

If I Fall



KATE NOBLE



BERKLEY SENSATION, NEW YORK

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REVEALED
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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

*To my brother-in-law Andy, who has instilled
in my nieces and nephew the importance of
intermittent swashbuckling.*

*And to my writing friends, my partners in
caffeinated desperation, who frequently kept me
from throwing my laptop across the coffee shop.*

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Epilogue

Historical Romance

Prologue

January 1823

SHE liked the ring on her hand. She liked the emerald glitter; she liked the weight of the gold band. She liked the way it felt there, solid and right, and the fact that her sisters and all her friends admired it with enthusiastic jealousy. But more than the ring, Sarah Forrester liked the man who gave it to her, and what he had said when he did.

“This belonged to my mother,” he’d rasped, looking up at her lovingly from his kneeling state—on at least she assumed it was lovingly, her vision was a bit watery at the time. “She wore it every day of her marriage. Over thirty years.” He smiled, with a charm that was rakish and kind all at once, and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Do you think we can match that?”

And now, as all of their family and friends, acquaintances, and people she didn’t even know but her parents wished to gloat to were gathered in the house in London, dressed in their finest silks and satins, cooing over her ring, Sarah Forrester only wanted one thing to make the night perfect: the man of her dreams standing by her side.

Amid all the music and dancing, she spotted him. He looked bemusedly harried, as if he, too, was a little overwhelmed by the whole thing. Jason. Her heart did that strange, happy flip she was slowly becoming accustomed to every time she saw him. His red hair made him easy to spot, as did the crowd of people that naturally gravitated to her future bridegroom. His easy, befuddled charm endeared him easily to all around him. And to those who it did not, his dukedom surely did the trick. A fact he knew but rarely capitalized on. Really, most of the time Jason was ... just Jason. Teasing and kind, occasionally melancholy but he came out of it quick enough. Whenever she came over and smiled at him, he would smile back. He was, admittedly, a little bragish, but held in check by those whom he loved.

A number that now included Sarah, she thought with a thrill.

“Oh, let us see it again!” Amanda cried, her round face lit up with glee. Sarah’s youngest sister may not have grown into her full, remarkable height yet, nor had she lost all of her youthful plumpness, but she was already getting eyes from several young gentlemen. At fifteen, she was on the border of acceptability to be out in society, and since it was her sister’s engagement ball, Amanda had wheedled and argued with their parents that *surely* there was no harm in letting her attend.

“Mandy...”

One desperate look from her burgeoning-on-adulthood sister had Sarah correcting herself. “I mean *Amanda*. You are being ridiculous,” Sarah replied through a smile. “You’ve already seen it a thousand times!”

“But Miss Brooks hasn’t, and neither has Miss Croft, have you?” Amanda turned to the two young ladies beside her. They were marginally older than Amanda, but eager to follow the enthusiastic girl on her demands, and shook their heads vigorously.

Sarah sighed, and proffered her left hand. The emerald was oohed and aahed over; Miss Brooks even gave a dutiful squeal. Strange. Utterly strange, the way this ring affected everyone around her. Including herself.

Because of its size. Because of its sparkle.

Because of what it meant.

She looked up again, sought out the red hair in the menagerie of the guffawing gentlemen across the

room, only to find it missing. She scanned, searched ... there he was, by the terrace doors. He looked to be making an escape, but before he could, he was looking over the crowd, scanning, searching ... and found her eyes.

He waved a hand in front of his face. *I'm hot!* his gesture said.

She rolled her eyes and repeated the gesture. *Goodness, me, too!*

Come on, then. He nodded toward the terrace door with a mischievous smile.

Lord did she want out of this pack of young girls and into his arms, but...

"Look how the emerald flashes blue in the candlelight!" Amanda said as she took Sarah's hand and raised it up to the candle, eliciting more oohs and aahs.

Sarah jerked forward slightly as she was pulled, but held her ground. Tolerated her sister's enthusiasm. Amanda could be irrepressible in a terribly kind way.

Sarah held up her other hand to Jason, fingers spread. *Five minutes*, it said.

He held his hand back in the same way. *Five minutes*, he replied.

I love you, she mouthed, with a laughing smile, but he missed it, as he was already out the door, providing a cool rush she could feel from the other side of the room. She frowned slightly, unhappy that he was so uncomfortable that he rushed out the doors.

"Oh, when will the wedding be?" Miss Brooks pounced on her.

"And where will you honeymoon?" Miss Croft asked at the same time.

"What about the gown? And have you seen His Grace's estates yet?"

Then again, Sarah thought, she could not begrudge Jason his speed out the door. For in four minutes and forty seconds, she would join him.



It was actually closer to six minutes, as once she had extracted herself from Amanda and her friends, Sarah had been waylaid by her mother, Lady Forrester, who had no fewer than three of the gentlemen she had been aiming toward Sarah in a circle around her. Sarah waited patiently as Lady Forrester made sure they all knew what a loss it was to them that Sarah was no longer available. The gentlemen looked appropriately aggrieved—mostly for Lady Forrester's sake, Sarah thought privately.

But finally, finally, she made her way to the terrace doors, and greeted the cool winter air with a smile of relief.

