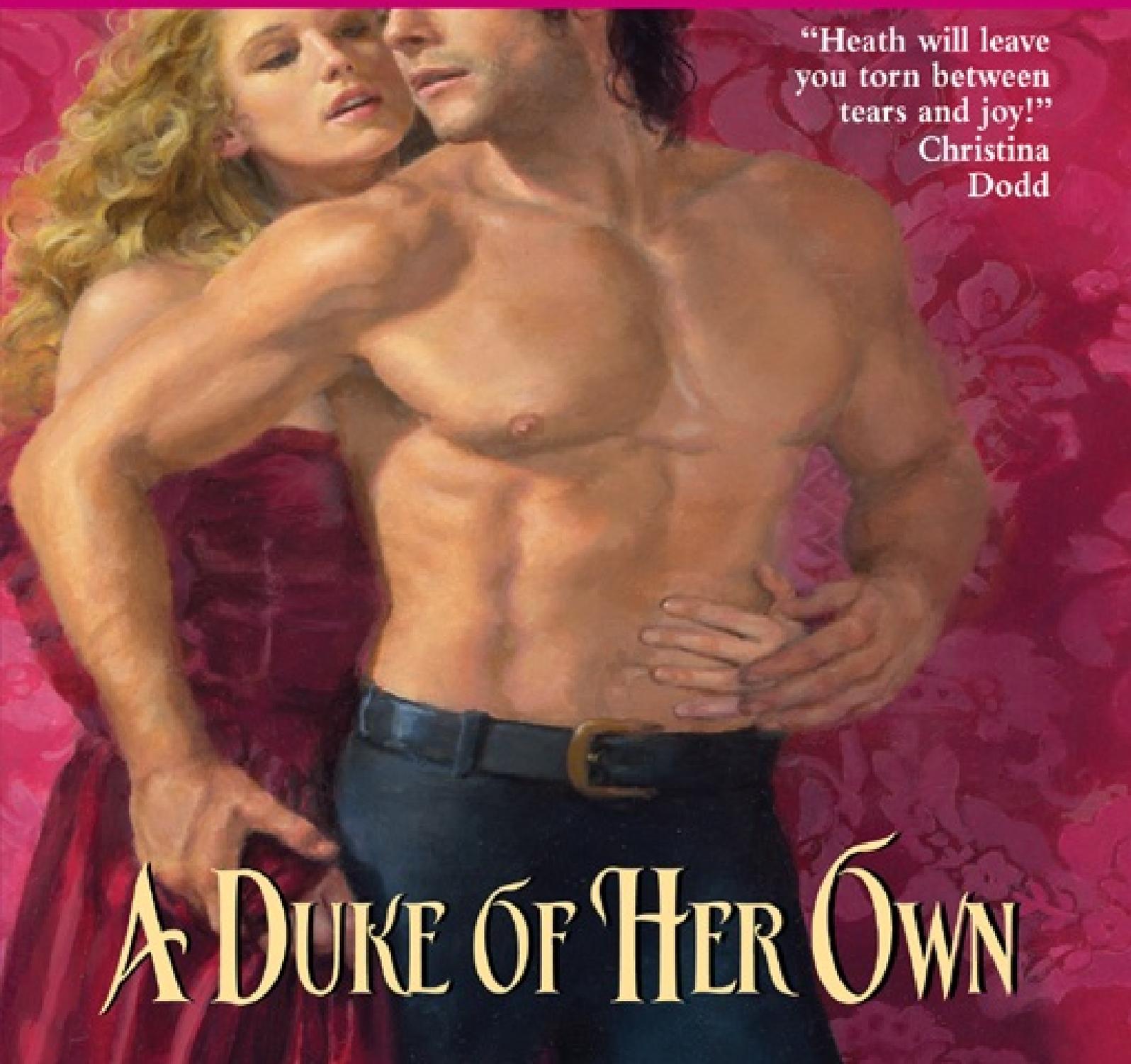


New York Times bestselling author of *Promise Me Forever*

LORRAINE HEATH

“Heath will leave
you torn between
tears and joy!”
Christina
Dodd



A DUKE OF HER OWN

LORRAINE HEATH

A DUKE OF HER OWN

 HarperCollins e-books

*For my realist
From your dreamer
With love, always*

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

“What in the devil is this?”

