

A NOVEL
IN THREE PARTS

The Lady
Most
Likely...

USA TODAY
BESTSELLERS

Julia
QUINN

Eloisa
JAMES

Connie
BROCKWAY

Julia
QUINN
Eloisa
JAMES
Connie
BROCKWAY

The Lady

Most

Likely...

**A Novel
in Three Parts**

 HarperCollins e-books

*This book is dedicated to all the
wonderfully funny, cheerful people who visit
Connie's, Eloisa's and Julia's Facebook Fan pages.
We have so much fun with you—
we hope you have fun reading this book!*

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[*“I had her make me a list.”*](#)

[*More Dazzling Romance From*](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

Chapter 1

August 20, 18—
The London town house
of the Marquess of Finchley
14 Cavendish Square

After years of inducing giggles, squawks, and outright bellows of laughter, Hugh Theodore Dunne, Earl of Briarly, understood perfectly well that an older brother exists primarily for the amusement of his younger sisters. After all, his parents had endowed him with four such sisters. They had the heir; they needed a spare; all they had managed to produce were girls who turned poking fun at their brother into an art form.

“A list!” his oldest sister Carolyn was saying, practically hooting between words, she was laughing so hard. “Georgie, did you hear what Hugh just said?”

Perhaps he shouldn’t have issued his demand in front of his sister’s best friend, since Lady Georgina Sorrell was practically convulsed with laughter.

“What’s so damned funny about it?” he demanded, starting to feel irritated. “It’s not as if you haven’t warned me a thousand times that I have to get married unless I want Slinky Simon to inherit my title. Here I am, bending over to put my head in the parson’s noose, and you’re falling all over yourself because it’s so hilarious.”

“I *do* think you should get married,” Carolyn replied. “I’m sure I have said so a thousand times. But now that you’ve finally decided to do it, you want me to pick you a wife?” Laughter bubbled out of her again. “You want me to make you a *list*?”

“I’m sorry,” Georgina said, gasping a little. “I certainly don’t mean to poke fun. I should allow the two of you to speak in private. I’ll leave.”

Hugh couldn’t help grinning as giggles burst from behind her fingers. He’d always liked Georgina even back when she was in pinafores, and she didn’t smile enough these days.

“Be serious,” he commanded the two of them. “I don’t have the time for fiddling around in the ballroom and doing this sort of thing myself. You’re always running around those places; you know the cattle; just point out a woman with good bloodlines and good teeth.”

“He’s in the market for a Hereford,” Georgina said to Carolyn.

“Not a cow,” Carolyn said. “A horse. You know Hugh; the only thing he thinks about is horseflesh day and night.”

“I’m sitting right here in front of you,” Hugh pointed out. “Scoff all you like, but I’m still waiting for a list.”

“Hugh,” Carolyn said.

He raised an eyebrow.

“You’re serious?”

It was a mystery to him why his sister would think he wasn’t serious. “I don’t have time for wife hunting,” he pointed out. “I’m breaking in a new stallion, Caro. He’s a —”

“Wait a minute,” Georgina broke in. “What happened to make you decide to marry?” All the laughter was gone from her voice as if it had never existed.

“What happened is that he’s finally growing up,” Carolyn said blithely. “And at twenty-eight, isn’t a moment too soon.”

Georgina waved her hand impatiently. “Something brought him here, Caro.” She turned to Hugh. She had a delicate jaw, but damned if it didn’t take on a bulldoggish look. “What happened?”

Hugh stared at her. He’d known Georgina since she was five years old. Their mothers were close friends, so they spent their summers together. Not that he’d seen her much in the past five years ... In fact, he hadn’t had a proper conversation with her since her husband’s funeral. And that was, what, two years ago?

“Hugh?” Carolyn asked, the mockery gone from her voice as well.

“There’s no need to make a production of it,” he said, wondering exactly when Georgina’s eyes had grown so grave. She had spent her childhood falling about laughing, yet now she was so clearly a matron. A widow, even though she couldn’t be older than twenty-five since she was the same age as Carolyn.

She was sitting bolt upright, her eyes focused on his.

“Richelieu threw me,” he admitted.

Carolyn gasped. “But you get thrown all the time.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “It goes with the territory. You can’t break in a horse, let alone the particular horses I fancy, without cracking a bone now and then.”

“But obviously this was different,” Georgina stated. “What happened?”

“I’ve been out,” he admitted reluctantly.

“Out?” Carolyn echoed. “Out of what?”

“Out of my mind. Flat out. In a coma, or so they call it.”

“For days?” Georgina put in. Her voice was steady, calm. Of course, she had watched her husband die. And it took the man months ... even a year.

“A week,” he said, resigned. “I was out a week.”

“Why didn’t I know?” Carolyn cried. Her big blue eyes were filling with tears, which was precisely why he hadn’t meant to tell her at all.

“Peckering has explicit instructions what to do in case of an event like this. And he followed them.”

There was a moment of silence in the room.

“Peckering is your groomsman?” Georgina asked.

“Valet,” he said. “I’d trust him with my life.”

“Did he even call for a doctor? Was that in the plan?”

“Of course. There was nothing they could do. You know that. After a kick in the head, you either wake up, or you don’t.”

“And if you do wake up, you might well be injured for life,” Georgina said. She was very white in the face, so white that her freckles stood out. She’d always had pale skin. It went with all that fiery red hair.

“I’m not injured,” he said shortly. “I’m fully *compos mentis*, as you can see.” Not that he hadn’t feared just that, particularly when his vision didn’t come back at first. It was during the day, when he lay in the dark after waking, that he realized the time had come to produce an heir. That or stop training horses. A wife was infinitely preferable.