"Winn, wait—" she heard Jason say from somewhere in the darkness of the terrace. She turned toward his voice, and narrowly missed being bumped into by a shorter lady trying to make her escape.

"Oh, excuse me!" Sarah exclaimed.

But escape the smaller woman did, slipping past Sarah without so much as a nod of acknowledgement.

Sarah's head whipped around to follow the petite woman's movements, watching as she quickly folded herself into the overcrowded room. There were many people here that Sarah did not know personally—her parents had decided it was far more important for *their* friends to be invited to her engagement ball than her own, and Sarah had smiled and allowed it. So it was not surprising when she did not recognize a guest. But the woman who had skirted past her, with what almost looked like tears in her eyes ... she was oddly familiar....

And then suddenly her brain placed the woman. From an editorial cartoon that had appeared in the papers about six months ago ... an etching of a small woman, standing in a crowd of scandalized men and facing down the enormous belly of Lord Forrester, Sarah's father, as she attempted to gain admittance to one of the most exclusive learned societies in Britain, the Society of Historical Art and Architecture of the Known World.

"Was that Winnifred Crane?" Sarah asked, turning to Jason, who looked unnaturally pale in the

moonlight. At his nod, Sarah could not help but smile.

~~“Where is she going? I so wanted to meet her!” Sarah could not help but gush. Miss Winnifred Crane’s adventures of the past summer were now the stuff of legend. She had challenged Sarah’s father, as head of the Historical Society, to a dare—if she could prove a painting’s authenticity, or lack thereof, he would have to allow her membership. She had apparently had to run all over Europe to do so, but prove herself, she did. And even though Lord Forrester had been depicted as the obstacle in the editorial cartoon—really, the exaggeration of his belly was most unkind, her father was only a *little* fat, Sarah had grouched—her father was a great friend of Miss Crane’s late father, and consequently her.~~

“My father told me he wanted to invite her, but didn’t think she’d attend as she’s been traveling through Europe—” Sarah continued breathlessly. But her admiration of Miss Crane was cut short by Jason’s sharp interruption.

“You knew?” he said, almost accusingly. “You knew she would be here?”

Sarah was taken aback—there were no other words for it. Jason’s normal teasing persona had fallen away as absolutely as gravity. His face—the pallor she had barely noted before began to take on new meaning.

“Yes,” she replied, cautiously, gauging his reaction. “I did not realize you were acquainted with her, however.”

She watched as red spread over Jason’s face. “Only ... only a little,” he stuttered. “Her father was one of my professors at school ... and then when she wanted to get into the Historical Society, I was there, and...”

Relief fell in waves over Sarah’s stiffened shoulders. For a moment, she had thought that she had seen ... something else, in his frame.

“I remember now,” Sarah cried happily. “You helped her get inside Somerset House, and to her audience with my father.” Although he was not depicted in the editorial cartoon, she remembered it being mentioned that the Duke of Rayne had shown gentlemanly grace when confronted with a woman claiming she wanted entrance to the Society, reacting the only way he could—by escorting her in. Of course they were acquainted. There was nothing else to it.

So why would this unease not abate?

“I hear she’s writing a book, you know,” Sarah continued blithely. “All about her misadventures, trying to gain admittance to the Historical Society.” Her father had told her—and while other members of the society were decidedly miffed, her father had simply chuckled and said he couldn’t wait to read it. A sudden thought struck Sarah, and she turned her inquisitive gaze to her fiancé. “Do you think you’ll be in it? You did play an instrumental part in getting her through the door—”

“No!” Jason cried, shocking Sarah to her toes. He began to pace, like a man consumed. “That’s just it! She’s writing me out of it. How can ... how can someone do that? *Literally* write someone out of their lives?”

And, as he paced in front of her, his brow furrowed and his gaze at his feet, Sarah felt the earth fall away beneath her feet. Felt the cold of the air around her, chilling her to the bone. Felt her limbs turn to stone, as the still world rushed past her, and her entire being focused on the dawning truth.

She didn’t know what had given him away—his angry speech, his mask of joviality fallen away—but it was plain as day on his face. And Sarah knew—knew as surely as she did her sisters’ names, or the color of her own eyes—that Jason, her fiancé, felt something deep and raw for the small woman who had slipped past her just a moment ago. In a few bare minutes, Winnifred Crane had provoked strong feelings in Jason ... stronger, Sarah realized, than she likely ever could.

“Jason,” she rasped, unsteady, “I, ah ... that is—how well do you know Miss Crane?”

To his credit, Jason tried to recover.

“I told you, when I was a student...” But his voice fell away when he saw her slowly shaking her head.

“No, I think you know her better than that.”

He was silent for a moment, met her steady gaze. She could see him turning over thoughts in his head: *Should I lie? Would she believe me? What is best?* But each question fell pitifully away as he ultimately made his decision.

“Yes, I do,” he whispered.

And suddenly, the last vestige of hope, of denial, slipped away and was lost to the cold night. Sarah felt her knees start to buckle.

“I think I should like to sit down,” she said, looking to her left and right, seeking anything, anywhere, that could buoy her before she fell.