[Chapter 2](#)

“I didn’t think matters could get any worse.”

[Chapter 3](#)

“I can hardly signify that you insulted my friends to...

[Chapter 4](#)

The very thought of marriage sent a chill skittering down...

[Chapter 5](#)

“I see Hawk has made his diabolically clever move,” Falconridge...

[Chapter 6](#)

“Men set little store by what is carelessly guarded,” the...

[Chapter 7](#)

“So you’re the chaperone.”

[Chapter 8](#)

“Pray do tell me you’re not planning to wear that...

[Chapter 9](#)

After listening to opera for most of the evening, Louisa...

[Chapter 10](#)

The two outings with Hawkhurst had signaled the start of...

[Chapter 11](#)

A week later, with the chandeliers glittering above him and...

[Chapter 12](#)

What in God’s name had possessed him to take Louisa...

[Chapter 13](#)

He stood in the corner, watching, waiting, a predator that...

[Chapter 14](#)

“You were supposed to secure a duke for my daughters,...

[Chapter 15](#)

“I’m marrying Hawkhurst.”

[Chapter 16](#)

Sometime later he found his mother in the garden, her...

[Chapter 17](#)

Louisa awoke that morning to find herself still in Hawk’s...

[Chapter 18](#)

The rain that had brought such comfort all afternoon had...

[Chapter 19](#)

“You can’t be serious,” Hawk’s mother said. “Whatever are you...

[Chapter 20](#)

“What if no one comes?” Caroline asked, fidgeting on the...

[Chapter 21](#)

“Will you please stop glaring?” Louisa demanded. “You will frighten...

[Chapter 22](#)

As the coach journeyed back to Selwyn Manor, Hawk knew...

[Epilogue](#)

“I can’t believe you kept the box all these years,”...

[Author’s Note](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books by Lorraine Heath](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

Chapter 1

London
1888

Gentlewoman of noble birth offers to chaperone genteel American lady in need of social guidance. References provided. Send inquiry to the attention of Lady Louisa Wentworth, in care of this publication.

The Lady's Quarterly Review

“What in the devil is this?”

Lady Louisa Wentworth jerked her head back slightly to avoid having her nose bruised by the publication her brother was flapping furiously in front of her face. She'd been enjoying her usual breakfast of porridge laced with butter, milk, and an abundance of sugar before he'd come storming into the morning dining room as though he were some avenging angel. Delicately pressing her linen napkin to each corner of her mouth, she summoned up every ounce of fortitude within her in order to confront his belligerence with serenity.

“It appears to be a magazine,” she said.

“Not *this!*” he shouted, frantically jerking the periodical up and down, before slamming it on the table. He pressed a blunt-tipped finger beneath a particular block of words. “This!”

Glancing at the familiar phrasing, she took a calming breath. “My advert.”

“Your advert,” he repeated with an unnatural calm that caused a frisson of unease to travel the length of her spine. Then he quite simply erupted in anger. “Your advert! You're advertising for a position as a chaperone?”

“Yes, and I have an interview later this morning, so I would appreciate it if you’d cease your shouting so my digestion is not unduly upset.”

“You are *not* taking a position as a chaperone. I absolutely forbid it.”

Her stomach tightened into a painful knot. Having made her decision after much agonizing, carefully scrutinizing her options, weighing the benefits against the disadvantages, and accepting the enormous consequences that would ensue after effectively changing the direction of her life, she wasn’t about to allow him—or anyone else for that matter—to deter or forbid her from seeing her plan through to the finish.

“I’m twenty-six years old, Alex, old enough to do as I please. Serving as a chaperone is a respectable position for the daughter of a peer—”

“Unmarried ladies younger than thirty require a chaperone. How in God’s name can you *be* a chaperone when you *need* a chaperone?”

Shoving back the chair, she came to her feet, tossed the linen napkin into her bowl of porridge, and steadfastly met her brother’s blistering blue glare. She wondered if her blue eyes darkened as much as his did when challenged.