“Oh, Hugh,” Carolyn said with a wail. “I can’t bear it!”

He went over and picked her up as if she were still a little girl, then sat down with her in his lap. “I’m fine, Caro,” he said, patting her back. “You know that training horses can be risky. You’ve seen me fall off a hundred times.”

“I don’t understand why you can’t just hire someone to do the dangerous part,” she said, leaning against his shoulder. “Other people hire stable masters.” He had a sudden memory of holding his sister

like this when she was much smaller, and she used to suck her thumb. That would be after the mother died, he guessed, when he was nine, and she was only five or six.

“Working with horses is my life,” he said simply. “I do have a stable master. Hell, I have three of them because of the stables in Scotland and Kent. But when a horse like Richelieu comes along, I’m the only one to touch him.”

“Why can’t you work with normal horses, then?” she cried. “Why must it be these terrible Arabians? So violent and uncontrolled?”

“They aren’t violent by nature,” he said, picturing the gorgeous animals he spent his life with. “Richelieu is high-spirited, and it’s a game for him to try to best me. If I kill his spirit, I kill his ability to win.”

“I don’t know a single other earl who spends his days in such a dangerous manner,” Carolyn said, starting to scold, which meant that she was feeling better.

He stood up, put her on her feet, and grinned down at her. “There’s my shrewish little sister back.”

“It serves you right if I’m a shrew. You drive me to distraction, Hugh. I hardly ever see you, and then you nearly die without even telling me, and—I *worry* about you!”

“You’ve been pestering me to marry for years. Ever since I turned eighteen, and that was ten long years ago. Just think about how happy you’ll be. It shouldn’t take me long to manage the business.”

“Did it hurt?” came a quiet voice.

He turned and met Georgina’s eyes. She had remarkable eyes, sort of dark lavender. The kind of flower his housekeeper hung in the stillroom. And she looked at a man steadily, without playing the coquette. Of course, she wouldn’t play that with him. He was like a big brother to her. “No,” he said.

And then: “Yes.” He didn’t want to lie to her. “My head hurt like the devil when I finally woke up. Something about the light, I think. But I was all right after a few days.”

Carolyn ran to the door with a little sob. “Piers, it’s the most awful thing—Hugh was in a coma for a week, and he didn’t even let us know!” She flung herself into her husband’s arms.

“Finchbird,” Hugh greeted his brother-in-law.

The Marquess of Finchley didn’t bow since he had an armful of marchioness, but he nodded. “How to the head?”

“Unfortunately.”

“He looks all right to me,” Finchley told Carolyn.

“He almost died,” she said, catching her breath on a sob.

Hugh’s brother-in-law shot him a look that said, clear as shooting, that he never should have touched his sister.

“I didn’t mean to,” Hugh said, sitting down again. “Georgina ferreted it out of me.”

Georgina was still sitting bolt upright. “He came over to offer himself as a sacrifice at the marital altar,” she said dryly. “I thought it would take at least a brush with death to bring him to that point.”

Finchley nodded. “It would have to be something disagreeable to get Hugh out of the stables.”

Hugh rather resented that. In the last ten years, he had tripled the estate his father had left him by importing and breeding Arabian thoroughbreds. If he wasn’t traipsing around ballrooms, it was only because ... it was because there was no life for him outside the sweat and the thrill and the pure joy of the stable. “Well, here I am,” he said shortly. “I plan to marry, so if you want to jeer at me, Finchbird, get it over with now.”

Finchley’s arms tightened around Carolyn’s waist, and he smiled an odd lopsided smile over her head. “Why would I do that?”

Of course, theirs was a love match. Hugh wouldn’t have had it any other way; Carolyn had always been the most softhearted of his sisters. She needed to be taken care of, and the marquess was just the man for it.

“He’s asking Carolyn to produce a list,” Georgina explained.

“What sort of list?” Finchley asked.

“A list of women to marry,” Hugh said, feeling as if his idea had been a stupid one. Now Finchbird would take the piss out of him as well.

“I find that one wife is more than enough,” his brother-in-law said, grinning.

“Thanks for the sublimely intelligent advice,” Hugh said. “Could you stop hanging on to your husband and jot down a name or two, Caro? I thought I’d go to Almack’s tonight and take care of this.”

“Almack’s? In case you didn’t notice, Hugh, the season is over. It ended more than a week ago.” Georgina’s voice had a sweet thread of laughter again. He hated to see that sadness in her eyes. Damn her husband for dying anyway.

“Does that mean I can’t meet women simply because it’s not the season? Caro, you seemed to be at Almack’s almost every night the year you came out.”

“Almack’s is only open once a week, during the season. And how would you know how often I was there?” Carolyn asked tartly. “Aunt Emma kept hoping that you would escort me one night, and you never bothered, not even once.”

“Brothers never—”

“Don’t even try that,” Carolyn interrupted. “I myself saw your closest friend, the Earl of Charterhouse at three or four balls this season with *his* sister.”

“Poor Alec,” Hugh said, amused. “Shall I ask him to make me up a list instead? He must have seen every woman on the market if he’s been spending his time in ballrooms.”

“If anyone is to make you a list, I’ll be the one,” Carolyn stated. “I will behave in a sisterly fashion by attempting to find you a spouse even if *you* completely neglected to help me in the same endeavor!”

“You came out the year I brought Monteleone over from Arabia,” Hugh said. “Richelieu, the horse I’m working with now, comes from his line.”

“I made a bundle on Monteleone when he won the Ascot,” Finchley said with satisfaction. He pulled his wife over to a sofa and sat down with her.