She felt his arms come around her. She should hate him right now. She should push him away, but oddly, she welcomed his support. He guided her to a small bench, a few steps farther away from the noise of the party beyond the doors.

She caught a glimpse of his face then, as he settled himself beside her. He looked so stricken, and earnest—he knew full well that whatever pain existed now, he was the cause of it. She felt so bad for him in that moment! But, *but*, she shook herself ... She had to know. Everything. And she couldn’t ask him her questions while seeing the concern on his face.

She looked away, her eyes roaming the darkness beyond the terrace, and found the strength for honesty there.

“When?” she asked in a surprisingly clear voice.

“When?” he replied, uncomprehending.

“When did you come to know?”—her tongue tasted sour at the name—“Miss Crane? Was it at school?”

He hesitated. “After.”

“Before we met?” she asked. Somehow, it would be better if it was before they had met. It would not change the current circumstances, but it was better ... surely.

“No,” he replied, resignation in his voice. “This summer, when I went to the Continent for a few weeks.”

And with that solemn confession, suddenly the last piece of the puzzle fell into place. Jason had abruptly left town last summer, just disappeared for a few weeks of fun in Paris, he had explained. They hadn’t been engaged then, of course. He had never even spoken of his intentions, but his deference to her had been marked. And then, when he came back ... something was different. The attentions toward her were the same in quantity, but—and she may have sensed something then, but could only see it now—*he* had been different. And as much as he had been everything kind and accommodating, there were times when she caught him looking out the window, or into a glass of wine, and ... he was somewhere else.

And apparently that somewhere else had not been Paris. It had been cutting across Europe, as Miss Crane’s companion on her adventures.

She tried to speak, tried to ask and accuse, but the only sound that she managed to create was a small, pained, “Oh.”

“Sarah, I am going to marry you.” Jason began in a rush, turning his body toward her, grasping her cold hand in her lap. “Don’t worry. And we’ll ... we’ll be happy. What she and I have ... *had*—it was a matter of circumstance. It’s over between us.”

“No, it’s not.” Sarah focused her eyes toward the light of the party. Beyond those windows, there were her family and friends, and they were celebrating *them*. They were celebrating their future.

“I have made a study of you, these past months,” she breathed. *How was her voice not shaking?*

How was she not crying? “You have been my favorite subject,” she admitted, somewhat sheepishly, only now realizing that it was true. She had wanted to understand him, so very much. “And you have been many things with me—jovial, joking, pleased, content...” Those moments when his mind had been far, far away came back to her with such frightening ease that she had to wonder if they hadn’t been resting right under the surface the entire time. “But never happy. Not ... not truly. Nor have I ever seen you as stirred up as you are after a mere few minutes in the presence of Miss Crane.”

Jason shook his head, desperate in his urgency. “That doesn’t mean you and I won’t—”

She pulled her hand from his, and finally sought his gaze.

“Jason, look at me.”

He did, meeting her eyes. She saw her own pain reflected back at her. Her own resolution.

She said the words she had to say.

“If you are going to break my heart, do it now. Not three months from now, after we’ve made vows. Not even tomorrow. Do it now. Have the strength to say what you want. And to go after it.”

He stood up then, looking as if he would jump away at any second. But he did not move. His face was lit by the light from within the house, his gaze entranced. He was searching ... for someone that wasn’t there.

He looked down at her then, and she couldn’t help it: her breath caught. Just the slightest hitch, but it was a betrayal of all she was holding back under her well-bred mask. She stifled it ... She just had to keep the tears from spilling down her cheeks for a little longer...

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

It was the only sound on the cold night air.

She let out a long, unsteady breath. She felt her body ready to crumble, but she would not let it. Not here, and not now.

She heard him ask the time ... She knew she responded. He asked what she would tell her parents. She replied that she would tell them in the morning. But her voice was so far away from her, dull to the ears.

She watched him take her hand and kiss it. But it was as if she could feel nothing.

She wanted, needed to be alone.

“You should go,” she whispered, putting a smile on her face. She did it to hurry him along, because if he didn’t go now, she would burst, and if he was here for that, he would not leave. But the sadness of the smile—that was real.

He turned, finally. But before he faded away into the darkness, he turned again, his voice cutting through what was left of her numbness.

“Sarah,” he breathed, his voice cracking in a way she knew she could not allow in herself, “please believe, I know I would have been terribly happy with you. If only...”

“If only,” she agreed.

And set him free.

She sat there for some minutes, alone in the dark. The coldness had begun to seep through her skin but she could not move. She could not go in and face her family and friends yet. They would see, on her face...

It was the hardest thing she had ever done.

It was the only thing she could do.

Her chest tightened over her heart. It became unbearable to breathe. She clutched her hand over her mouth so as to not make a sound.

If only...

But no—there was no use in “if only.” Because as the tears began to fall, ugly drops running down her face, across the ring on her hand, Sarah knew one thing with absolute certainty.

Everything was broken, and nothing would be right again.

April 1823

IT was over.

Everything was all right again.

Sarah closed the door to her bedroom, sinking back against it with an audible sigh of relief. Finally the horrendous night had ended, and she was safe again.