“A lady requires that her reputation remain pristine when there is some chance in hell that a gentleman will seek her hand in marriage. No gentleman is going to ask for my hand, and you damned well know it.” His jaw had dropped at her first bit of profanity; his eyes had bulged at her second. “I have no dowry at all. It is time that I face reality, that *you* face reality. We have nothing of value—”

“We have ourselves.”

“Then allow me to rephrase and be perfectly clear. You have value; you have a blasted title. I have nothing. No dowry, no property, no hope of ever enticing a man into looking past my impoverished state—”

“Somewhere a man of rare intelligence exists who can see your true worth.”

She laughed bitterly. “Dear brother, how long shall I wait? I’ve never been courted. Oh, a few men have dallied with me here and there, but it was more for sport than any serious consideration. No one sends me bouquets of flowers. No one sits beside me in the parlor, chatting aimlessly. No one dreads running the formidable gauntlet of asking you for my hand. I’m not seriously sought after—not at all. The reality is that I never shall be. Not as a wife anyway, and I will not stoop to becoming some man’s mistress—”

“I would kill any man who even entertained the notion of using you thusly.”

Yet she knew he had no compunction whatsoever about keeping a mistress for

himself. Men were such odd creatures. Still, she thought it sweet that he would jump to her defense so quickly.

“Alex, I’m weary of being without funds, of not being in charge of my life or my destiny, of waiting in vain for some man to decide I’m worthy of his affections or his attentions when I come with nothing.”

Alex looked down at his shoes, slightly worn, a sight that tore at her heart, because he’d always taken such pride in his appearance. Their situation was becoming very sad indeed when he went so long without replacing his shoes.

“You are worthy of a great deal more, Louisa,” he said quietly. He lifted his gaze to hers, and she could see how he suffered because the truth of their lives was not as either of them would wish it to be. “But to take a position, to be seen as someone’s servant—”

“A chaperone is not considered a servant.”

“Semantics. You will serve at their pleasure.”

“I shall have pin money.” Making light of the situation was the only way that she could avoid weeping every moment of every hour of every day. She was no happier with her decision than Alex was, but honestly, what choice did she have? She was well past her prime, and now that American heiresses had descended on London like ravenous vultures and were taking the choicest among the lords, she had no desire to settle for the scraps—not that any had ever been tossed her way. But still she had to allow for the possibility that it might happen, that some aging lord might see her as a last resort.

But not the young and virile ones. No, they were taking advantage of the wealthy Americans, marrying their daughters when they could come to terms on a generous settlement. Why shouldn’t the British ladies take advantage as well? Why should only the men benefit from this madness of Americans wanting to elevate their status by becoming titled?

“Louisa—”

“Alex, I’m quite determined to see this through. Please don’t make it any more difficult than it already is.” Giving him a gamine smile, she returned to her chair. “I hadn’t expected you to hear of my plan. I didn’t realize you read ladies’ magazines.”

Pulling out a chair, he sat as well, his anger effectively doused. It always burned so brightly it could seldom burn for long. “I don’t, for God’s sake. My mistress showed it to me. She had quite a chuckle over it, I can tell you that.”

They were well ensconced in poverty, yet he still managed to keep a mistress, had no qualms whatsoever about asking merchants to extend his credit so he might

continue to enjoy all the benefits life had to offer. Louisa detested that particular habit, but it was one all merchants seemed to expect of the nobility—allow them to purchase items in haste and pay in leisure, usually not until the end of the year, if then. And if not this year, then the next.

She, however, believed one should live within one's means. Their problem was that their father, upon his untimely death three years earlier—ironically he'd been reviewing the latest figures for debts owed when his heart quite simply had ceased to beat—had left them with no means whatsoever, and Alex had not accepted that fact yet. Although the state of his shoes indicated he might be on the cusp of facing the unfortunate reality of their situation.

“Your mistress can read?” Louisa asked smugly. “Fancy that. I had no idea you'd chosen a woman based on her intellect.”

As fair of complexion as she, Alex had difficulty hiding the fact he was embarrassed. Crimson crept over his chin and high onto his cheeks. He cleared his throat as though hoping to distract her attention from his brilliant coloring. “So what do you know about this position for which you'll be interviewing?”

