

A woman with blonde hair styled in an updo, wearing a light pink, backless, floor-length gown, stands on a sidewalk. She is looking over her shoulder towards the camera. Behind her is a white, ornate building with a balcony featuring a black wrought-iron railing and several flower boxes. A black street lamp is visible on the sidewalk. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting daytime.

A
Marquiss
For All
Seasons

The Lords of Oxford

Book Two

Renée
Reynolds

A Marquis For All Seasons

Book Two in The Lords of Oxford series

by
Renée Reynolds

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For Karen

who taught me how to laugh at myself, talk on the phone way too long,
and keep a friendship close no matter how many miles separate it.

Friends, Family, Rabble

Those Lords of Oxford

Roman de Courtenay, Marquis of Stafford, 26 – affable and witty partner in crime to Lady Miranda

Jonas Leighton, Duke of Dorset, 26 – brother to Lady Miranda and husband of Juliet (whose story may be found in *Lord Love a Duke*)

Tobias Kitteridge, Earl of Aylesford, 27 – cousin to Hertford, slightly harassed guardian of a daft Aunt and Grandmother

Miles Fairchild, Marquis of Hertford, 27 – cousin to Aylesford, content to laugh and smile his way through his days

Charles Quinn, Earl of Bristol, 26 – brother to Major Lord Marcus Quinn and Juliet, unable to understand why his friends are suddenly content to be leg-shackled

The Ladies

Miranda Leighton, 20 – sister to Duke of Dorset, talented walker of the fine line between propriety and spirited adventure

Juliet Quinn Leighton, 20 – Duchess of Dorset, best friend to Lady Miranda (whose story may be found in *Lord Love a Duke*)

Margaret Stansbury, 22 – sister to Viscount Melville, takes refuge in friends to relieve burdens of her feckless family

Temperance Warren, 21 – daughter of Marquis of Bath, she of the flame-hair and personality to match

Miss Elinor Gates, 21 – daughter of General Gates of His Majesty's Horse Guards, knows more than she should of politics and less than she should of the weather

The Rabble

George Stansbury, Viscount Melville, 30 – obsequious, fortune-hunting, malevolent sort of ne'er-do-well lurking about various events

Viscountess Iola Hoare – age irrelevant, widow, predator of the male species, violator of good taste and fashion

The Innocent (mostly) Bystanders

Damaris de Courtenay, Marchioness of Stafford, age unnecessary, mother to Stafford and Lady Rosalind, of the fond hopes and dreams for happily wedded children

Lady Rosalind de Courtenay, 19, sister to Stafford, semi-professional eavesdropper and contriver of schemes

Margaret Leighton, Dowager Duchess of Dorset, age unnecessary, mother of Leighton siblings and mother-in-law of Juliet, despairs of another child marrying under scandal

Catherine Allendale, Countess of Ashford, ageless, Aunt of the Quinn siblings, purveyor of opinions, advice, and set-downs

Lady Philippa Legge, 19, sister to the Earl of Dartmouth, fond of soliloquy and gossip, excessively fond of the word 'so'

Major Lord Marcus Quinn, 26, twin of Charles, survivor of war with Napoleon and optimistic survivor of the *ton*

Mr. Gregory Burke, 29, second son of the Earl of Macclesfield, friend of Viscount Melville – friend of everyone, really

Lord Gilbert Eastell and **Mr. Samuel Verney**, guests of Lord Liverpool's river trip

Prologue

My dear dear Lord, the purest treasure mortal times afford is spotless reputation – that away, men are but gilded loam, or painted clay. A jewel in a ten-times barr'd-up chest is a bold spirit in a loyal breast.

William Shakespeare, Richard II, Act 1, Scene 1

London, June 1814

Of all the places he could expect to run into the formidable spitfire that was Lady Miranda Leighton, a cockfight on the disreputable edges of High Holborn was not one of them. He took in the shadowed features of the petite figure across the makeshift ring and knew it for a certainty: Lady Miranda, trussed up like a boy on the cusp of maturity, was watching two roosters battle to the death with a mixture of fascination and repugnance. He would have laughed at the juxtaposition of the two expressions on her face if he didn't immediately fear for her safety. The assemblage was calm so far, or at least as calm as could be expected of crowds at an animal *melée*, but the Marquis of Stafford knew the atmosphere could change at any moment. He had to get her out of here.