“So you see? Finchbird managed to find you without my help, and if I’d been gadding about in ballroom, Monteleone wouldn’t have won,” Hugh pointed out.

“And if Monteleone hadn’t won, no one would want his issue, and you wouldn’t nearly have died under the hoof of Richelieu,” Georgina put in.

“Georgie,” he said, reverting to her childhood nickname, “for God’s sake, throw me a bone, here!”

Carolyn sniffed and straightened up. “So whom should he marry, Georgina?”

They both stared at him for a moment. Hugh waited.

“Gwendolyn Passmore?” Georgina said, with just a touch of doubt in her voice.

“That’s just what I was thinking,” Carolyn said, but then she shook her head.

“Why not?” Hugh demanded. Then he realized he had no idea who this Gwendolyn Passmore was. “I don’t want to marry anyone walleyed,” he said hastily. “Or with spots.”

“Gwendolyn doesn’t have spots. She’s easily the most beautiful debutante of the year. Gorgeous pale red hair, the kind with a perfect curl,” his sister clarified.

“I love red hair,” Hugh said. “Didn’t you just say that the season is over? So why didn’t the paragon marry someone?”

“She turned down three offers that everyone knows of, and I’m sure there were others. The word is that she’s waiting for the Duke of Bretton to declare himself.”

“Betting is running strongly against the duke’s future liberty,” Finchley put in. “He danced with her twice at the McClendon ball.”

“No stables to speak of,” Hugh said with a shrug.

“It’s not stables that will win a woman,” Carolyn said, frowning at him. “Bretton has great address

“And he’s very handsome,” Georgina put in.

“I’m not?” For some reason, it nettled him to hear that from Georgina. Granted, he didn’t swa about in ballrooms, but the woman he’d—ahem—befriended never showed any lack of appreciation. In fact, he had the distinct impression that his broad shoulders and muscled body were highly regarded.

“She’s above your touch,” his sister said. “Too beautiful, too desirable.”

“I don’t agree,” Georgina said, knitting her brow. “Gwendolyn would be lucky to get Hugh. After all, he has your hair, Carolyn.”

Carolyn grinned. “My finest feature!”

Hugh peered at his sister’s hair. It was the same brandy brown as his own, not that he’d ever given the subject much thought.

“But I don’t know that she would want him,” Georgina continued.

“Why not?” he demanded.

“She’s a bit shy,” Georgina said.

“You have the social graces of an elephant,” his sister said briskly. “Besides, Gwendolyn really is a smash hit.”

“She’s the Carolyn of her year,” Finchley put in. He was holding his wife tightly against his side.

Hugh eyed him. Whatever happened, he didn’t want to end up as lovesick as his brother-in-law. And the same ... “If you won the top debutante, I can certainly do the same,” he said pointedly.

“There’s a perfect comparison,” his sister said. “Piers knows how to dance. He *courted* me, Hugh. He wooed me. He sent me violets every morning for three weeks in a row. You couldn’t do all those things. You don’t even—no. Just put Gwendolyn out of your mind.”

“What about Miss Katherine Peyton?” Georgina asked. “She’s so adorable, and she does come from the country. She understands stables.”

Carolyn tapped her chin thoughtfully. “I heard her ask Lord Nebel how many sheep he was running on his estate. He didn’t even know he was running sheep.”

“I have sheep, but from the look of it, all they do is eat. No running,” Hugh said. “I think I’d rather have Gwendolyn. Look how well it’s worked out for Finchbird.”

“What has?”

“Going for the best woman on the market,” he said promptly. “I know you don’t like the comparison, but it doesn’t strike me as so different from buying a horse. There’s always one foal that everyone thinks will breed a winner. Gwendolyn’s it this year, so she’s the one I want.”

Carolyn rolled her eyes. “You can’t just buy Gwendolyn, Hugh.”

He knew enough to keep silent about that. But he had a shrewd idea that Gwendolyn’s father, whoever he was, wouldn’t be unhappy to learn that the Briarly estate was now one of the richest in England. And if he offered to throw in Richelieu as a bridal present ...

“Kate is absolutely charming,” Georgina said. “An adorable laugh and a charming figure. Plus, she has beautiful teeth.”

He didn’t like it that Georgina, of all people, was choosing a wife for him—and poking fun at him while she did it. Her own teeth were very white, as he could easily tell since she was laughing again. What was the matter with liking good teeth? No one would want to marry a woman who had a snaggletooth in front.

“I agree that Kate Peyton is a brilliant idea,” Carolyn said. “Don’t you think so, Piers?”

His brother-in-law shrugged. “No use planning these things.”

There Hugh disagreed with him. “Just give me one more name,” he said. “I’ve got Gwendolyn

Kate, and—”

“Georgina,” Finchley put in. “Why not Georgina?”

Carolyn and Georgina burst out laughing, which nettled Hugh even more.

“As if I’d want my dearest friend to spend the rest of her life trying to woo her husband out of the stables!” Carolyn exclaimed.

He narrowed his eyes and waited until Georgina stopped laughing. “You *are* on the market, aren’t you?” he asked pointedly. “After all, it’s been two years since your husband died.”

“Yes, it has,” she said, the laughter running out of her like air from a punctured balloon.

A pang of guilt hit him. “I’m sorry. I never should have reminded you. Damn it, but I’m as careless as a stableboy.”

“It’s quite all right,” Georgina said, producing a smile that curled her lips but didn’t touch her eyes. “I’d rather not be on your list if you don’t mind. I have a fancy not to marry again.”

“Never marry again?” he asked, stunned. “Ever?”

She shook her head. “Richard’s estate was not entailed. I have no need for the protection of a man’s income.”

“That’s not the point,” he said. “What about someone to be with? What about children?”