“It's with the Rose family. They have two daughters—”

“Of New York?”

“You know them?”

“Not personally, of course, but I have heard the rumors. James Rose is a banker, from what I understand, and extremely well-off.”

She nodded, acknowledging the rumors he'd heard to be true. “I'll know more once I've spoken with him and his wife. I suspect they are hoping to land each of their daughters a titled husband.”

A mischievous smile crossed her brother's handsome face. “You don't say? I've heard these Americans are more than generous when it comes to arranging a marriage settlement.” Leaning forward, he whispered conspiratorially, “I'm talking thousands. And here I'll have someone in a position to put in a good word for me.”

“Would you want to marry an American heiress?”

“Much less work than serving as her chaperone.”

She laughed. “Gentlemen don't serve as chaperones.”

Reaching out, he took her hand, all teasing gone from his face. “I'm truly sorry, Louisa, that you've had to resort to actually *working*. I feel as though I've let you down.”

“I don’t blame you, Alex. You’re not the reason we have so little, although I will admit I do get cross when I think of your mistress living in what would be the dower house if Mama were alive and you ever did marry.”

“Thank God, she’s not.”

She tugged her hand free of his. Their mother had succumbed to death shortly after their father’s passing. The physician had identified the cause as pneumonia, brought on by the damp weather, but Louisa had always believed it to be a broken heart. Her mother’s rather lengthy list of shortcomings did not include an absence of love for her husband.

“I’m sorry, Louisa. It would only be more difficult if she was alive, and well you know it. Her insatiable appetite for spending went a long way toward putting us where we are today.”

“A habit you seem to have embraced.”

He grimaced at her chastisement, but he could not deny the truth of her words. “A man must have his distractions; otherwise, his responsibilities will overwhelm him, and he’ll be of little use to anyone.”

She rolled her eyes at that ludicrous statement while her stomach rumbled. She did wish she hadn’t tossed her napkin into her porridge. *Rather bad planning that.*

“And to whom might I attribute that ridiculous sentiment: Hawkhurst or Falconridge?”

“I fail to understand why you think so poorly of my friends.”

“They are a bad influence. Neither has bothered to take a wife and see to the business of his title.”

“Neither have I for that matter.”

“My point exactly.”

“Well, perhaps this year will be the one when we’ll each take a wife. A pity the Roses weren’t blessed with three daughters. You could steer them all toward us.”

“I’d steer them away from you is what I’d do.”

“Have pity—”

“On them I shall. *If* I’m offered the position. I have to endure the interview first and leave them with a favorable impression.”

“I daresay you shall charm them.”

“Can you guarantee that my daughters will marry a man with an impressive title and lineage?”

Louisa fought not to stare at the behemoth who called herself Mrs. Rose. She in no way resembled the delicate buds for which her family was named. Rather she sat in the massive yellow floral-print chair across from Louisa giving the impression that she was queen and failure to provide the right answer would result in her shouting, “Off with her head!”

Louisa darted a glance at the two young ladies sitting on either side of their mother. Jenny’s deep green eyes reflected amusement at her mother’s question. Louisa had no idea what Kate might be thinking. Her gaze was focused on the novel she was reading, as though she truly couldn’t be bothered with this nonsense of finding a husband.

Clearing her throat, Louisa met Mrs. Rose’s gaze, a gaze as green as her elder daughter’s. Her hair, however, was another matter. She’d passed her vibrant red hair on to her younger daughter, Kate, while Jenny’s was a muted shade, more like mahogany.

“I would do my best—”

“And if your best was not good enough?”

Louisa could sense she was on the verge of losing this position. Mrs. Rose seemed dissatisfied with every answer she’d given. Louisa’s father had been only an earl. With a haughty sniff, Mrs. Rose had stated she’d hoped for a duke’s daughter to serve as chaperone. Louisa suspected in truth she’d hoped for more than that: the daughter of a prince or king.

Mrs. Rose thought Louisa dressed dowdily. Well, not every lady could afford to hop across the Channel to Paris and have Charles Worth design her gowns.

Louisa spoke too quietly. The quiet-spoken Louisa had refrained from explaining that she spoke with refinement, something with which the American mother was obviously not familiar.