It wasn't meant to be a particularly taxing evening. After all, it had only been a card party, with supper and some light amusements thereafter, Bridget on the pianoforte. Just close friends, her mother had said. No one there would dare mention...

The Event.

And to their credit, no one did. No one would think to do so in the Forresters' own home. But that didn't stop them from staring. And whispering.

Sarah pushed herself off of the door, giving herself the smallest of shakes. "Close friends." What a laughable conceit. When your father is consumed by antiquities, and your mother has one daughter entering her third Season and another daughter her first, the term "close friend" becomes muddled. What Lady Forrester considered a close friend was, apparently, the wife of the man whose personal collection of Roman statuary Lord Forrester was trying to acquire. And said Lady's sons—who happened to have been among the men who danced with Sarah more than once last Season.

Although, that had been before.

She pulled her weary body over to her silly little scrolled dressing table and sat on the small velvet stool that had always reminded Sarah of nothing so much as a tuffet. Which, of course, was why Sarah had picked it out when she was twelve.

No one should be held accountable for his or her adolescent tastes.

The dressing table was fluffy, if a wooden object could be described as such. There were cherubs, and clouds, and other white-painted rococo touches that made the twenty-one-year-old Sarah certain she had been a slightly ridiculous child.

She took off the pearl drop earrings, the pearl pendant at her throat, placed them aside.

She glanced at her left hand. Now naked. She quickly looked up, moved her gaze back to the fat woodwork of the silly dressing table.

Somehow, today, the silliness was a comfort. Because she could recognize it. It reminded her of herself ... before. Though as she turned her face to the dressing table's mirror, she could not recognize the face that stared back at her.

It was not twelve.

It was not one-and-twenty.

It was ancient.

The face did not smile. The eyes were hollows of exposure in the moonlight. If she went so far as to light a candle in the dark room, she would see herself, true. She would see the pearl pins in her golden hair; she would see the light green eyes that bespoke her Anglo-Saxon ancestry, and her pale unlined skin that attested to her youth. But the old woman with hollow eyes would still be underneath. Because...

Because that's who she truly was now.

A swift knock at the door, and the curt entry of Molly, her maid, snapped Sarah to attention.

“Ah, miss, quite the party tonight!” Molly said, efficiently straightening her cuffs before she approached Sarah and struck a flint to light the candles at the mirror.

“Yes,” Sarah said, again painting her face with the serene smile she had tried to adopt all night. She was certain it had only fallen a few times over the course of the evening, and that she had quickly recovered. “My mother does love to have her *friends* over.”

Molly, whose professionalism belied her youth—she couldn’t have more than a few years on Sarah herself—hummed a noncommittal reply, as she began pulling the pins from Sarah’s hair.

But the sweet relief of having her thick straight hair give in to gravity’s pull was negated by the truth Sarah knew, and Molly was too smart to say.

“Be honest, Molly.” Sarah finally broke the silence that had been filled only by the brush being pulled through her hair. “Tonight was a disaster.”

“It was no such thing, miss!” Molly declared, the brush never stopping. “The courses were all served on time. None of the china was cracked. And we could all hear her Ladyship’s laughter all the way in the kitchens.”

It was true. Her mother’s laugh did carry—especially when it was forced.

“I suppose your definition of success differs from mine.” Sarah sighed.

“It might at that”—Molly shrugged—“but don’t think we didn’t see you standing up to dance with that Lord Seton. He seemed a jolly sort.”

He seemed the sort to report back the answers to any and all of his probing questions to the nearest gossip columnist, Sarah thought wearily, recalling his pointed queries and his short breath, due to too tight stays. Worse still, he was the only one to have asked her to dance. Maybe she no longer looked the type to wish for a dance.

Maybe that was one of the times the ancient woman who lived beneath her skin had slipped through the surface.

“Now, would you like to dress for bed, miss?” Molly asked, taking the pearl-headed pins and placing them precisely in the case, next to the matching jewelry. “Your parents are still in the drawing room, having a bit of cold cheese before retiring. Perhaps you’d wish to join them first?”

Sarah saw herself blanch in the mirror. But while the thought of rehashing the evening with her parents was bad, the idea of lying in bed with nothing to do but rehash the evening to herself was even worse. She needed a distraction.

A warm glass of milk. A lurid novel. Anything that could remove her from herself.

From what they called her in whispers.

“Thank you, Molly, I can see to my dress. The kitchens must need an extra hand this evening.”

“You have the right of it, miss.” Molly smiled kindly as she curtsied. “Good evening, miss.”

“Good night, Molly,” Sarah replied distractedly.

A novel. From the library. She could slip down the servants’ staircase, and avoid the possibility of her parents hearing her on the main stairs. On the way back up, she could retrieve a glass of warm milk from the kitchens while enjoying the distracting comfort of their bustle and hum.

A novel. That should do the trick.



Unfortunately, while one could in theory avoid the drawing room doors if one were, say, leaving the house, it was impossible to cross to the library without passing said doors.

It was luck that had them closed.

It was bad luck that they were thin enough to hear through.

“It could have gone worse.” Sarah heard her father’s gruff voice as she tiptoed across the foyer. His usual booming jubilation was countered by a certain reserve. As if he were asking a question instead of

knowing his own opinion.

