



## The Viscount Risks It All: A Prelude to a Kiss (A Prelude to a Kiss Novel)

By *Erin Knightley*

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**From the bestselling author of *The Duke Can Go to the Devil*, comes a new novel about destiny, and taking a risk on a second chance at love...**

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**Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #664767 in Books
- Published on: 2016-01-05
- Released on: 2016-01-05
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.79" h x .91" w x 4.25" l, 1.00 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 336 pages



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### Editorial Review

#### Review

##### Praise for Erin Knightley's *Prelude to a Kiss* series

“Will delight Regency fans looking to escape London’s stuffy ballrooms.... supremely gratifying, and readers will eagerly await future stories.”—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Charming and disarming love stories are Knightley’s forte...sweet and sexy, humorous and tender—a delight.”—*RT Book Reviews*

“Breathtaking...very sensuous...kept me reading past my bedtime.”—*Fresh Fiction*

“Endearing...a pitch-perfect blend of comedy and sweetness.”—*Under the Covers*

“A sweet romance...delightful.”—*Open Book Society*

#### About the Author

**Erin Knightley** is the author of the *Prelude to a Kiss* series (*The Duke Can Go to the Devil*, *The Earl I Adore*, *The Baron Next Door*) and the *Sealed with a Kiss* series (*Flirting with Fortune*, *A Taste for Scandal*, *Miss Mistletoe*, *More Than a Stranger*). Despite being an avid reader and closet writer her whole life, Ms. Knightley decided to pursue a sensible career in science. It was only after earning her BS and working in the field for years that she realized doing the sensible thing wasn’t any fun at all. Following her dreams, Erin left her practical side behind and now spends her days writing. Together with her tall, dark, and handsome husband and their three spoiled mutts, she is living her own Happily Ever After in North Carolina.

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#### Praise

#### Also by Erin Knightley

#### Title Page

#### Copyright

#### Dedication

#### Acknowledgments

#### Prologue

#### Chapter One

#### Chapter Two

#### Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-one

Chapter Twenty-two

Chapter Twenty-three

Chapter Twenty-four

Chapter Twenty-five

Chapter Twenty-six

Epilogue

*Excerpt from The Baron Next Door*

*About the Author*

## Prologue

There she was.

Standing by the alcove, alone and searching the crowd. The filmy white fabric of her gown looked cloudlike against the blue velvet drapes behind her. She was beautiful, but that wasn't what made Gavin Stark, Viscount Derington's stomach drop at the sight of her. No, it was the fact that it was *her*, Felicity, the girl he knew better than any person in the world. More to the point, it was what he had come to say to her.

He'd seen her skinned knees, heard her laugh so hard she'd actually snorted, and comforted her as her tears had soaked through his best shirt following her mother's funeral. He'd seen her tired, angry, stubborn, and even frazzled, but she'd never been anything but beautiful to him. As far as she was concerned, they'd been the best of friends since they were children.

And as far as Dering was concerned, he'd been desperately in love with her since they were fifteen.

It had been five long years since he'd fallen for her, and yet, in all that time, he had never once been able to bring himself to say anything. How could he, when he knew that the moment he did, everything would change between them? No more easy, lighthearted afternoons beside the river. No more stolen conversations in the folly, or teasing debates about the merits of stowing away on a ship to the Caribbean when the first blanket of snow covered the Somerset landscape.

Dering—the nickname his friends had given him at school, which Felicity refused to use—knew that the moment he declared himself, everything would be different. It was a prospect that had scared the hell out of him, but time was of the essence.

His stomach rolled with a wave of nerves at the thought. Biting hard on the inside of his cheek, he straightened his shoulders. It was now or never. Her coming-out had been postponed first by her mother's illness, then by her mother's death, but in a few short months, she would be off to London to make her debut.

This, his break over Christmas between the Michaelmas and Lent terms, was the last time he would see her before she left. God knew the moment the *ton* got a hold of her, his chances would be destroyed. She'd be a diamond of the first water, an Incomparable for certain.

What was the overly tall heir to an earldom when there were dozens of rakish noblemen to be had? He couldn't take the chance. Further, he simply couldn't wait anymore.

Five years was long enough.

That thought finally pulled him from his invisible moorings and propelled him forward in her direction. He used his height and breadth to his advantage, gently but firmly bullying his way through the crush. He knew every last one of them there—his father entertained constantly and had instilled the importance of socializing in all his sons—but at that moment, none of the other guests meant a damn to him. There was exactly one person he wanted to see, and she had just noticed him coming toward her.

Felicity's lips spread into one of her adorable, overwide grins that made her entire countenance come to life. "Gavin," she exclaimed, wrapping her gloved hands around his and giving a tight squeeze. "I'm so glad you're here. I've been waiting for you for ages."

His mind instantly went blank as he leaned into her touch. Her fingers fit so well in his hands. Struggling to understand her meaning, he said, "Did I forget a meeting?"