Louisa’s stomach rumbled. Damnation, it always did when she was tense. Mrs. Rose arched a brow as though the low growl emphasized whatever point she’d been attempting to make.

Louisa fisted her gloved hands in her lap. “I’m well acquainted with the lords. I’m familiar with their character, their heritage, their family scandals, and their family triumphs. I know the value of their titles. I know of their dalliances. I recognize who is suitable and who is not. I would seek a husband for your daughters as I would seek

one for myself. One who is kind—”

“I care nothing at all if he is kind. I care only that he is well placed among the aristocracy. Can you guarantee me his position will be such that other American mothers will look upon me with jealousy and unbridled envy because my girls have done so well for themselves?”

With resignation, Louisa shook her head. “I can’t guarantee that, no. I would strive to ensure that your daughters would make a good match, but I can’t guarantee that others would be envious. In all honesty, I’m not certain any chaperone could meet such exceedingly high expectations. We can only guarantee our own actions, not those of others.”

“At least you appear to be honest.”

“I *am* honest,” Louisa quickly countered. She might desperately need this position, but she could swallow only so much pride without strangling, and she’d reached her limit. “I’m striving not to present a false impression or create false expectations.”

Louisa thought she detected one corner of Mrs. Rose’s mouth twitching, as though she were more amused than annoyed at Louisa’s sudden show of nerve.

Mrs. Rose tapped a neatly manicured finger on the lace doily covering the arm of the chair. “Were you in a more favorable position, which lord would you select for yourself?”

Louisa’s stomach tightened at such a personal and intimate question. It was a test. She was certain the nasty woman was giving her some sort of *test*. She angled her chin only enough to show she wasn’t intimidated without appearing haughty. “Having never been in a more favorable position, I’ve never given the matter a great deal of thought.”

“Oh, come, come. Every woman fantasizes. Who would be your ideal mate?”

“Oh, Mama, surely you are aware that the man a woman fantasizes about is not necessarily the one who would make an ideal mate,” Jenny said.

Louisa was stunned that the young lady had spoken exactly what she had been thinking. An image of Hawkhurst—dark, roguish, dangerous—flashed unexpectedly through her mind. An odd thing really, as he was neither fantasy nor ideal...well, perhaps he was a bit of fantasy, if she was honest with herself, and hadn’t she just claimed to be honest?

Adding to that honesty was the admittance that he was partly responsible for her present situation. Whenever he visited her brother, he ignored her as easily as any other man. If she couldn’t even snag the attention of her brother’s most trusted friend,

then what hope was left to her? None.

“Why, Lady Louisa, you’re blushing,” Jenny said.

“I’m simply not accustomed to being bombarded with such personal inquiries. We English are a bit more circumspect when it comes to hiring someone to do a specific job. Who would be ideal for me, Mrs. Rose, has no bearing upon who might be ideal for your daughters. If it is your fear that I will offer some competition, I assure you I will not.” A painful admission, but again a truthful one. “All my efforts and energy shall go toward fulfilling your expectations.”

“I admit I have not found your answers satisfactory—”

Louisa’s stomach knotted as disappointment swelled through her. Did she graciously accept defeat or did she make one last, valiant effort—

“Were you to hire me to serve as a social chaperone for your daughters, I shall do all in my power to see that you are not disappointed in the outcome of our association. We would all benefit, and is that not the measure of a successful partnership?”

“Do you often interrupt your elders?” Mrs. Rose asked.

“No, I hardly ever interrupt anyone, and I apologize for my rudeness. I simply wished to make my final”—plea made her sound as though she were begging, and she refused to stoop that low and acknowledge that was exactly what she was doing—“to address what I consider strong points in my favor before you said anything we might both wish you hadn’t.”

“What I’d planned to say was that I’ve grown quite weary of our going in circles, but have decided you will do. You’re hired.” She came to her feet, with a rush of movement that had her skirts rustling. “My husband will work out the vulgar details of payment with you. You may move in tomorrow. A room will be readied near my daughters so you are available to them at all times. Don’t disappoint me, Lady Louisa. I’m not someone you want to disappoint. I can make your life miserable—”

“Yes, yes, I think you’ve made your position quite clear, my dear,” Mr. Rose said, speaking for the first time since Louisa had come into the room and introductions had been made. He was sitting in a chair off to the side by the window as though he were merely an afterthought.