~~“Not much worse,” Sarah heard in a feminine grumble of reply. She would have continued on past the drawing room doors; she would have nodded and smiled curtly to the servants bent over pails to clean as she headed briskly to the library, shutting the door behind her.~~

She would have done so—except for one thing. The voice that responded to her father had not belonged to her mother. It instead belonged to her sister, Bridget.

“Come now, my dear,” Lady Forrester replied this time, the weariness apparent in her voice. “I thought the evening went ... as smoothly as we could expect.”

“Smoothly?” her sister scoffed. Sarah, via some previously unknown gift for subterfuge, silently went to the door and knelt at the jamb, half concealing herself behind a potted plant. She briefly locked eyes with a footman, who was busy dusting footprints from the marble tiles in the foyer. He looked back down again and quickly resumed his work.

“*Smoothly* would have been if Sarah hadn’t looked like she was about to faint the entire time,” her sister replied in that lecturing tone she took on when she thought she knew better than everyone else. “*Smoothly* would have been if Rayne’s wedding announcement hadn’t been printed just yesterday.”

Sarah could feel the blood rising to her face. It was silent beyond the doors, Bridget’s pronouncement simply hanging in midair for the barest, longest of seconds.

The announcement. God, what horrific timing.

It had been almost four months since that terrible night, when Jason Cummings, the Duke of Rayne had dashed everyone’s hopes and called off their engagement. Shortly thereafter, Lord and Lady Forrester had retired with their daughters for the spare remainder of the Little Season to Primrose Manor, the family seat near Portsmouth. Four months should have been plenty of time for people to forget. For Sarah to forget.

It had been peaceful at Primrose. Comfortable. There, Sarah had room to breathe.

But it was also quiet. And the quiet only let the memories slip in.

As such, she had been determined to return to London for the Season proper. New gowns, new plays, new people. It would be, in her estimation, a fresh start.

She had expected some questions. Some whispers.

But not like this.

It hadn’t helped that Jason had been so bloody *good* about the matter! Once the engagement was called off, he told everyone who would listen that absolutely no fault lay at Sarah’s door, that she was nothing if not a kind and deserving young lady. And then, blessedly, he left town for an extended stay on the Continent.

But when Jason left London, he left the gossipmongers behind.

The day after they first arrived back, the gossip columns noted their arrival. Strange, as no one really noted the comings and goings of the Forresters before. They were proper young ladies of good family, of course, but not high ranking enough or scandalous enough to pique a newspaperman’s interest. For heaven’s sake, her father was president of the boring, stuffy, academic Historical Society. The Forresters could not have been less salacious if they tried.

But there it was. In bold print.

“The Girl Who Lost a Duke Returns to Town.”

After that, Sarah avoided the papers.

So she hadn’t known about the announcement. Until yesterday, when one of her mother’s “friends” told her.

“Oh, my dear,” Lady Whitford said, coming over to clasp Sarah’s hands in a show of sympathy

early in the morning. Too early, really, to be paying calls. And far too early to be wearing such a ridiculous silk costume of patriotic ribbons across her bodice. But there she was, her round face shining with predatory concern, the feathers from her striped turban flopping into her earnest eyes. “How can you stand it? How can you go on?”

And then she told her. The Duke of Rayne had been married last week in Provence, to noted historian Winnifred Crane. Sarah tried to feel something. Anything. Other than a wistful sort of dread.

Because, while Sarah had been certain that she would be quite able to go on, contrary to Lady Whitford’s opinion, it seemed more and more people were just as certain that she wouldn’t. She couldn’t, they’d said. Enough people repeated the same thing to her with wide, sad eyes, and thus she began to question herself.

Will I be able to go on? ... Should I even try?

She held out a small hope that something, anything would happen to distract the population. A global catastrophe, a declaration of war, anything. But sadly, the only bit of gossip involved some gentleman who got caught in, and then managed to escape from, Burma—and since most people could not locate Burma on a map, it was not nearly of enough interest to waylay the ogling of the “Girl Who Lost a Duke.”

Therefore, the dinner party that Lady Forrester had planned for weeks, as a casual reintroduction of herself as a hostess, while also easing her daughters into society again, had been a clamorous game of expectations. People had been expecting her to break. To make some sort of comment about the situation.

And the whispers and stares had made her want to do nothing more than oblige them.

To give in to gravity’s pull.

Bridget’s imperious voice broke the silence from within the drawing room, and broke through Sarah’s racing thoughts. “And *smoothly* would have been if anyone had bothered to remember that they were there to meet me, too.”

“Bridget!” her mother admonished, shocked.

“It’s true, Mother!” Bridget replied, adamant. “Any woman that spoke to me made sure to ask, ‘Oh and how is your sister?’” Bridget’s voice took on a quality of mock concern, her pitch eerily like that of Lady Whitford. “And any man who thought to talk to me could barely put two words together, as if they were afraid that I was tainted with the same man-repelling stain!”

“For heaven’s sake, Bridget—” her mother tried, but Bridget would not be stopped.

“This was to be *my* Season. How am *I* supposed to catch a husband when Sarah looks like she’s going to break into pieces at the idea of a dance? She should have just married the Duke—even if he did not love her. Everything would have been better!”