"I'm for home," he announced to his companions, lords Hertford and Aylesford, then pushed his way through the crowd to circle the cockpit from a more navigable distance. His height gave him the advantage of being able to see her as he moved, and he stopped to watch her tug on the arm of a hulk of a man next to her. He resumed walking with more speed and purpose, his determination to ring a peal over her head growing with his every step as he seethed over her reckless decision to observe this sport. He slipped in behind her location and moved to grab her arm when a vice-like grip instead stopped his hand with agonizing force.

"I wouldn't do that if I was you," snarled the giant he had seen earlier,

who seemed to have increased in height and girth upon nearness. The heavyweight painfully squeezed Stafford's hand to give credence to his warning.

"I know your companion by *name*, my good man," he began affably, but with steely emphasis. "Perhaps we could take this outside."

The giant's eyes narrowed as he surveyed the expensive cut of Stafford's clothes and his polite but firm expression. He nodded before bending to whisper in Miranda's ear. She turned of a sudden and paled when she saw the man her groom indicated. She drew a gloved hand to her throat, tugging at her tight cravat in a tell-tale gesture of nervousness. A brief flash of resistance crossed her face before she dropped her gaze and acquiesced. Another large man followed from her other side and Stafford gave her some credit for her foresight. *At least she brought plenty of force for her escort*, he thought.

The odd-looking company moved through the crowd to exit into the alley outside the establishment, and Miranda wasted no time launching her verbal attack. With a vehement look and a hissed, "Not here," Stafford maneuvered the group down the street toward a coach in the distance. They had used an old carriage, one missing the ducal crest, but he recognized the horses and Leighton livery of the servant on the back. After reaching the coach, he turned to fire first.

"Of all the hare-brained adventures I expected to hear tales of, I never imagined you would be foolish enough to attempt this," he scorned with a soft voice of restrained anger. "I should tell your brother!"

Miranda's expression turned stony and she stuck her chin in the air with defiance. "You must do as you please, my lord, but I was in no danger. My grooms have me well-protected, and we planned to stay but half an hour. I am posing as a boy, Angus' son," she indicated with a nod to her looming groom. He started to argue but she raised her hand. He marveled that he waited to see what else she had to say. "But I owe you no explanation, sir. You are not my guardian." She tugged again at her neck cloth, as if she could not stand the uncustomary constriction around her neck. He saw a glitter of gold before a gold

chain and locket tumbled from their hiding place beneath the folds of her stock.

Stafford laughed outright at her ridiculous taunt. "I could scarce care less for any explanation, *madam*, and I have no wish to act as your guardian. I am your brother's friend, and I will act in his best interest. I do have the ability to send you home, as I know for a certainty your grooms wish none of this to be revealed to *their* master."

Miranda straightened her posture, managing to look both regal and proud despite her worn boy's breeches and coat. "Only a bully threatens servants, *my lord*," she sneered. "We will leave, but only because such action was already planned, not because you demand it. You win this skirmish, but I wager I shall take the battle."

She glared up at him, and he actually felt himself draw back a bit under her withering stare, but he would not yield this ground. "'Tis fortunate you did not worry your cravat inside, tiny terror, as anyone who knows you would immediately recognize this charm." He flicked the locket, rattling the gems inside and drawing her attention to the jewelry. "And I make no threats, only promises," he replied silkily. "If it is war you want, I suggest you find another opponent. I am a lover, not a fighter." He grinned smugly and tugged on the decidedly feminine chain now dangling down the front of her coat. He found himself inordinately pleased when she reacted with a further flare of temper in her eyes as she stuffed the chain back into its hiding place behind her neck linen.

She raised her eyes and favored him with an arch look, but then smiled, not bothering to hide the merriment she found in some part of his statement. "A lover, my arse. You are a toad," she declared with a laugh before jumping into the carriage and slamming the door behind her.