Mrs. Rose gave him a pointed glare, and Louisa couldn’t help but wonder if she’d made his life miserable. It seemed to be her purpose: to overwhelm and intimidate.

“Very well,” Mrs. Rose said. “I shall leave you and the girls to get acquainted. I have other pressing matters that require my attention.”

And with that she swept from the room as though a strong gale blew at her back.

Louisa found herself sinking against the chair, an equal mixture of relief and dread swirling through her. What had she fought so incredibly hard to get herself into, and how soon before she began having regrets?

“Not to worry. My wife is more bark than bite,” Mr. Rose said, as he moved to the chair his wife had vacated. He was well fed, well dressed, and well-mannered.

Louisa felt some sort of response was required, and she had no wish to insult her new employer. While she had little doubt Mr. Rose brought the money into the household, she suspected Mrs. Rose oversaw its departure. “She seems to know her own mind and what she wants.”

“We’re new money. My lovely wife believes that our daughters’ marrying English lords will give us the prestige of *old* money.” He repeatedly stroked his thumb and forefinger over his graying mustache. He had kind eyes, not quite brown, not quite green, and a shy sort of smile that seemed out of place on a man who was reputed to be as wealthy, successful, and determined to leave his mark on the world as he was.

Louisa had liked him immediately upon introduction. She wished she could say the same of the formidable Mrs. Rose.

“My wife referred to the vulgar details of your payment. Nothing vulgar in honest work. You aristocrats need to accept that if you’re to survive.”

“We’ve done quite well for ourselves for several centuries, thank you very much,” Louisa said, grimacing at the haughty tone of her voice, not to mention the audacity of her remark. Was she not practically begging for this position? “My apologies—”

“No need to apologize, my dear. I was once where you are now. Didn’t have two pennies to rub together, and I was willing to do what had to be done to survive. So let’s talk vulgarities, shall we?”

They discussed her salary, or rather he told her what he planned to pay—five pounds a month plus a bonus on the day each girl married—and as it was an extremely generous arrangement with which only a fool would find fault—and Louisa did not consider herself a fool—she accepted the terms without argument or hesitation. He welcomed her into the household with a firm handshake and a promise to have the papers outlining their agreement ready for her signature when she arrived the following day.

After he walked from the room, all that remained was for her to put the young ladies at ease regarding how her duties would affect their lives. She had a sense, based on Jenny’s comments, that the lady enjoyed teasing and having fun. She had no idea what to expect of Kate. Louisa smiled brightly at Jenny since Kate was still absorbed by the contents of her novel. “So as I understand it this will be your first Season in London.”

“We were here in the spring, so the summer will be our second season in London,” Kate murmured.

Laughing, Jenny did what Louisa had been tempted to do: She snatched the book out of Kate’s grasp. With a shriek Kate lunged for it, and Jenny promptly shoved it beneath her bustled skirt, sitting on it and looking quite smug.

“Give me my book,” Kate demanded.

“Not until you stop being so rude to our new chaperone. Can’t you see she’s nervous?”

“I’m not nervous,” Louisa protested. She grimaced at Jenny’s challenging look. “All right, I am a little.”

“You shouldn’t be, now that the dragon has left the lair,” Kate said, settling back in her chair as though resolved to the fact that her sister wouldn’t return her treasured possession.

“Kate is upset that Mother is handling the hunt for our husbands as though it were a business arrangement.”

“One should marry for love,” Kate said.

“I disagree. One should marry for passion, and love will follow.”

“You must have love *before* you can have passion,” Kate said.

Jenny looked at Louisa. “What do you think? Which comes first, love or passion?”

Shifting in her chair, Louisa felt acutely uncomfortable with the boldness of her question. “Having experienced neither, I fear I’m hardly in a position to advise.”

“Then what makes you think you are qualified to serve as our chaperone?” Kate asked.

“If you’d been listening, silly, you’d know. She gave all her qualifications to Mother.”