A shadow crossed her eyes, and he knew he had put a finger on the weakness of her argument.

“Even I can remember how you dragged around that raggedy doll summer after summer,” he pointed out. “You were always putting her to bed and feeding her leaves and generally carrying on.”

“We never fed our dolls leaves,” Carolyn said indignantly. “Acorns, yes, leaves, no.”

“When we weren’t trying to sail them down the stream,” Georgina said. “Give way, Caro. I’m afraid that our treatment of our poor dolls would only prove our unfitness for motherhood. I am sorry that my children came of my marriage. But I can’t imagine myself marrying just for that reason. I shall never marry.”

“I don’t agree,” Carolyn said. “You simply haven’t met a man who is a true grown-up. We’ll find you someone who’s a real man, like my Piers. Perhaps someone in the military.”

Hugh opened his mouth—and shut it again. It was none of his business, after all. “Where the devil am I to meet this Gwendolyn if Almack’s is closed?” he asked his sister.

“We’ll have a house party,” she said promptly. “I’ll send out the invitations for a fortnight from tonight. I’ll invite Gwendolyn *and* Kate. Oh, and some other debutantes as well. Once I drop the word in a few mothers’ ears that you’ll be there, I’ll have every nubile maiden you could possibly want.”

Hugh grunted. He was vaguely aware that he was the subject of matchmaking fervor; one could hardly miss it given that he was regularly besieged at the races, especially Ascot. But he’d never paid the least attention before. “They don’t have to all be maidens.”

“Well, that’s very liberal of you,” Carolyn said with a sisterly smirk. “But since I can hardly harry you out a questionnaire as regards their experiences in that regard, we’ll have to leave it there.”

“I mean that I’d be happy to marry an older woman,” Hugh said. “A widow. Not Georgina, since she’s apparently marked out for the uniformed crowd, but what I’m saying is that I’d just as soon marry a wife wasn’t sixteen years old.”

“No debutantes are sixteen this year,” his sister said comfortably. “Seventeen, perhaps. But the fashion at the moment is to wait for a bit before debuting. I do believe that Gwendolyn is nearly twenty.”

“She sounds better and better,” he said.

“And since I can’t invite only women,” Carolyn said, “I know just whom I’ll invite for you, Georgie.”

“For me?” Georgina exclaimed, looking less than thrilled, somewhat to Hugh’s pleasure.

“She just said she didn’t wish to marry,” he pointed out.

Finchbird gave him a look that told him it was useless to add anything to the conversation and, sooner or later, enough, Carolyn talked right over him. “Captain Neill Oakes. He’s a war hero with a lovely estate—~~not that you need it~~—and most of all, he’s just so *manly*. I don’t even like uniforms, and I shivered all over when I watched him being presented to the queen.”

Georgina wasn’t so quick to scoff at that idea, Hugh noticed. “You’ll want to be careful there,” he said, in his role as big brother. “The war can do terrible things to a man.”

“He has these fabulous jet-black eyes that just look right through you,” Carolyn said dreamily.

Hugh could tell that Finchbird wasn’t enjoying the description any more than he was. His air tightened on his wife, and it seemed to wake her up.

“I’ll also invite the Duke of Bretton,” she continued. “Otherwise, Gwendolyn’s mama will never accept the invitation. I heard it said that she has her heart set on her daughter becoming a duchess. And who can blame her?”

“You’ll hold this party in a fortnight?” Hugh said.

“Yes. We’ll be at Finchley Manor, of course. The household is already scheduled to move there tomorrow.”

“We have the best grouse hunting south of Scotland,” his brother-in-law put in. “You’ve never been with us in September.”

Hugh could hardly say that he disliked nothing more than tramping around the woods trying to kill something. Especially now that it had been established that war heroes made the best husbands.

“Plus it’s my twenty-fifth birthday,” Carolyn said smugly. “Piers has promised me a particularly wonderful present, Hugh. So you can learn from him how to make a woman fall in love with you.”

“You’re lucky you’re sitting all the way across the room,” Hugh said. “I’d love to pinch you.”

The marquess grinned at him. “Don’t worry, old man. I’ll give you some pointers ... if you give me the next foal from Monteleone’s line.”

“Don’t even dream of it!” he said rudely. But that reminded him. “I’ll be bringing Richelieu, of course,” he told his brother-in-law. “Will there room for him in your stables?”

“Absolutely!” Finchley replied. “Everyone is talking about Richelieu, and no one’s seen him yet.”

“I can’t leave him, even for a week or two,” Hugh said. “I know he has the passion for racing. Something might happen to his mouth if I allowed someone else to finish his training.”

“Richelieu is *not* invited to my house party,” Carolyn said pointedly. “I’m only inviting males of the two-legged variety, and they all have to be housebroken.”

Hugh was about to tell her that he wasn’t coming in that case when Finchley gave his wife a little shake. “You can’t get the Duke of Bretton to come to the country just because there’s a beautiful debutante in the offing. *She* may have decided to marry him, but I’ll warrant that Bretton isn’t so hellfire keen to tie the knot.” He met Hugh’s eyes, and the knowledge passed silently between them that Bretton’s new mistress, an opera singer cheerfully known as Delicious Delilah, would likely keep him in London.

“But if Bretton knew that Richelieu was training at my estate,” Finchley continued, “he would come. And the other men too. *That’s* the lure that will bring in gentlemen.”

“Bretton would be there in a sodding minute,” Hugh agreed. “He has tried to buy Monteleone from me five or six times.”

“You don’t want Bretton to come,” Georgina said, looking amused. “He’s your competition for Gwendolyn’s hand, remember?”