The two grooms grabbed their forelocks in deference but were unable to hide their looks of amusement before climbing atop and taking the reins. Stafford turned his back and stifled a chuckle himself. The lady was a vixen and a fount of trouble, but he had to admit he enjoyed sparring with her. He sighed in relief as the carriage moved off. She had

thought most of her plan out well, save for the fact that no poor son of a stable hand would command his own carriage. She had not counted on the easy recognition of her servant's livery, either, or would likely have disguised his attire as well. Stafford prayed that the focus had been on the action inside rather than the subterfuge without.

He sighed, removing his beaver hat to rake a hand through his hair. Despite his threats, he was happy to have saved Lady Miranda from the punishment that would befall her should her brother Jonas, Duke of Dorset, have been the one to find her this night.

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Lady Miranda moved stealthily, despite the late hour and the fact she used the less familiar servants' stairs. The house was eerily quiet and she felt nearly smothered by the inky blackness of the narrow stairwell. She dared not light a candle in case some member of the household still moved about. She ran one hand lightly up the wall to keep her balance, and to maintain some sense of uprightness in the void, while her other hand stretched in front to locate the door at the top of the stairs. After what seemed an eternity, she reached the threshold to the next floor, and silently slid the latch. She waited a moment, absentmindedly fingering the delicate chain at her neck.

Her father had given her the gift when she turned twelve. The necklace was actually three thin chains beautifully braided together which suspended an open locket of filigree gold. Inside nestled five beads that her dear father told her represented things of great import to her life – her family. The gold bead represented the dukedom and its lasting legacy. The blue lapis represented her brother, the purple her mother, and the pearl, herself. The red ruby represented the love each member of the family shared and promised each other. Miranda shook the locket and smiled as she relished the tiny sound each bead made as it bounced around. This was her most treasured possession.

She shook off her brief reverie and opened the door, squinting at the brightness of the landing awash with the moonlight that streamed through the windows at the end of the hall. After her eyes adjusted, she

cast a furtive glance in both directions before hugging the wall, boots in hand, as she slipped quietly to her chamber. Once inside, she was again surrounded by blackness, but this time, it comforted.

She was safe. She was home.

She was exceedingly glad, loath to admit to herself how poorly the night's adventures had actually been. She would never admit aloud how queasy the entire spectacle had made her, nor would she admit she had no idea the crowd would be so loud and bloodthirsty. She could scarce believe her eyes upon finding the birds fitted with sharp spurs on each leg, nor that they fought viciously to the death. She shivered slightly and belatedly wished she had sneaked into a different all-male event. She leaned back against her door, smiling in contemplation of the possibility of a future visit to Gentleman Jackson's, when a scratch sounded from the darkness. A light flickered and grew in brightness as a candle flame flared to life.

She was discovered.

"Where in the blazes have you been?" asked the shadow across the room. She immediately recognized the voice and her stomach plummeted to her toes.

"Jonas, you've returned!" she exclaimed with a false sense of brightness. "I have missed you and Juliet desperately. Tell me, did you enjoy your stay in Kent? Was the weather as fine there as here? How is the staff? Were they surprised to see Juliet as your Duchess? I can only imagine they must have been, as they have known her for ages only as my friend and guest. Did she settle in as the new mistress? Mother cannot wait for her to take over the duties here in Town, I assure you. She has even talked of moving to another house, though I am sure Juliet would never wish that, nor even allow it. Have you –"

"Enough!" he bit off as he stepped closer into the room, moving to light the branch of candles by her wardrobe. He crossed over to the bed to light the tapers there, the room growing brighter with each new flame. Miranda shifted uncomfortably and spared a glance at her attire, unable to smother the groan over having to justify her clothing.

And the lateness of the hour. And her whereabouts. She groaned again.

“You can cease your moaning, Miranda,” Jonas growled menacingly. “You will not persuade me to wait until morning for an explanation, nor will you shower me with deceits and half-truths.” He stopped in front of her, hands empty now to clutch into fists at his sides. He looked her over thoroughly, his frown deepening as he took in her shabby hat, jacket, and breeches. He reached out and took the riding boots from her hand, drew in a deep breath, then tossed them to the floor at the foot of her bed. Miranda shrank back slightly and, for the first time in her life, feared that she might be turned over a knee.

