

“There you are,” Raphael said from the bottom of the stairs, only to add, “I could have sworn you said early.”

Ophelia gritted her teeth. So much for dazzling him to make him regret his harshness with her. He barely looked at her as he slipped his greatcoat over his wide shoulders!

She'd actually been up for hours after going to bed so early last night. She'd delayed coming downstairs merely so everyone else could get a little more sleep before another long day on the road.

Next time she'd save her consideration for someone who might appreciate it.

"I was exhausted yesterday," she merely said, "or I would have come down to meet your aunt.

Am I going to have that pleasure before we depart?"

"Oh, indeed, in fact she's coming with us. Didn't think you'd mind sharing your coach."

"Afraid to be seen with me without chaperonage?" Ophelia smirked as she reached the bottom of the stairs.

"I knew you'd understand. No one likes having a favor backfire on them."

"If they're actually doing someone a favor. I doubt you are," she said drily. "Why don't you fess up that your sister left you stranded at Summers Glade, so in essence, I'm doing *you* the favor—"

"Of letting me ride in your nice warm coach?" he cut in with a raised brow.

She actually felt a blush coming on. What the devil? She never blushed. Pink on her ivory cheeks looked like a splotchy rash. It was *not* becoming.

But having disconcerted her, he at least didn't expect an answer and continued, "Why don't we agree to suffer each other's company for the duration and let it go at that?"

"Fine," she retorted. "Since the duration will be a short one, I suppose I'll survive it."

"Ouch," she thought she heard him say, but she wasn't quite sure.

An elderly lady came out of the parlor just then to join them, a young maid close on her heels, both dressed to travel. Ophelia assumed this was Raphael's aunt. Heavily bundled in not just a coat but a heavy cape over that, and thick woolen scarves about her head, it was hard to see the cherub face beneath all that covering.

"You must be Lady Esmerelda," Ophelia said with a smile, extending her hand in greeting. "I'm Ophelia Reid. It's a pleasure to meet—"

"Speak up, gel," Esmerelda said in a testy tone. "I'm quite deaf, you know."

"I said it was—!"

"You don't have to shout," Esmerelda interrupted. "I'm not quite *that* deaf yet." Ophelia grinned. "Shall I help you to the coach?"

"There's nothing wrong with my feet, gel."

Ophelia didn't take offense at the lady's cantankerous replies. She found them rather amusing.

"Very well. My maid went out earlier to start the brazier. It should be nice and warm for you."

"Excellent. Do appreciate it," Esmerelda said, then added to the butler standing off to the side,

"Hold the fort, William. I have a feeling I won't be gone long."

"Of course, m'lady," the butler replied as Esmerelda marched outside.

Ophelia noticed Raphael's wince over his aunt's remarks. If she didn't detest the fellow, she would have assured him that she understood how the infirmities of old age could and did make some people quite disagreeable. But apparently she was mistaken about the source of his discomfort because he held her back from following Esmerelda, his grip on her arm quite firm. This wasn't the man who usually had a jaunty air about him even when he was being his most sardonic. This was the serious Locke, the devil she'd met twice before when anger had removed all semblance of civility from him.

"What in the bloody hell was that about?" he demanded, adding in the same breath, "Don't think you can use my aunt for any of your machinations. I won't tolerate it." She blinked, then she understood. He thought the worst of her, after all. Seeing her being nice to his aunt must have shocked him, she thought derisively.

"What an amusing idea. I hate to correct you, Lord Locke, really I do, but I happen to like older people. They're the only ones who don't try to compete with me or otherwise take advantage of an acquaintance with me. So your aunt and I will get along just fine, I do assure you. You needn't be

concerned that I'll turn my viperous tongue on her. You on the other hand—”

~~“I got the point, no need to belabor it,” he cut in, not nearly so sharply now. “Just get in the coach.~~
The sooner we get this over with can't be soon enough for me.”

“How odd that we agree perfectly,” she retorted on her way out the door.

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