Shaking her head, she pulled him the slightest bit closer so she could whisper by his ear. “No, but waiting for your return has been torture. Meet me in the library in five minutes?”

Dear God. In all of the scenarios he had dreamed up on how he could sweep her from her feet, he’d never imagined she might be the one to do the initiating. His Adam’s apple bobbed against his suddenly tight cravat as he swallowed and nodded. “I’ll see you then.”

Her smile was swift and glorious, making his heart hammer in his chest. “Excellent. I think I shall go nonchalantly take a turn about the room.” With a wink, she released his hands and slipped away, leaving him to stare after her and reflect that this might very well have been the greatest day of his entire twenty years on this planet.

Sucking in a deep breath, he set off to find a footman, or more specifically, a glass of champagne. No, make that *two* glasses of champagne. If his dream was about to come true, he damn well wanted to celebrate with the woman he loved.

Precisely three minutes later, he was pacing the marble tiles of his father’s prized library, his heart thundering with anticipation. In a few short minutes, Felicity would arrive. After all these years of wanting her so badly, but knowing he couldn’t say a word for fear of risking their friendship, it was impossible to believe that the waiting would be over. The not knowing would be over. The moment was finally here for him to show her the man he had become, declare himself, and allow the pieces to fall where they might.

Hopefully, right into his waiting arms.

The door squeaked open. He turned just as she slipped inside, her cheeks pink and her eyes fairly glowing. Drawing a steady breath—which failed utterly to calm his nerves—he set the drinks down on the nearest table and held his hand out to her. “There you are.”

“Here I am,” she responded with a grin. She hurried to his side and slipped her hands right back into his. He wished that the soft fabric of her gloves weren’t there, so he could feel the heat of her skin against his, but that would come soon enough.

His mouth practically went dry at the thought.

“I’ve missed you,” he exclaimed, not willing to hide the truth even a moment longer. It had been almost four months since he had seen her—far too long.

“And I you. Desperately,” she added, tightening her grip on his hands.

*Desperately.* He nearly closed his eyes against the pleasure the word evoked. Could it possibly be that she felt the same way about him as he did about her? *Desperate* was exactly the word to describe the way he had felt these last few months, waiting to see her again. “Lissy,” he started to say, but his voice cracked on the second syllable. Embarrassed, he cleared his throat and tried again. “Lissy, so much has changed of late.”

She seemed to be humming with just as much energy as he was. She nodded, her pale locks swaying with the motion. “Yes, I know. *Everything* has changed. And there is no one with whom I can speak of it but you.”

Yes! He had been going mad, not being able to talk to anyone about his intentions. His school friends would have mocked him for actually wanting to marry, let alone for falling in love. His chest tightened as he reached into his pocket, where he had stashed the betrothal ring he had commissioned. As heir to the earldom, there were literally dozens of jewels he could have chosen from, but he hadn’t wanted them. No old

family heirlooms for his Felicity; he wanted her to have something created just for her. Opal, surrounded by a cluster of diamonds to represent the moon and stars that he knew she loved so much.

The gold was warm to the touch as his fingers grazed the delicate curve. “I—”

“No, please, I can’t wait another second.” She bit her lip, looking as though she would burst if she didn’t say whatever was within her. “Gavin, I’m in love!”

His ears roared with the surge of exhilaration that washed through him. They were the sweetest words he had ever heard. “Me, too,” he rushed to say, relief and elation assailing him in equal parts. All this time, he had been so afraid she wouldn’t return his regard, and here they were, declaring their love for one another. It was like a dream, even better than he had imagined in his very best scenarios.

Her eyes went huge, rounding to the size of twin guineas even as she laughed with delight. “You are? With whom?”

Dering froze like a rabbit in a snare. *With whom?* The words reverberated through his brain like a ricocheting bullet. If she didn’t think it was her, then that could only mean . . .

She was in love with someone else.

His fingertips went numb as he stared back at her, thunderstruck. “You first,” he said, only barely able to push the words past his lips.

She sighed gustily, her eyes briefly fluttering closed. “Oh, Gavin, he’s wonderful. He’s kind and handsome and smart, and I haven’t told a soul yet, but we’re getting married!”

The room dimmed from Dering’s vision, fading to gray as he focused on her beautiful, beloved lips and the unbelievable words they had just delivered. “Married?” he whispered.

She nodded, her light brown eyes glittering in the room’s dim candlelight. “He spoke to my father last night, and the announcement is to be made just as soon as the contracts are signed. I’m so happy, Gavin, I could burst.”

As she wrapped her arms around him in an impromptu hug, her scent enveloped him, that soft hint of gardenia that had taunted his dreams for years, and he breathed it in even as the shock numbed his thoughts.

She was getting married. She’d soon belong to another man, and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it. If she was being forced, that would be one thing, but she had uttered the one phrase that could keep him from declaring himself, consequences be damned.

She was in love. Felicity was in love, and it wasn’t with him.

He had missed his chance after all.

## *Chapter One*

*Ten years later*

I’m so glad you’ve decided to join us.”