“The day that Bretton provides competition for me is the day that I—”

“What?” his sister interrupted, laughing. “Throw in the towel? Declare that you’ll stay single forever?”

She burst into giggles, and they were right back where the conversation had begun, so Hugh

managed to get himself out of the room.

Chapter 2

When Gwendolyn Passmore was eighteen, she slipped on a muddy lane and broke her leg. The doctor did a splendid job setting the bone, but Gwen was required to stay off her feet for eight full weeks. Normally, this would have been utter torture. Gwen was a walking sort of girl; she loved nothing more than to slip out of the house when the dew was still fresh on the grass and walk for miles and miles, until the hem of her dress was soaked.

But she broke her leg in April, which meant that she had to forgo what was to be her first London season. Her mother was devastated.

Gwen was ecstatic.

When she was nineteen, her brother was killed at Waterloo. The family went into mourning, and Gwen's season was postponed by another year.

Gwen had got to do all her lovely, long walks that spring and summer, but half the time she found herself sitting under a tree, crying. Her brother Toby had been the only person in the world with whom she had felt completely at ease. And now he was gone.

When Gwen was twenty, she broke no bones, and no one died, and so in late March, she found herself being measured and poked and fitted and examined, and then she was taken off to London where she was measured and poked and fitted and examined by women with French accents (which somehow made the experience remarkably different although no less miserable).

As her parents were the Viscount and Viscountess Stillworth, she received invitations to every important party, and on one chilly night in April, she was trotted out before the *ton* to make her debut.

To her horror, she was an instant sensation.

"I told you she looked like Botticelli's Venus," her mother said proudly to her father, after a fourth gentleman had commented on the resemblance. And indeed, with her wavy titian hair, alabaster skin, and sea-green eyes, Gwen did bear a striking resemblance to the goddess as interpreted by the Italian master.

But each time someone commented on it, she could do nothing but stammer and blush because she knew as well as all the rest of them that Venus was standing in her clamshell with her hair covering only one breast.

And so, less than a week into the season, Miss Gwendolyn Passmore was heralded the undisputed beauty of the *ton*. Sonnets were composed in her honor, the newspapers had taken to calling her Venus of London, and she had been asked to sit for a portrait by Sir Thomas Lawrence himself.

Gwen's mother was ecstatic.

Gwen was miserable.

She hated crowds, hated having to talk with people she did not know. She did not enjoy dancing with strangers, and the mere thought of being at the center of anyone's attention was terrifying.

She spent a great deal of time standing in corners, trying not to be noticed.

Her mother was forever telling her to, "Smile! Smile a bit!" and "Be more cheerful!" Gwen wanted to please her parents, and she would have loved to have been one of those girls who laughed and flirted and was the life of every party.

But she wasn't.

By June, Gwen was counting the days to the end of the season. In July, she gazed at her calendar

thinking—so close, so close. And then August (so tantalizing), and September, and—

“I have wonderful news!” her mother exclaimed, rushing into her room.

Gwen looked up from her sketch pad. She wasn't terribly good at drawing, but she liked to do nonetheless. “What is it, Mama?”

“We have been invited to a house party!”

Little fingers of dread began to uncurl in her belly. “A house party?” Gwen echoed.

“Indeed. We have been invited by the Marchioness of Finchley. Isn't that splendid? It is to be two weeks hence.”

“I thought we were going home next week.” It did not matter that the London residence bore her family's name; to Gwen, home would always be Felsworth, the huge, rambling estate in Cheshire where she'd grown up.

“Finchley Manor is in the Yorkshire Dales. It is almost directly on our way to Felsworth,” her mother explained. “We shall stop off on the way. It will be a lovely diversion. So nice to break up the journey.”

The journey wasn't so long as to require breaking up by anything more than a few nights at inns, but Gwen didn't bother pointing this out. Nor did she ask how, exactly, Yorkshire was on the way to Cheshire. There was nothing to be gained by it; her mother had made up her mind, and there would be no budging her.

A house party, Gwen thought miserably. She supposed it couldn't be worse than a London season.

“Lady Finchley writes that Bretton will be there,” her mother said, holding up the letter as if it were a legal document. “I do think we have him close to proposing, Gwennie. This may be our opportunity to bring him up to scratch.”

It was at times like these that Gwendolyn wondered if she and her mother inhabited the same world. Because in her world, it was quite obvious that the Duke of Bretton wasn't anywhere *near* proposing marriage. Although she would probably say yes if he did. She rather fancied being a duchess. As far as she could tell, duchesses got to do anything they wished.

It might be rather entertaining to be an eccentric.

And the duke seemed pleasant enough. Quite handsome, and terribly intelligent.

“I shall have to write to Lady Finchley to see who else is coming,” Gwen's mother said, her eyes taking on a terrifying strategic gleam. “Perhaps her brother—he is Lord Briarly, you know.”

Gwen knew. She had memorized *Debrett's*. It made talking to people a bit easier, knowing who they were and how they were all connected.

“I wonder who else,” her mother mused. “I cannot think of anyone with whom Lord Finchley is friendly. Although one would think it is his wife who is composing the guest list.” She leaned forward and patted Gwen's hand. “I know you don't like these things, darling, but this won't be so terrible, I promise. A house party is much different than London. It's much more intimate. By the end, you shall be great friends with everyone.”

Based on her experience with the young ladies of the *ton* thus far, Gwen thought tartly, she highly doubted it. She looked down at her sketch pad. She'd been drawing a rabbit. She decided to give him unpleasant teeth. Vicious little bunny. Excellent.

“Now then,” her mother continued, “we shall have to get you a new riding habit, and perhaps three new day dresses as well. And oh, I am just so so pleased that Lady Finchley thought of this. I am so grateful for this last opportunity for you to meet a few gentlemen.”