“Bridget, that’s enough!” her father interrupted. “Such petulance is ugly.”

Sarah could have heard a pin drop. Their father usually left the set downs to their mother. If such words from him landed heavily on Sarah all the way through the door, she could only imagine her sister’s expression.

“Ugly it may be,” Sarah finally heard Bridget say shakily, “but it is the truth. And if you don’t do something, we may as well all dye our clothes black to join Sarah in mourning her lack of husband!”

Sarah barely scooted back behind the potted palm in time to avoid the swinging door as her sister made a dramatic exit, unknowingly marching past the object of her fury and up the stairs without a backward glance.

The door slowly creaked closed, a million years passing before the latch caught. Sarah caught the eye of the scrubbing footman again, but this time, before he looked away, Sarah knew the blush that crept up over his face was a mirror to hers.

The young footman might feel for her, but Sarah was alone in her humiliation. Of all people,

Bridget! Of her whole family, Bridget had been the most supportive, the one who had propped her up the most through the winter months in Portsmouth with little to do but watch the ships sail in and out of the harbor. The one who had immediately sworn a lifelong vendetta of hatred against the Duke of Rayne, as all good sisters do. The one who had their trunks packed to come back to London before the decision had even been made.

Foolishly, Sarah had thought she was doing so in support of her. The fact that it was to be Bridget's debut Season had completely slipped her admittedly preoccupied mind. But obviously, it had not slipped Bridget's.

So now, not only was Sarah miserable and wretched, but her mere presence was destroying her sister's Season, too.

Brilliant.

Bridget—who had declared undying hatred of the Duke of Rayne—would marry her sister off to him, because that would be less miserable for everyone. Bitterness flooded Sarah's mouth. So much for sisterly affection.

Sarah was so caught up in her own burning frustration, she almost missed her father's voice when it rumbled forth again.

"I received a letter from the Portsmouth steward," he began, his voice hesitant and careful. "He has asked that I return to oversee the installation of the new well. It shouldn't take me more than a few days."

"Darling, I really would prefer if you didn't leave just now," her mother's voice was honey and lemon—soothing but stern, the way it always sounded when she negotiated for what she wanted. "Or you must, make it as short as possible. The Season has only just begun, and if Sarah is to endure, she needs the support of the family behind her."

"I was thinking I would take Sarah with me," her father replied, much to Sarah's own surprise. And her mother's, apparently.

"What on earth for?" Lady Forrester asked.

Her father paused a moment before answering.

"I didn't think it would be this bad."

There was a pause, heavy in the air.

"Neither did I," her mother finally said softly. "But we'd hoped..."

"Hoped, but not prepared," her father countered.

In her mind's eye, Sarah could see her father. He was likely sitting on the edge of her mother's favorite stuffed settee, looking down at his interlaced fingers, twiddling his thumbs the way he always did when he was thinking.

"I don't know if she's ready for this. I don't know that I am."

Sarah's heart, dampened under layers of her own effort, went out to her father. Outside of herself, he had been the one most hurt by the Event.

Her father had loved Jason. They became acquainted as members of the Historical Society, and Lord Forrester (father of three daughters) had been practically giddy at the idea of not only a son-in-law, but also one with whom he could converse for hours and hours about antique pediments and arcane painting techniques.

"Oh, my darling." Her mother's voice came through the thin door, placating her husband. "Maybe we can find a way to take Sarah's—and your—mind off the troubles."

"I would have him removed from the Historical Society if I could," her father stated, his voice muffled by what Sarah had to assume was her mother's shoulder. "But I cannot allow personal feelings to belie—"

"I know, I know," she soothed. "But for now, let us be thankful that Rayne had the good grace to

remove himself to the Continent. And let us hope he—”

And that was the point that Sarah decided she had heard enough.

Because as hard as it was to think and hear about her parents’ disappointments in her—it was infinitely more difficult to dwell on the Duke of Rayne, where he was, and what he was doing.

She stood up abruptly and crossed the foyer as fast as her feet would carry her to the library, without concern that her footfalls were too loud or rapid to be mistaken for a servant’s. Without care for the eyes of the footman following her. And without any idea for whom she would meet inside the library’s doors.

“Oh my God!” Sarah cried, coming to a sudden halt.

“I’m afraid not, Miss Forrester,” the elegant figure that lounged with a volume of poetry in her hand said. “It’s just me.”

“L—Lady Worth,” Sarah breathed, as breeding won out over shock, and she curtsied. Phillippa, Lady Worth, the unofficial but undeniable reigning leader of the ton, did not smile and stand in return. Instead, she flipped the book shut and regarded Sarah with a bemused expression.

“Oh, so you do know who I am. I was beginning to wonder if you remembered me at all from last Season.”