Felicity Danby turned and smiled to her brother-in-law's wife, Charity, as she came to join Felicity at the front window. The servants were busy loading the last of the trunks onto the carriage, which meant they were right on time for a noon departure, less than three hours hence.

"As am I," she said, directing her gaze back to the courtyard. It was more or less the truth. She was nervous and a tad anxious to be returning to Bath for the first time in years, but she felt confident in her decision to do so. A year and a half was quite long enough for her self-imposed isolation.

Although perhaps *isolation* wasn't quite the right word. She readily socialized with the villagers in their tiny little corner of England, which was about as southwest as one could go in this country without hitting water. But she hadn't yet been able to make herself travel north to visit the many friends and family who lived in Somerset. She just hadn't been ready.

Felicity shook her head and sent a wry look to Charity. "Frankly, I'm surprised you were able to adjust to my rather last-minute whim. I hope Hugh truly won't mind having two more females in his midst."

Between Charity, Charity's grandmother Lady Effington, Felicity, and Felicity's daughter, Isabella, the poor baron would be quite outnumbered—just as he was every day here in Cadgwith. He was a good sport about it, but this was to be a holiday for them. It was the anniversary of when they first met, after all.

And it truly had been a last-minute decision on Felicity's part. Charity and Hugh had been asking her for months to join them for the second annual Summer Serenade in Somerset music festival, and she had steadfastly declined until, out of the blue, she had changed her mind yesterday.

The idea of traveling to her hometown for the first time since her life had crashed down around her ears last year was intimidating. Here, everyone knew what had happened and the awkward expressions of sorrow and condolences were well behind them. Though she had proudly gone by Lady Cadgwith when she was married, the villagers all knew to call her Lady Felicity now. Bless her father for being an earl, because she vastly preferred her original honorific to the Dowager Lady Cadgwith distinction.

Ghastly term, that. *Dowager* brought to mind gray hair and squinting eyes and many well-earned wrinkles. No one under the age of sixty should have to use it, let alone under thirty.

And yet, here she was.

Charity, oblivious to Felicity's train of thought, shook her head decisively. "Of course he doesn't mind. You know he adores having you and Bella around."

A genuine smile came to Felicity's lips. She held true affection for her husband's younger brother, and she knew the sentiment was mutual. They had helped each other through dark times, as best they could, anyhow, and she loved him every bit as much as one of her own brothers.

When he had married Charity, Felicity had offered to move out, but Hugh wouldn't hear of it. Now she was so lucky to have a father figure for Bella, a dear friend in Charity, and a surrogate grandmother in Lady Effington.

"Besides," Charity added, sending her a mischievous grin, "we were operating on the assumption that you would eventually change your mind, so no plans needed to be altered."

Felicity laughed out loud at that. A bit cheeky on their part. "I'm not sure whether I should be flattered that you know me so well or insulted that apparently you think I'm flighty."

“Flattered, definitely,” Charity said with a wink.

A movement from the drive caught their attention, and in unison they leaned to the right to see who was coming. Mild surprise lifted Felicity’s eyebrows as she recognized the vicar’s wagon.

“Well,” Charity said, shooting her a knowing look, “it appears your presence may well be missed.”

Perhaps she was right. Felicity certainly hadn’t expected Mr. Anthorp to respond to her note this morning in person. They’d spent enough time together of late—doing charity work, sharing walks, organizing the Flora Day feast—that they’d developed a rather nice friendship, and she wanted to let him know that she would be gone and to wish him a happy summer.

Smoothing a hand down the lavender-colored muslin of her skirts, she headed for the front door. The air was warm and breezy, perfumed with the ever-present salty smell of the sea. She lifted her hand in greeting as he came to a stop and secured the reins before hopping down. Though he wore a sensible straw hat, the sun glinted off the silver strands liberally peppering the fine brown hair at his temples.

The corners of his eyes crinkled behind the round lenses of his spectacles as he smiled at her. “Good morning, Lady Felicity. It seems that you are to have an adventure.”

“That may be too strong a word, I think,” she said with a wry smile. “I simply came to the conclusion that it was past time to visit my hometown.”

He nodded, a bit of somberness softening his countenance. “I am very glad to hear it. They will be happy to see you, no doubt.” His smile was gentle, encouraging.

He knew exactly why she hadn’t gone home since Ian’s death. As a widower himself, he understood better than anyone the pain of facing those who knew a person before a great tragedy. Those people expected the person one used to be, not the person one was now. Felicity could barely remember the carefree, happy girl she had once been. It was a lifetime ago.

“Let us hope so,” she said, only half joking. “You needn’t have come to see me off, however. I know how busy you are on Saturdays.” He always liked to study at home the day before his sermons.

He glanced around at the courtyard before offering her his elbow. “Why don’t we step away from the bustling servants for a moment?”