“I've *met* all the gentlemen,” Gwen insisted. It was true. She'd been introduced to every gentleman in London. She'd danced with most of them, and she'd received offers of marriage from four. Two had been rejected out of hand by her father, one had been nixed by her mother (“I know his mother,” she had said, “and there is no way I am subjecting my only daughter to that.”), and the last—Lo

Pennstall—she had almost accepted.

~~He had been very kind, and he was rather handsome, too, and only eight years her senior. There had been nothing wrong with him at all—until she found out that he wished to make his primary home in London. He was very interested in governmental issues, even extending beyond his seat in the House of Lords.~~

Gwen just couldn't do it. The thought of spending the rest of her life in London, acting as her hostess, giving parties and arranging salons—it was unbearable.

And so with some regret, she declined, explaining her reasoning to Lord Pennstall. (She could not imagine refusing an offer of marriage with anything less than complete honesty.) He had been disappointed, but he understood.

Gwen knew that this meant she would have to endure another season unless she somehow managed to find the perfect husband back home. Still, one more season in London was infinitely preferable to a lifetime as a political wife.

But she'd thought she had earned a respite. She'd thought she'd be free of this for another year. She looked over at her mother, who had apparently just composed a song called "A House Party La La Land." Freedom, it seemed, would be delayed.

Alec Darlington had been the Earl of Charters for two years, but he still had not grown used to the name. "Charters" was his father, a gruff and strict old man who had never met a bit of his son without which he did not find fault. Alec had always enjoyed being "Darlington." It was a roguish, devil-may-care sort of name, perfectly suited to a man who spent his life in the pursuit of pleasure.

Alec had enjoyed living up to his name when he was Darlington.

Charters, on the other hand, was dull. Charters made charts. Looked at ledgers. Acted responsibly.

And it wasn't so much that he wished to be irresponsible again. He'd simply have liked the option of it.

But the carriage accident that had taken his father had also taken his mother, whom Alec had deeply and honestly mourned. And Alec had quite suddenly found himself entrusted with the care of his two younger sisters. He'd got Candida married off the year before, to a well-connected second son who worshipped the ground she walked upon. All in all, it had been a most satisfying arrangement.

This left Octavia, who, at twenty, had just completed her second season with nary a proposal despite the perfectly respectable dowry he'd settled upon her. She'd done everything right, or so the great-aunt Darlington (who had acted as chaperone) had told them. Her clothing had been from the finest of modistes. She danced like an angel. She could sing, and draw, and paint watercolors. In short, she could do everything a young lady of her birth was supposed to do.

But for whatever reason, she did not "take."

Maybe she wasn't ravishingly pretty, but he did not think she was plain. Her teeth might be a bit prominent, but that was all, really. And her eyes were quite lovely, the same color as his, actually—clear, crisp gray. He'd certainly received compliments on his eyes. Why the hell didn't Octavia?

The men of London were a pack of idiots. It was the only explanation Alec could think of.

"Do you know who will be in attendance?" Octavia asked him. They were in his carriage, nearly at the end of the long drive that led to Finchley Manor.

"Briarly, of course," Alec said, peering out the window. He'd never been to Finchley despite his long-standing friendship with Hugh. "The marchioness is his sister."

Octavia nodded. "Yes, but I can hardly set my cap for him. He's practically my brother."

Alec nodded absently. "I'm sure Carolyn has assembled quite a guest list. She's very thoughtful about these things."

Octavia sighed. "It's just that—*Oh no!*"

"What is it?"

She let out a beleaguered breath. "Look," she said, jerking her head toward the window.

Alec looked out but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Just another carriage at the entrance to the house, depositing its owners—a young woman and her parents, from the looks of it.

"You don't see her?"

"Who?" he asked.

"Gwendolyn Passmore," she groaned. "This is the *worst* news imaginable."

"What's wrong with Gwendolyn Passmore?"

"Alec, no one will even so much as *look* at me if she is in the room."

Alec had been introduced to Gwendolyn Passmore once or twice, and he had to admit, she was rather amazingly beautiful. Still, Octavia was his sister, and so he said, "Don't be ridiculous. I can think of a thousand reasons why a gentleman would rather spend time with you."

"Oh, really," she said. "A thousand. Do tell."

He groaned inside. Sisters and sarcasm were a lethal combination. "You have much more personality," he said.

She looked stricken.

"What did I say?"

"That I have 'personality'?" she nearly cried. "Don't you know that's what gentlemen always say about the ugly girls?"

"I never said you were ugly!"

"You didn't have to," she sniffed.

He stared at her for a moment, then said, "I just want to verify that there is no correct statement I could make at this point, yes?"

She gave him a grudging nod.

This, Alec thought, was why he was not married. Clearly, a man could manage dealings with one female at a time. He couldn't even consider taking a bride until he had his sister off his hands.

He shook his head, then put his hand on the door handle. They had come to a stop, and he was eager to hop down and stretch his legs.

"Don't!" Octavia said, yanking his hand back.

"What is it now?"

"Wait until she goes inside."

He looked outside. "Miss Passmore?"

"Yes."

He looked outside again. "Is she that bad?"

"I don't want to walk in beside her."

"For heaven's sake, Octavia."

"I shall look like a pudgy little hen next to her."

"Oh, for the love of—"

"*And*," Octavia added with great emphasis, "she's very standoffish. If *I* had been declared the peer of the season, I would be a great deal more friendly to the other young ladies."