“I was listening, and I don’t care about any of the things she mentioned. I don’t want my marriage arranged—”

“Marriages are no longer arranged—”

“The hell they’re not. They’ve fancied up the process, but it’s the same thing. As long as Mother approves of him, it doesn’t matter whether or not we love him.”

“Which is the very reason Lady Louisa is so important. She will guide us toward only men whom we can love. Isn’t that so?” Jenny asked.

Louisa took a deep, calming breath. “That is my hope.”

“Have you any candidates?”

“Well, I suppose to begin with, I should find out what you’re looking for in a man.”

“Splendid!” Jenny pulled the book from beneath her and tossed it into her sister’s lap. “There, you see, Lady Louisa is on our side, so victory is assured.”

“You make it sound as though you’re engaged in war,” Louisa said.

“Did you not just meet our mother?” Kate asked. “I could have sworn she was the reason your tummy rumbled.”

“Don’t be bothered by Kate’s sour disposition,” Jenny said quickly, before Louisa could respond to Kate’s rudeness. “Like Mother, she has her own ideas regarding how one should go about finding the love of her life.”

“You don’t have to find him. He should find you,” Kate said.

Jenny rolled her eyes. “Enough on this subject.” She sat up straighter, more attentively. Although neither sister was plump, Kate was considerably rounder, while Jenny was a bit taller, nearer to Louisa’s own height.

“Tell us about the prospects,” Jenny demanded.

Louisa laughed, a laugh fraught with insecurities as she sought to find a balance in this awkward arrangement: matchmaker-chaperone. It was an emerging position for ladies of quality. As far as she knew no books had been written to explain one’s exact duties or responsibilities.

“As I mentioned earlier, I think you should tell me what you are searching for in a husband. Then I can compare your desires against what I know of the available lords, and I hope we’ll find a suitable match.”

“You want my reality rather than my fantasy?” Jenny asked. “Because as you’ll recall, I don’t consider them to be the same at all.”

Louisa felt the heat of embarrassment warm her cheeks. Americans always spoke so brashly. “Perhaps a little of both would be in order,” she said.

“Well, he must be handsome,” Jenny said. “Don’t you agree, Kate?”

“I care little about his appearance. I care only about how he makes me feel.”

“Well, if he’s hideous, he will make you feel quite ill.”

“He won’t be hideous.”

“He might be if you don’t give Lady Louisa some guidance.”

“Ladies,” Louisa said before their bickering could escalate further. She hadn’t expected her charges to be so vastly different in opinion or temperament. Finding them each a husband would prove a challenge, a man approved by their mother almost impossible. “I think it would be best if you simply each told me what you require.”

“Passion,” Jenny said.

“Love,” Kate countered.

They then proceeded to return to their debate regarding which came first. Oh, the upcoming Season was going to be jolly good fun.

Chapter 2

“I didn’t think matters could get any worse.”

Randolph Selwyn, the fifth Duke of Hawkhurst, moved the glass of brandy from his lips and arched a brow at Alexander Wentworth, the sixth Earl of Ravensley, where he stood staring morosely into the fire, an arm resting on the marble mantel. “You always did lack imagination.”

In the plush chair beside him, Michael Tremayne, the fourth Marquess of Falconridge shook his dark head and chuckled.

Ravensley jerked around to face his two longtime friends, apparently appreciating neither the wryly delivered comment nor the subsequent chuckles. “I see no humor in our present situation.”

“Only because you see humor in nothing,” Falconridge said. “So you lack humor and imagination.” He paused for emphasis, his green eyes sharp as he no doubt hit upon the crux of the problem. “And money.”

“The humor and imagination I can do without, but I’m finding it increasingly difficult to manage without the money. I’m having a time of it getting anyone to extend me credit. How are you managing?”

Falconridge held up his glass, swirled the liquid around and around, as though mesmerized by the flowing amber. “I’m not. My mistress walked out on me this week. Packed up her baubles and went. Apparently she found a gentleman who could purchase her the useless trinkets I was having difficulty providing.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Not nearly as sorry as I am. She was incredible in bed. The best I’d ever had actually.”