She readily accepted, and he led her through the gates toward the rose garden overlooking the sea. From this vantage point, she could see Hugh cutting through the waves on his last morning swim before their departure. Seagulls cried noisily as they circled the sky above him, clearly unhappy at his presence.

The vicar cleared his throat, drawing her attention back to him. “Though I’m certain this trip will be a joyful one, I realize, from experience, that it may not be without its trials.” He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small leather-bound book. “I hope that this can bring you some measure of peace while you are there.”

The gold leaf letters easily stood out on the black cover, spelling out the book’s title: *Holy Bible*. A fitting gift, coming from a clergyman. Accepting the book, she smiled. “Thank you for such a thoughtful present. I’m sure it will be very comforting.”

“I certainly hope so. It’s a good size for traveling, so I thought it might come in handy for you should you find yourself overwhelmed during your sojourn.”

He truly was one of the most thoughtful men she knew. “I probably shouldn’t accept this, but I will, with much gratitude for your kindness.”

A soft but sincere smile settled on his lips as he met her gaze. “You are quite special to me, Lady Felicity. I hope you know that.”

She was coming to see that. She swallowed, not entirely sure how she felt about hearing of his affection for her. It was nice, spending time with him. He was fifteen years her senior, which, combined with his profession, lent him an air of wisdom and tranquility. After the turmoil of the last year and a half, she appreciated those traits more than ever. He filled that need in her to have a stable, calming presence in her life.

Looking down to the book in her hands, she gave a single nod. “Thank you, Mr. Anthorp. I value our friendship as well.”

They talked a few minutes longer about the coming journey before he finally steered her back toward the house. Patting her hand affectionately, he said, “I look forward to your return already, but in the meantime, I bid you safe travels and a very happy reunion with your family.”

In short order, he was back in his wagon, heading home, with Felicity waving after him. Charity walked outside, attempting to look nonchalant but failing completely. After offering her own wave to the vicar’s retreating form, she said, “So will you miss him?”

“Do you know? I think I will,” Felicity replied, surprised to realize it was true.

But it was only for two months. By summer’s end, she would be back here where she belonged, breathing in the salty air and listening to the crashing waves that she loved so much, as well as sharing walks and quiet conversation with Mr. Anthorp. Bath might have been her hometown, and she was indeed looking forward to the visit, but Cadgwith was and would always be her true home.

“And who is it that you are most looking forward to seeing once we get there? I met several of your cousins already, and they seem like lovely people.”

Felicity considered the question as they turned and headed back into the house. Thoughts of her childhood and adolescence in their sunny estate just outside of Bath drifted thought her mind, and there was one person in particular who stood out the most. “Gavin,” she said, a broad smile coming to her lips. The very thought lifted her heart, soothing some of the anxiety that had gathered there.

“Gavin? Oh! Do you mean Lord Derington?”

Felicity nodded. She was the only one who called him by his Christian name. His schoolmates had nicknamed him Dering his very first year at Eton—a play on his daring manner as much as his courtesy title—but she’d always preferred the name she had called him since they were children.

It had been so many years since she’d seen him, but he was such a part of her memories from there, she could hardly think of her childhood without thinking of him. It had started out with her eldest brother Percy and him playing together—the heirs to two distinguished earldoms—but Percy never had been one to have much interest in others. What had started out with Felicity tagging along had turned into true friendship before long.

“Though we have written on occasion, I haven’t seen him in almost a decade—dreadful timing with my

visits and his time at his other estates—and I can hardly wait to do so.” It was amazing it hadn’t occurred to her before. With her old friend there, at least she would have one true ally.

“Well, then,” Charity said, putting her hands to her hips, “it’s a good thing that his is the first soiree we are set to attend. You can start the festival off right.”

A relieved smile came to Felicity’s lips at this fortuitous bit of news. Thank goodness. Having another friend in her corner who could bypass all the awkwardness she feared awaited her would be wonderful. As the worry faded, something else seeped in to take its place: excitement.

“Indeed,” she replied, clasping the vicar’s gift to her chest. With the help of her friends both old and new, perhaps this would turn out to be an enjoyable trip after all.

• • •

Setting his hands to his hips, Dering surveyed the scene before him, pleased that all of it had come together so well. His townhouse wasn’t overly large, but enough people were packed into his drawing and music rooms to put one in mind of a proper London party, right here in Bath. Merely thirty or forty of his closest friends, of course.

The lighting was low, ostensibly in deference to the warmth of the June evening, but in truth to subtly encourage his guests to be a little daring tonight. What was the fun of summer if one couldn’t relax the rules a bit?

“Quite the crush, it would seem,” Theresa, Lady Kingsley, declared as she strolled over to him. Every last one of her generous curves were on full display tonight in a shimmering silver gown that was impossible not to notice.

He smiled and lifted his glass. “On the eve of the festival’s opening, we must properly celebrate. Where is your champagne, anyway?”

Her laugh was soft and throaty, as seductive as a siren. “I’ve already had two glasses. You’re not trying to get me foxy so you may have your way with me, are you?”