“Lady Worth, of course I remember you,” Sarah replied, blushing to the roots of her hair. “I attended your garden party last year, and of course you were at...” *my engagement party*, she stopped herself from staying. Instead she shook herself. “I apologize, let me fetch my parents. It is quite odd hours for calling, but—”

“Yes, I am aware it is quite odd hours for calling,” Lady Worth replied as she stood to her full height. She was dressed in easily the most beautiful evening gown Sarah had ever seen, but to Lady Worth, it was likely just her Tuesday ensemble. “Your butler may seem stern, but entry was fairly simple. I just told him I had been here for your supper party and had left a reticule behind. He allowed me to search on my own.” Lady Worth suddenly frowned. “I am going to recommend to your mother that you reinforce the need for security with your staff. After all, I could have been a thief—or worse yet, a newspaper reporter.”

“My mother,” Sarah repeated, latching onto a solid form throughout Lady Worth’s bewildering speech. “Yes, allow me to fetch her, she’s just across the hall...”

“Never mind that.” Lady Worth waved her hand in dismissal of the idea. “I have come here to see you.”

“Me?” Sarah squeaked.

“Yes, child. For heaven’s sake, when did you become such a mimic? Last Season you seemed to have more brains than that.”

Sarah, not having an answer to that, prudently remained silent.

“How long have you been in town, Miss Forrester?” Lady Worth asked, as nonchalant as if she had asked the question in full daylight in a room full of society ladies.

“A fortnight, ma’am,” Sarah answered, her eyes following Lady Worth as she gently paced the carpet.

“And in that fortnight, how many invitations have you received from me?”

“Ah ... I am uncertain...” Sarah hedged.

“As luck would have it, I am entirely certain. Two. You have received two invitations from me to come to tea. I know this because I rarely ask anything of anyone more than once.”

“Oh,” she replied, knowing she sounded stupid and out of her depth ... because in truth, she was. “I think, ma’am”—she tried valiantly—“that my mother thought—that is, she didn’t want us to accept any invitations until after we had settled...”

But at that, Lady Worth stopped pacing, and simply stood with her hands on her hips. “I have

always preferred the truth to pretty lies, my dear. But if you insist upon continuing with that sentence at least speak it with conviction.”

Sarah’s head came up sharply. She met the challenge in the taller lady’s eyes. And decided to rise to it.

“How could I visit with you, Lady Worth, when your family is connected to Jason’s?”

Sarah had thought to shock Phillippa Worth. And she had. But not for the reasons she had imagined. Because while she read surprise in that lady’s eyes, she also recognized not horror, but applause.

“Yes, my husband’s brother is married to the Duke of Rayne’s sister.” Lady Worth waved her hand in the air again, seemingly waving away anything that she did not consider important. “But that is exactly why you *should* have accepted my invitation.”

“Lady Worth, I...” Sarah tried, but suddenly, she felt very tired. The weight of the party, overhearing her parents and sister’s conversation, and now the mad assault on logic and propriety that was Lady Worth being in her library, settled over Sarah, and she could no longer stop her shoulders from slumping.

“Do you mind if I sit down?” she asked, already half seated on the settee.

Lady Worth, to her credit, immediately sat down with Sarah and, in what she must have thought was a sympathetic gesture, patted Sarah’s hand.

“Would you like me to call for some tea? Or perhaps sherry?” Lady Worth inquired kindly.

Sarah let out a small, exhausted laugh. “Lady Worth, we are in my house. I should be offering tea to you.”

“Oh,” she replied, with a smile. “I nearly forgot. And I think this will be simpler if you take to calling me Phillippa, and I call you Sarah.”

“What will be simpler?” Sarah asked hoping to finally understand ... anything.

Lady Worth—Phillippa—regarded her quietly for a moment.

“It’s too early in the Season for you to be this tired,” she finally observed.

Sarah thought about denying it, thought about making excuses ... but somehow, she couldn’t fight any longer. She couldn’t pretend to be even and fine. The only thing left to do was admit her failings.

To give in to gravity’s pull.

“I don’t know what to do,” Sarah admitted. “Tonight, we had our first party—my mother was so excited to be a hostess again, and it’s my sister’s first Season, and it was just—”

“Terrible,” Phillippa supplied. At Sarah’s questioning look, Phillippa smiled in bemusement. “Really, you should simply assume that I know everything already. It saves time.”

“Yes, but how—”

“At least three of your evening’s attendees were at the Newlins’ ball after your fete. Interestingly, no fewer than five people fought through the crush to rush to my side and let me know—as the only connection to the Duke of Rayne in town—just how unfortunate your supper party was.”

Sarah started rubbing one of her temples. “Wonderful. Everyone will know.”

“Oh, I’d expect that it will be in the papers tomorrow.”

“So all of London thinks I’m a fragile mourner for a missing Duke.”

“Where did you find that description?” Phillippa peered at her intensely.

“My...” not wanting to implicate her sister, Sarah changed tack. “I feel like I’m disappointing my family, most of all. And I don’t know what I could do differently. I smile, and everyone thinks I’m covering my feelings. I frown, and everyone thinks I’m about to break down and cry. I don’t know how to act under such scrutiny. I wish I could just go back to being one of a thousand girls. And not —”

“‘The Girl Who Lost a Duke’?” Phillippa finished for her.