Hawk knew they wouldn't ask after the situation concerning his mistress, as they knew him well enough to know he'd never taken one. He grew too easily bored with women, had never met one who could hold his attention once the thrill of the chase was past. It was one of the reasons he'd never given serious contemplation to marriage. How did a man force himself to visit his wife's bed, night after night, year after year, until she'd blessed him with an heir and a spare? The duty of procreation effectively removed any sense of enjoyment, any hope for spontaneity, as did the familiar. He enjoyed new experiences. Marriage guaranteed boredom.

"We've all been in this difficult spot for some time now," Hawk said. "Why, of a sudden, are you so bothered by it?"

Ravensley dropped into a chair as though he no longer had the strength to remain standing, as though the burden he carried had suddenly become too heavy. "Louisa."

Hawk's stomach tightened at the mere mention of the woman's name—as irritating a female as he'd ever met. Eight years his junior, she'd been troublesome from the moment he, at the age of fourteen, had met her when he'd visited Ravensley's estate for the first time. She'd caught him and her brother in the stables testing out the old man's pipe. At fifteen, it had been the old man's liquor.

At sixteen, it had been the daughter of the old man's valet—a young woman six years Hawk's senior who took extreme delight in initiating young lads to the joys of manhood when she wasn't seeing after Lady Louisa. In a corner stall in the stables, with the woman and a mound of hay beneath him, Hawk had been lost in bliss until Lady Louisa had suddenly come upon them and shrieked that he was killing her nanny. She'd tried to pull him off, grabbing his shoulder and shaking him. He'd always been grateful that he'd been savoring the initiation and had been in no great hurry to unbutton his trousers, and was merely lying atop the woman, but her harsh breathing at his earnest attentions no doubt did sound as though she was fighting for air. His subsequent yelling for Ravensley and Falconridge—both having experienced the woman's talents earlier—had resulted in their ushering Lady Louisa away, her being none the wiser regarding his true circumstance that afternoon. Ever since that unfortunate encounter, he'd taken great care to avoid her.

"Your sister? What of her?" he asked.

"This morning she took a position as a social chaperone." Ravensley drained the remainder of brandy from his glass. "She's gone to work, for God's sake."

Falconridge shrugged. "It's a reputable position for a lady of quality."

"Wait a moment," Hawk said. "I didn't realize your sister was that old."

"She's not. She is but six-and-twenty, but she has determined no man will ever have her, and, therefore, her age is a moot issue."

“Surely, someone—”

“No,” Ravensley interrupted. “No one. She has no dowry. And she is quite right. Without some financial gain to offer a man, her cause is hopeless. And I’m to blame. As head of the family, I should have taken action long ago to ensure that matters didn’t deteriorate this far.”

“What sort of action could you have taken?” Falconridge asked.

“Married one of these American heiresses who are so set on getting themselves a title.”

Hawk got to his feet and replaced Ravensley before the fire, his mood suddenly taking a plunge into the pit of despair at the thought of any proud English lady, especially one of his acquaintances, now serving at the pleasure of others—of wealthy Americans at that. “For whom is she working?”

“The Rose family.”

Hawk spun around. “Of New York?”

Ravensley grinned. “My reaction exactly. Wealthy with two very attractive daughters, from what I understand. I’ve decided the best thing I can do for Louisa is to see that these girls are quickly wed, and that one of them is quickly wed to me. Without charges to oversee, she will no longer be a chaperone, and I will then have the means to provide properly for her. Two birds with one stone, as it were.

“And with Louisa in the Rose household, I have an advantage. She can serve as my spy, offering me advice on how to effectively woo the lady of my choice while keeping me informed of other lords’ sad progress. I wondered if either of you wanted to have a go at the other sister.”

His gaze darted between Hawk and Falconridge, who was slowly shaking his head.

“You never were good with numbers,” Falconridge said. “Two of them and three of us. It doesn’t work, old man.”

“I’ll admit it’s not perfect, but it does offer a challenge, and I’ve found challenges sadly lacking of late. Are you gentlemen interested?”

“I’ll confess I’m intrigued by the possibilities,” Hawk said. “No harm, I suppose, in at least hearing what Lady Louisa has to say about the ladies in question.”

Hell and damnation. A man without means was as trapped in an undesirable position as a woman without a dowry.