He offered her a wry smile. “I’m much too keen on self-preservation to try, Theresa.” Her husband might have been as old as the pyramids and as lecherous as Lucifer, but Dering wasn’t about to take chances with a married woman. Besides the obvious complications, he held too much stock in honor to dabble in such a thing.

She looked him up and down, taking her time as her gaze lingered on his chest. “A man of your impressive size and strength has little to worry about.” Even as she said the teasing words, it was clear that she wasn’t really serious. They had played this game for years, and it was exactly that: a game.

Smiling, he shook his head. “I do hope you’ll save a dance for me tomorrow at the opening ball.”

“Mmm, perhaps. *If* you are very fortunate.” With a wink, she sauntered off toward the desserts, clearly aware that he would be watching her go.

He chuckled lightly. He lived for nights like this. Nights where he could flirt harmlessly with worldly women, laugh with friends, and immerse himself in the energy of the gathering. Silence was not his friend. Idleness drove him mad, and peaceful settings made him shifty. He thrived in the noise and movement and bustle of a roomful or even city full of people.

Better to be with others than alone with his thoughts.

Marcus Trough, a friend and frequent rival at the card tables, paused at Dering's side, sliding a knowing grin his way before directing his famous blue gaze back to Theresa. "Good to see Lady Kingsley looking so well." He was in full rakehell form tonight, with his brown hair dipping across his forehead in the way he was convinced women loved and his jacket cut so close to his form, Dering suspected he could have seen the impression of the man's navel, were he so inclined to look.

"As always," Dering replied easily. "Glad you could make it out, old man. I didn't think a music festival would be quite your cup of tea. Or whiskey, I should say."

"After the buzz about it last year? Had to see for myself what it was about this place that could convince Radcliffe and Evansleigh to succumb to marriage in the space of a month."

Dering snorted. "It was something to behold, I'll say that much. My mother was deuced disappointed that a similar fate didn't befall me. Getting old, to hear her tell it. Me, not her."

Trough laughed, shaking his head. "It's a wonder we can still chew our food, if our mothers are to be believed. Old girl told me just last week that if I waited much longer, she feared she may not live to see her first grandchild. She's not yet fifty, mind you."

Chuckling, Dering patted his friend on the shoulder. "To our mothers," he said, lifting his drink and tossing back the rest of it. Trough did likewise, and with a salute, set off into the crowd, no doubt in search of a proper prospect to woo. Or perhaps it was an *improper* prospect he sought. The man thrived on female company. Not that Dering blamed him. Truth be told, he himself was on the lookout for a good match this year. He was fast approaching his thirtieth birthday, and, though he'd never say as much to his meddling mother, it was past time for him to get on with the business of heir making.

This wasn't the first time he had thought about taking the plunge. He'd briefly considered his longtime friend Charity Effington last year. Her loveliness, mild temper, and extraordinary talent in music had seemed a proper match for his tastes, but she'd gone and fallen in love with the baron. He was happy for her—for them both—but he had no interest in making a love match.

As long as he lived, he would never make himself so vulnerable again.

As if summoned from his thoughts, Charity herself entered the room, her hand settled comfortably on the arm of her husband. Her dark copper hair was pulled back in a becoming chignon with soft curls framing her freckled face. Grinning broadly, he strode over to greet them. He hadn't been certain they would make it in time, given the rainy weather they'd had this week, so he was thrilled to see them.

As he raised a hand in welcome, his gaze shifted to the blond woman who stepped in just behind her. Almost before his brain realized who she was, Dering's heart slammed to a stop, taking with it all the air in his lungs.

*Felicity?*

What on earth was she doing here, in his house? He hadn't even known she was coming to the county, let alone to his home. Shock held him momentarily rooted to the ground, hand up and mouth half-open, before some sane, blessedly rational part of him pushed through, propelling him back into motion. Before he could get a true thought in his head, Charity spied him and broke out in a wide smile.

"Dering," she exclaimed, coming forward to greet him with both hands extended. "How wonderful to see

you again."

It took every ounce of his willpower to focus on her and not the vision from his past that was just behind her. His mouth stretched into something he hoped looked like a smile as she clasped his hands and kissed his cheek. "And you," he murmured, his voice seeming to come from somewhere outside his body. Having restarted, his heart was thumping nearly loud enough to be heard over the din of conversation around them.

How could Felicity be here? He hadn't seen her in ages, despite her efforts to visit him when she was in town over the years. He had purposely avoided her, not wanting to see her in the beginning, when she was a glowing newlywed, and then later when it had just been easier to stay away. He'd put his ridiculous adolescent love behind him, and it wasn't something that he wanted to think about now.

Unfortunately, the choice was proven to be out of his hands as Charity leaned back and gestured to Felicity. "I do hope you received our note," she said, completely unaware of the turmoil within him as he continued to smile politely. "We didn't hear back from you, but I know you and Felicity are old friends, and more to the point, I know that when it comes to parties, your philosophy has always been the more, the merrier."