Sarah nodded, then turned her gaze to her hands. “My father ... I think he’s planning to go back to

Portsmouth soon and perhaps it would be easier—”

“Don’t you dare,” Phillippa intoned severely, her expression suddenly focused and serious. “Now you listen to me—first of all, do not concern yourself with how your family feels right now. I know it is curious advice, but you have been a dutiful daughter for your entire life. You have never given them any reason to be disappointed in you, so do not let them make you feel as such now. Nor should you let the world make you feel as if you are somehow damaged goods. You are no such thing. In fact, when one takes a thorough accounting of your actions, one can only conclude that you have not only done no wrong, you have, in fact, done everything right.”

“Exactly!” Sarah cried. “I did everything right. *Everything*. I got top marks from every teacher I had, I learned to play the pianoforte—a little—to sew, to speak French and Latin. I came to London, and only accepted dances from men my mother approved of. And then I met a man who was supposed to be the one I would spend the rest of my life with and I...” Her voice broke, an echo of the seam that still sat along her heart. “I did everything right. And somehow, I still lost.”

“You lost a battle.” Phillippa agreed. “But the war is long. And the enemy ... changeable.”

“What do you mean?” Sarah asked.

“Public perception,” she said with a smile, “is a tricky thing. The world looks at you now as ‘the Girl Who Lost a Duke.’ You have to change that. Else, no amount of time spent in Portsmouth is going to kill that idea here. In fact, as more time passes, it will be cemented as such. *You* have to make the world stop looking at you with pity.”

“How?”

“First of all, stop looking at yourself with pity. Tell yourself a hundred times a day that it was Jason’s loss, not yours, in ending the engagement. Even if you don’t believe it.” Phillippa gripped Sarah’s hand. “Then, you take London by storm. Be charming, vivacious. Just this side of outrageous. Flirt with appropriate men and dance with inappropriate ones. Be the person every hostess absolutely must have at her party. Put on a mask and save your true feelings for when you are in private. Soon enough, all of London will have forgotten the ‘Girl Who Lost a Duke,’ and instead think the Duke of Rayne utterly mad for having let you escape.”

“I ... I don’t know if I can do all that,” Sarah replied breathlessly.

“*You have to*. It is how you survive.” Phillippa’s face suddenly shuttered with old memories. “It is how I did.”

Sarah looked at the hand gripping hers. Then, she ran her gaze up the elegant dress and stature of the queen of society sitting in her library. But for once, it was not the extravagant dress or the beautiful jewels at her throat that Sarah envied. It was her posture. Her conviction. Her strength. Phillippa Worth was everything a young lady aspired to be. And she knew it.

“How do I begin?” Sarah asked.

Phillippa’s eyes lit with anticipation. “We already have.”

As sure as a gun,
We shall all be undone,
If longer continue the peace;
A top we shan't know
From a futtock below,
Nor a block from a bucket of grease.

—William Nugent Glascock, *The Lieutenant's Lament*

A little over a month later...

“WELL, what do we do now?” First Lieutenant Jackson Fletcher—called Jack by friends—asked, no one in particular. But since he was standing on deck next to his second lieutenant Roger Whigby, he invariably was to receive an answer.

“We have to supervise the men, Mr. Fletcher. They still have a dozen duties on board before we can even hope to make berth,” Whigby said through bites of cold salted ham that he had stashed in his pocket after breakfast that morning. Whigby was the type of kind soul who, for some reason, was eating something every time he spoke. “Although why the captain insists the old girl’s brass fittings shine with the rising sun is beyond me.”

Jack tried to refrain from rolling his eyes—instead he kept his gaze on the horizon. Normally, all he would see was an expanse of water, dotted with gulls, depending on how far from shore they were and how seafaring the birds. But now, as they headed up the Thames, they were surrounded not by water, but by farmland, that progressively gave way to towns. In a few hours, the small towns would give way to the colonnades and domed buildings that made up London’s skyline.

“I expect it is a point of pride, Mr. Whigby.” Jackson replied, but kindly. “Captain Healy wants the ship to be at her very best when she’s seen by her judges.”

From the quarterdeck, seven bells sounded. Half an hour until the noon meal and the watch change. Although really, there was no slacking today, no gadabouts. Even those men not currently on duty were on deck, including Whigby. Pulling into the port of London was too exciting, even the long ride up the river had the men jubilant, waving to the specks of people on shore, shouting at those that they thought might be wearing skirts. Jack had been forced to reprimand three seamen for their rowdiness already, halving their grog rations for the day. And they were nowhere near the city. The men had grumbled and shrugged. In their minds, they had already disembarked. It’s not like they’d be dealing with the likes of him much longer in any case.

“Her executioners, you mean,” Whigby snorted, swallowing another bit of ham. “If the *Amorata* is lucky, she’ll find herself in ordinary, or as a prison hulk—”

“She’s not big enough to be a prison hulk,” Jack countered dismissively.

“Right then,” Whigby grunted. “More likely, she’ll end broken up and sold for scrap.”

Jack shot his friend a look. “Do you really have so little faith in our girl?” He reached out and caressed the smooth, polished rail that ran the length of the HMS *Amorata*’s starboard side. She was a Banterer-class sixth-rate post ship, meaning she was small but fast. She had twenty-two guns, but an extra eight 24-pounders and two howitzers had been added during wartime. She was nothing compared to first- and second-rate ships of the line that fired cannons at the enemy from three different deck

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