Alec took a breath. He didn't want his sister to feel uncomfortable, but this was ridiculous. And she was uncomfortable. For him. He'd been in the bloody carriage for four hours. He wanted to stretch his legs. "I will count to ten," he said. "If she is not inside by then, I am getting out."

"Please, Alec. For me?"

Luckily for both of them, Miss Passmore entered the house when Alec reached nine, and he did not have to force the issue. But still, he could not walk with anything approaching his normal speed.

Octavia clamped her hand on his elbow with what had to be superhuman strength, then positively bolted her feet to the ground.

“Now what?”

“Give her time,” she ground out.

“You would prefer to stand out here like a lack-wit than cross paths with Gwendolyn Passmore?”

From Octavia’s expression, the answer was clearly yes, but she must have had some pride because she allowed him to nudge them forward at the same pace he’d used when he’d given Candida away at her wedding the previous year.

“I am beginning to realize,” Alex murmured, “why people always hope for sons. It has nothing to do with producing an heir.”

“That was unkind,” Octavia said, not sounding the least bit insulted.

“Females are a prodigious amount of work.”

“I’m told that we’re worth it.”

This time Alec halted in his tracks. “Who told you that?”

Octavia opened her mouth to speak, but before she could make a sound, he said, “What the devil has Candida been telling you?”

“We haven’t a mother, you know,” Octavia said primly. “Someone must explain to me how things are done.”

Alec felt his whole world drop by two inches. Or maybe it was just his belly. He felt ill. Exhausted. “She was supposed to wait until you married,” he grumbled.

“Sisters don’t have secrets,” Octavia said gaily, and then she sailed inside with a wide smile on her face. Alec was impressed. She gave no sign of her recent distress.

Lady Finchley was waiting in the foyer, greeting her guests with a basket of scones.

“Carolyn,” Alec said, giving her a polite bow and a sly smile. “You look positively pastoral.”

“Don’t I?” She held up the basket as if displaying a costume. “Everyone has been in town for so long, I thought it only right to be as rustic as I could. We are here to celebrate fresh clean air and morning dew and all that, aren’t we?”

“Do I have to awaken in time to enjoy the dew?”

“Absolutely not,” Carolyn assured him.

“Then I agree completely.”

She gave him a smile that was really half smirk. “You need a wife.”

“You are not the first to say so.”

Her brows rose, and then in flash she dismissed him with a wave, turning to his sister with a grateful smile. “Octavia Darlington,” she said, with enough delight that one would think they hadn’t seen each other just one week prior. “How nice to see you!”

“Thank you for inviting me,” Octavia said, bobbing a polite curtsy.

Carolyn leaned in and spoke in a conspiratorial voice, although it was difficult to understand why. Alec was the only other person nearby, and he could hear perfectly well. “I have invited many eligible young gentlemen,” she said to Octavia. “You, my dear, are going to have a splendid time.”

She turned back to Alec, one of her brows arching in question. “I’m told you were in London for the season, but I hardly saw you.”

“He pawned me off on Great-Aunt Darlington more often than not,” Octavia said with a grin.

“Well, don’t tell Hugh,” Carolyn said to Alec. “I told him you took Octavia everywhere.” To Octavia, she added, “I needed to make him feel guilty about something. I do hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Octavia said, clearly pleased to have been included in Carolyn’s subterfuge.

“Now then,” Carolyn said, clearly ready to move on, “where is Great-Aunt Darlington?”

“She was delayed in London,” Octavia explained. “Her bimonthly meeting of the Society of Bi-

Collectors was the day we left. She'll be along this evening."

"She collects birds?"

"You should ask her about it sometime," Alec said.

"Don't," Octavia put in, flashing him an aggravated look. "Not unless you *really* want to hear about it."

"I confess to a curiosity ..."

"She stuffs them," Alec said.

"She does *not*," Octavia exclaimed. She looked at Carolyn. "He is a nuisance. A blight on society."

Carolyn laughed. "Brothers often are. I tell you, I don't know what to do with Hugh these days."

"Is he here yet?" Alec asked. He hadn't seen his good friend in months.

"In the stables," Carolyn said.

"Of course."

"Of course." She rolled her eyes, then slid back into her role as hostess. "Winters will show you your rooms. Octavia, I've put you with Great-Aunt Darlington. The room is exceedingly pink. I hope you don't mind. Alec, you're off near Hugh." She gave a little wave of her hand as if to indicate some specific portion of the massive house.

"I believe I'll go find Hugh," Alec said. He looked over at Octavia. "You'll be fine without me?"

Octavia looked peeved that he would embarrass her with such a question in front of Carolyn. "Of course."

"There is already a small group of young ladies gathered in the west salon," Carolyn said. "Gossip abounds."

Octavia grinned. "Then I shall proceed there directly."

"And I shall make my escape," Alec said, wondering if there existed any greater nightmare than a pack of young ladies in one room, engulfed in a cloud of gossip. Luckily for him, he would not have to find out. He headed back outside, striding across the drive toward the stables. It would be good to see Hugh again. They had been fast friends at Eton, then at university, but after that, their meetings had been sporadic. Alec was more often than not in town, and Hugh was, more often than often, wherever his horses were. Which wasn't usually in town.

Alec hummed to himself as he approached the massive stables. The smell of hay and manure wafted toward him on the breeze, and he smiled, even as *eau de* sweaty horse mixed itself into the scent. He liked riding just as well as the next man, and he'd certainly run in his fair share of races and hunts, but he'd never quite understood the passion for horseflesh that gripped Hugh. Still, he liked that Hugh liked it. He wouldn't be the same if he weren't so cowheadedly obsessed with his cattle.

"Hugh!" Alec called out, pushing open the door. He heard a whinny from a rear stall, followed by an expletive. Followed by another whinny, which he assumed was the horse's version of an expletive.