Dering cocked his head. Note? He had been too damned busy today to bother with sorting out the correspondence that was piling up in his study. What he wouldn't give to go back in time and read the bloody mail in order to give himself a heads-up. Although would it have been better or worse to know that she was here in Bath and would make an appearance this evening? Would he have been able to stand the suspense, knowing she could arrive on his doorstep at any moment?

Impossible to say.

Drawing in a fortifying breath, he turned his attention fully to Felicity. His stomach somersaulted as their gazes met after so long apart. Even though he didn't want to appear overly interested, he couldn't help but take in every inch of her face. She'd matured since he'd last seen her—her cheeks were less round and the corners of her eyes showed the first sign of laugh lines—but she was unmistakably the girl he remembered. He wouldn't have thought it possible, but those small changes in her only served to enhance her beauty.

When she broke into a wide smile, the air left his lungs in a rush.

God, but he remembered that smile. He remembered those light brown eyes, the color of strong tea with a dash of cream. He remembered the way her hair smelled and how her voice sounded when she was happy. Did it sound the same now?

Drawing a much-needed breath, he dipped his head and said, "It's been an age, Felicity. I hope you are well." By some miracle he sounded almost normal. Hopefully no one would guess he was so affected by her unexpected presence, least of all her.

Her smile tilted into a wry impression of itself. "Is that the greeting I get after ten years?" She shook her head as though sorely disappointed. "Do come here and greet me properly. You are, after all, the one person in the city I have been looking forward to seeing most." Leaning forward an inch, she added in a mock whisper, "Don't tell my cousins I said that."

Swallowing against the stubborn lump in his throat, he stepped forward, unsure of what a proper greeting between them even looked like after all these years. Gingerly, he reached for one of her hands and brought it to his lips, pressing a quick, featherlight kiss to the leather at her knuckles. The teasing scent of gardenia wafted to his nose, and he inhaled before he could think better of it.

It was the scent of all his favorite memories . . . as well as the worst one.

She squeezed his hand as he lowered it, her eyes bright with obvious affection. "Much better. Now perhaps we can take a turn about the room, so that you can explain why you have been such a dreadful correspondent these last few years."

His wits were slowly coming back to him, enough that he could see how bad an idea that would be. He needed a moment to gather himself. It had been almost a decade; there was no reason why she should still affect him so strongly. He was past all that. Her presence had blindsided him, and he just needed time to get himself together.

"How I would love to, but I have quite a bit to tend to at the moment. Please do enjoy yourselves, and perhaps we can find a moment a little later?"

Mild surprise showed in both women's faces, but neither of them challenged him. Pretending he didn't see the disappointment in Felicity's dimmed smile, he offered them a brief nod, murmured a greeting to Cadgwith, then plunged back into the crowd, hoping to lose himself in more ways than one.

He might be a coward, but he was a prudent one.

## *Chapter Two*

"It's about bloody time you got here."

William Spencer, Duke of Radcliffe's, eyebrows shot clear up his forehead at Dering's rather shabby greeting. His wife, May, pressed her lips together, but Dering could see surprised amusement sparkling in her bright blue eyes.

"Well, good evening to you, too," the duke responded mildly. "I doubt you missed me that keenly since our meeting yesterday, so am I to assume something unpleasant occurred in my absence?"

"You could say that," Dering replied, dragging a hand through his hair. "Might you be amenable to leaving your lovely wife for a bit to join me in my study for a drink?"

He knew full well that Radcliffe didn't drink anything stronger than the wine that was readily available on any passing servant's tray, and Radcliffe knew that he knew that, so it didn't take any time at all for his friend to grasp Dering's desperation to speak with him alone. "Certainly," he replied, then turned to his wife. "Might I abandon you to your friends for a few minutes?"

May, who was resplendent in a crimson-and-gold gown and elegantly plaited hair, didn't hesitate at all. "Of course. Good to see you again, Dering," she added with a knowing smile before heading off to find her friends. Exceptionally fine woman, that one. His friend could scarce have done better in choosing a wife.

Once in his study, he shut the door and waved Radcliffe over to where a pair of leather chairs sat prominently in the center of the room. The duke pursed his lips, not making any move toward the chair. "No need to get cozy. Is something amiss?"

Dering gave a curt nod. "It is indeed." He stalked to the sideboard and pulled out his favorite brandy. Pouring a glass that was entirely too generous even by his standards, he took a long drink before setting it aside and pouring a glass of wine for his friend. Handing over the goblet, he reclaimed his own drink and

began to pace.

The duke watched him make a few circuits before finally crossing his arms. “Shall I wait for you to wear a hole in the carpet, or would you like to go ahead and tell me what the devil is going on?” The question was mildly spoken, without ire or annoyance. Radcliffe was as bemused as he was curious.

Pausing midstride, Dering drew a breath and spread his arms. “She’s here.”

The duke tilted his head, watching him closely. “*She* being . . . ?”

“*Her*. The bloody girl who broke my heart.”