"Hugh?" he called again.

A head popped out from the stall. "Darlington," Hugh said. "Good to see you."

"And you." Alec didn't bother to correct him about the name. He rather liked that Hugh still called him Darlington. There was something lovely and familiar about it, as if they were boys again, the only responsibilities to their tutors and their friends. He walked closer and peered in. "Is this the stallion that has half of London aflutter?"

"The intelligent half," Hugh answered.

"Robespierre?"

"Richelieu."

"Of course," Alec murmured.

Hugh got back to work, which was—well, quite honestly Alec wasn't sure what he was doing, but the horse didn't seem to like it. Alec took a step back. He'd seen men kicked by horses before. He'd

not aspire to the experience.

“What are you doing here?” Hugh asked, not looking up.

“You invited me.”

“Eh?”

“Your sister. By extension, you.”

At that his friend raised his head and gave him a frank stare. “Will our sisters ever not be, by extension, us?”

“I don’t think so,” Alec said regretfully.

Hugh pressed his fingers to his temples, an action Alec would not have endorsed, considering the state of his gloves. Still, the poor man did look as if he was battling a ferocious headache. “One more,” Hugh said. “One more to get married off, then I’m done.”

Alec thought of Octavia, off gossiping with her brethren. “We shall have a party, you and I.”

“Do you ever think of taking a bride?” Hugh asked.

Alec blinked at the surprising turn of the conversation. It was damned odd. Men didn’t talk about marriage. Not the way women did. “Er ... No?”

“You’ll have to eventually, won’t you?”

“Well, yes.” But not yet. What the devil had got into him?

Hugh let out a sigh. Or maybe a groan. “I’ve been thinking of taking one on myself.”

“A wife?” Alec asked, just to clarify. *Taking one on* seemed an odd way to phrase it.

Hugh nodded, then jumped back when the horse let out an aggressive snort. “It’s time.”

Was it possible that Hugh needed to find an heiress? He’d not heard of difficulties in the Briar family finances, but that did not mean they did not exist. Hugh was a private man, and he did not go to town; his estates could be falling apart without anyone knowing a thing about it.

“Is there something you’d like to tell me about?” Alec asked carefully. Something wasn’t quite right about Hugh. He was far too serious. Not that he’d ever been unserious, but this was different. Hugh looked guarded. Worried.

Hugh never worried about anything that wasn’t equine.

“Everything’s fine,” Hugh said with a grunt. “It’s just that I have responsibilities.” He looked up. “As do you.”

It didn’t *exactly* sound as if Hugh was scolding him, but it felt like it, all the same. Alec paused, let the reply in a manner he might later regret.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Hugh said, giving him a lopsided smirk. “Where does *your* title go if you don’t reproduce? You don’t have a brother.”

“First cousin,” Alec said, a bit peeved that Hugh could defuse his irritation with so reasonable an argument.

“Do you really want that? Mine goes to Simon Carstairs.”

Alec blinked. He knew Carstairs. He wished he didn’t. “You’re related?”

Hugh nodded grimly. “Third cousin.”

Alec considered this. “Your family really does have difficulty producing boys.”

“It’s a problem.”

“Very well, you *should* marry. Quickly.”

“My sisters call him Slinky Simon.”

Alec chuckled.

“It’s only funny if he’s not your cousin.”

“It’s funny because it’s true.”

Hugh did not look amused. “I had them make me a list.”

Alec stopped chuckling. “What?”

“A list. Of women. I had my sisters make me a list of possible brides. I can’t be expected to figure this out on my own.”

“The rest of us generally do.”

Hugh gave him a powerfully irritated glare. “I’m busy.” He waved an arm toward the stallion which, Alec had to admit, had calmed down remarkably during the conversation. Whatever it was that Hugh was doing to the beast, it was working.

“Very well.” And then Alec had a provident thought. “D’you want my sister?”

“Octavia!” Hugh gaped at him. “Isn’t she twelve?”

“She’s nineteen.”

“I can’t marry her. I’d keep picturing her as twelve.”

“She doesn’t look twelve any longer, Hugh.”

Hugh shuddered, looking vaguely ill. “All the same. I can’t do it.”

“Damn.” There went a perfectly good husband prospect.

“I’m thinking about Gwendolyn Passmore.”

Alec looked up and let off an exhausted groan. “Double damn.”

“What’s wrong with Miss Passmore? I’m told she’s lovely.”

“You haven’t met her?”

“When would I have met her?” Hugh asked with a shrug.

Alec shook his head. He adored Hugh, but honestly, he was sometimes so far removed from normal British life it was scary. “She’s beautiful,” he said. “Insanely so.”

Hugh cocked his head to the side and tilted the corners of his mouth as if to say, “That’ll do.”

“Octavia hates her,” Alec went on.

“She’s probably jealous.”

“Of course she’s jealous. She admits it freely. But she also says she’s haughty.”

“Miss Passmore?”

Alec gave a nod.

“Damn.” Hugh released a pent-up breath. “I can’t tolerate a snobby female. Ah, well, I suppose I’ll give her a go, anyway. Ought to judge for myself.”

Give her a go. Alec wasn’t so sure Hugh understood the difference between winning a female and taming a horse. “Who else is on the list?” he asked.

Hugh blinked. “Do you know, I can’t remember.”

Alec smiled. There was Hugh for you. “I wish you well with Miss Passmore, then.”

But Hugh was already back to Richelieu, whispering something as he rubbed an ointment into his flank.

A really, incredibly, viciously foul-smelling ointment.

Alec shook his head as he left the stables. He hoped Miss Passmore liked horses.

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