For the first time in their entire acquaintance, Radcliffe’s jaw actually dropped as he stared back at him, stunned. “She’s here? Now? Did you invite her?”

He was the only other person on the planet who knew of the whole debacle ten years ago. He’d been there at university when Dering had returned, brokenhearted and bereft. They had spoken of it exactly once, when Dering was deep in his cups and self-pity, and never directly brought it up again.

Until now.

“No, I didn’t invite her. I damn near fell over my own dropped jaw when she walked though the door. The worst part about it is that she thinks we’re still friends. Everyone does.”

The duke shook his head, his brow knitted as he tried to make sense of Dering’s rush of words. “If you didn’t invite her, how is she here?”

Dering exhaled and dropped into the nearest chair. What a mess. Setting his drink on the table beside him, he ran both hands over his hair. “She came with Charity and Baron Cadgwith. She’s his sister-in-law.”

Radcliffe blinked a few times before the import of his words sunk in. “Lissy was *Lady Felicity*? The Earl of Landowne’s daughter?”

Nodding once, Dering leaned forward, his elbows on his knees as he scrubbed his hands over his face. “Or the Dowager Lady Cadgwith, if you prefer.”

“Well. That *is* a problem,” Radcliffe agreed. “She’ll be as thick as thieves with Charity by now, who will be equally as attached to May and Sophie, which means there is little chance you will be able to escape her this summer. Unless you intend to hole up here for the remainder of the festival.” He paused. “Assuming you wish to escape her?”

“Yes. No.” Dering shook his head. “This is ridiculous. I am a grown man, and am well past the stage of adolescent infatuation and heartbreak. There is no reason I should be so affected by her presence other than the fact that it was a complete surprise.”

It was the only explanation. He had gotten over Felicity years ago. He’d been infatuated with a dozen women since then, danced with hundreds, and flirted with more than he could count. He’d learned that, outside of the bubble of his youth, there was a whole wide world out there with females aplenty with whom to share enjoyment and attraction. *Mutual* attraction. He had no intention of getting caught up in a one-sided love affair again so long as he lived.

Yes, it had to be the surprise that had him so off-kilter.

Coming to sit in the chair beside him, Radcliffe sighed. “An understandable reaction, given the fact you were taken off guard.”

It was a diplomatic response, for which Dering was grateful. He could have easily rehashed what a blubbering idiot Dering had been that night he’d poured out his woes to Radcliffe over a bottle of blue ruin. Or there were the weeks of sullen moping that had been followed by some rather poor choices in company, the latter of which had resulted in Dering’s father traveling to Cambridge to set him straight.

Drawing a deep breath, Dering nodded. “Yes. Exactly. We are both adults, and there is no reason why we cannot interact as such.”

“Precisely.”

“Absolutely.” He was a grown, responsible man. He could damn well act like one around an old friend, no matter how embarrassing their past was.

The two of them sat in silence for a few moments, Dering momentarily lost to their shared history, to the feelings he’d endured that night when Felicity had announced that she was in love and about to marry.

“So,” the duke said at last, his tone even, “shall we return to the party?”

“Yes, of course. My apologies for the outburst.”

Radcliffe leaned forward and gave him a brotherly pat on his shoulder. “No apologies necessary. I know full well how badly she hurt you, however unintentionally. If there is anything I can do to make this easier for you, just say the word.”

Gratitude bloomed in his chest as he sent his longtime friend a grateful smile. “You’ve already done it. I appreciate both your discretion and your ear. Now let us return to the festivities and pretend that I didn’t just blubber on about a female like some Friday-faced fool.”

They both stood, set aside their unfinished drinks, and headed toward the door. “I know a thing or two about being a fool when it comes to a woman,” the duke said, sending him a wry glance. “Are you certain you’ll be all right?”

Dering gave a mirthless laugh. “I will be fine.” And if he wasn’t, well, hopefully his acting skills were up to scratch.

• • •

So far, things had gone surprisingly well at this, Felicity’s first true social event since Ian’s passing. By some stroke of luck, she didn’t know very many people at the party. A few familiar faces here and there, but other than Hugh and Charity and their close acquaintances, she was blessedly anonymous. After having conversed for a long while with Charity and her delightful friends Sophie and May, she had stepped back from the conversation so they could discuss the upcoming concert they were performing later in the week.

Gavin’s home was well suited to entertaining, with strategically placed conversation areas in the corners of the two main rooms while the bulk of the space was open for mingling. She rather liked people-watching, which wasn’t something she could easily do in their little town, where everyone knew everyone else. It was an indulgence to simply be a fly on the wall. After finding a footman with a tray of drinks, she stood off to the side with her glass of sherry and glanced around the room.

It was an interesting collection of people. Musicians, peers, ladies, opera singers, and even a few foreigners filled the two front rooms nearly to bursting. There was a clear air of celebration, with the other attendees laughing, drinking, and generally making merry. She couldn't remember the last time she had attended something like this. It was . . . invigorating. Exciting, even. The sense of optimism for the coming days of the summer festival was both palpable and infectious, and she found herself smiling.

“Lady Cadgwith?”

Without thinking, she automatically turned around, her eyebrows raised in question. A slim, tall brunette with pleasant features and a ready smile approached her.

“I thought that was you. My family owned the bookshop that you used to frequent before you married and moved away.”

It was enough to jog her memory. “Miss Hedgecock! How nice to see you again. You are looking very well indeed.” Felicity could clearly recall the woman as a girl only a year or two older than herself, smiling at her from the other side of the counter whenever she stopped in to peruse the well-stocked shelves.

Dipping her head shyly, she said, “It’s Lady Ware now, actually. Married for three years this March, with a wee one in the nursery.”

Felicity hadn’t heard that Sir Geoffrey had married. A bookish academic who must be in his late fifties by now, the baronet had always seemed destined to remain a bachelor. It was probably a very nice match, considering their shared love of literature.

“How wonderful,” she replied, truly meaning it. As nonchalantly as she could manage, she added, “And actually, it’s just Lady Felicity now. My husband passed a little over a year and a half ago.”

But, of course, there was no nonchalant way to say such a thing. Just as she feared, Lady Ware’s eyes widened as her hand flew to her throat. “Oh my, I am so very sorry to hear that.” All traces of joviality had vanished as she shook her head slowly, her features schooled in sympathy. “You poor, poor dear.”

Felicity forced a smile, hating the pity that bled into the other woman’s voice. “Thank you. I appreciate the sentiment. And like you, I am blessed with a child. She’s just over fourteen months old, in fact.”

Instead of lightening the mood, her words only served to further distress the baronetess. “Born after her father’s death? How absolutely tragic for you both! I can’t even imagine.”

Dread settled like a stone in Felicity’s stomach as she cast about for something that would defuse the situation. People were beginning to notice the conversation, turning curious gazes their way. She nearly groaned when she saw that there were actual tears brimming in Lady Ware’s eyes.

“There you are,” a deep, resonating voice interjected at Felicity’s side, and she nearly wept with relief. Gavin had returned at last, and his timing couldn’t have been better. “I hope you don’t mind my stealing Lady Felicity for a moment, Lady Ware. It’s been years since we’ve seen each other, and I find I am exceedingly anxious to catch up.”

If she could have kissed him without causing a scandal, she would happily have done so. Not waiting for the woman’s response, Felicity said, “It was so lovely to see you again. Do enjoy your evening.”

Placing her hand to the viscount’s sleeve, she gladly allowed him to lead her away. He skirted around the room, keeping his pace slow and steady.

“Oh, bless you, you wonderful man, for coming to the rescue. That was *not* going well.”

He kept his eyes trained ahead as he nodded. “Given your stricken expression, it seemed rather obvious that you were in need of a savior. Luckily for you, that’s always been my specialty.”

Though his words were teasing, his manner was somewhat detached. Not unlike how he had originally greeted her. She wasn’t sure what, exactly, she’d been expecting from him, but somehow this wasn’t it. In her mind, she had envisioned a happy, heartfelt reunion where the years would melt away.

A silly thought, now that she examined it. It had been nearly a decade since they’d seen each other. He wasn’t likely to be the same unreserved, unabashedly extroverted boy she remembered. Heaven knew she wasn’t anything like the girl she had once been.

Still, even just being in his presence reminded her of the lightness of spirit she once possessed. “Rescuing women from uncomfortable situations? Oddly enough, I can believe it. You always did have a knack for saving the day.”

“Did I?”

Her lingering unease began to fall away as she soaked in his protective presence. “Don’t tell me you don’t recall the flipped rowboat incident of oh-seven?”

He chuckled, the sound a low rumble in his chest. A chest that was easily twice as broad as she remembered. When had he filled out so much? Last she remembered, he had been as tall as he was now, but a good two stone lighter. It shouldn’t really surprise her. He was a man now, whereas back then he had been barely more than a boy.

“Oh yes,” he replied, his lips quirking up as he nodded. “Well, if Gregory Cox would have realized the folly of his plan before setting sail, he could have saved himself a dunking. Which, by the way, I maintain was an accident.”

She laughed at the memory of the boy emerging from the waist-deep water, his hair in his face and his less than honorable intentions thoroughly thwarted. Gavin had offered to hold the boat steady as Gregory stepped in. It might have gone better for him if Gregory hadn’t confided his intention to row to the middle of the lake with her then refuse to row them back unless she kissed him.

It seemed like they were so young, looking back, but she had met Ian only two years later. She drew in a slow breath, lingering on the memory of the day they had first laid eyes on each other. They’d accidentally collided as they both hurried to Collin’s Sweet Shop for shelter from an unexpected rainstorm, and when she’d looked up to apologize, his gorgeous blue eyes had stolen the breath right out of her. Within three months they were married, and in their entire marriage, they never spent a single night apart.

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