“Allow me to explain. It was all a lark, and no one –”

“Spare me the platitudes that 'no one was hurt, no one was the wiser,' or 'no one lost any money.' Simply tell me where you have been, with whom you kept company, and why you felt the need to dress in such a manner.” He ran an impatient hand through his hair. “And then I will decide if I should kill you, ship you to the Americas, or merely lock you in the attic.”

Miranda laughed nervously before choking the sound off as she saw the serious look on her brother's face. He was in no mood for flattery or prevarication. Straightforward honesty might just prove the best choice. She took a deep breath. “I have been at a cock-fight in Holborn. I went with two burly gentlemen – from our staff, Jonas – and was protected the entire time. I dressed such because only men and boys are allowed at the fights, so I posed as a boy. I avoided scandal,” she added proudly before shrinking back under his glare, making the wise decision to omit her discovery by the Marquis of Stafford. “And you cannot ship me to the Americas as we are still at war, nor confine me in the attic because the door has no lock.”

Jonas raised his hands, steepling his fingers under his chin while taking several deep breaths. She silently prayed it would calm him sufficiently for her to extricate herself from this mess. Why oh why did he and Juliet have to return early? It had been such a lovely month, full of freedom

and joy and new adventures. No one had seen her to identify her, and she was safe, wasn't she? Not a scratch on her, save a blackened toe on her left foot, but that was an accident that had occurred in this house, from a dropped book, while she was dressed appropriately. *Unlike now*, she thought as she looked again at her breeches.

“Well, we are officially no longer at war with France. I received official word at the estate that the Treaty of Paris was signed last week. I suppose I could ship you to the continent instead, and let you lend your expertise in their rebuilding. Although they are still not terribly fond of *aristos*, so you would need to travel as a peasant.” He paused as if in genuine contemplation. “Now I think on it, a little toil in the dirt could serve you well.”

Miranda kept silent, knowing this was not the moment to engage her brother in any speculative discourse. He would likely take her jests as plausible ideas.

“As you are safe,” he continued after a moment, “I am going to wipe the slate clean and start afresh with you. I will not punish those whom you beguiled into taking you tonight. I've no doubt you blandished and cajoled your way into their good graces to the point they think they actually did you a great service. But you leave me no choice. Juliet pleaded your case and I relented, giving you this entire month to show your maturity and responsibility. As the Prince Regent has declared all will stay in Town this summer to celebrate the new peace, you must prove yourself under the watchful eyes and gossiping tongues of the *ton*. However, if I allow you to continue under your own guidance, no doubt you will end the Season in some spectacular scandal or on a ship to Jamaica.” He rubbed a weary hand across his face and into his hair, pulling slightly at the strands. “Henceforth, you will put yourself out for marriage for what remains of the Season. You will attend every function, and be charming and polite. You will engage in a diligent search for a husband. You will take this seriously. Am I understood?”

Miranda swallowed loudly in the silent room. “I understand, but I will not be forced –”

“No, you will not be forced . . . to marry a man of my choosing. I am at my wit's end and all too willing to find the first available male and shackle you to him, whoever he may be. I would not wish my desperation to be your permanent misfortune. But you will make a choice at the end of the summer. I suggest you apply yourself diligently to this task, because I am giving a similar task to our mother. I will inform her on the morrow that you will find a husband within three months, or else she will name the man you will marry. As you search, so will she. As you move through ballrooms, separating the wheat from the chaff, so will she. I will also seek the help of Lady Stafford. She is launching her youngest, and as such, will know the better prospects and the gentlemen to avoid.” He sighed loudly. “If you truly want to make your own selection, I suggest you find a candidate. After this year's demonstrations of your abilities to apply yourself to various activities and pursuits, I am confident you will find success in this undertaking as well.”

“Jonas, I . . . I am sorry for abusing your trust,” she stammered. Her mind raced and whirled with arguments, but she continued in this conciliatory vein, not wishing to rile his temper again. “I will do as you say.”

Jonas Leighton, Duke of Dorset, searched his sister's face thoroughly and with such duration that she felt nearly lightheaded from standing so still and straight under his scrutiny. He nodded his head briefly before stepping close and wrapping her up in his arms in a tight hug. Tears pricked her eyes over his care. She knew he only wanted the best, and she knew he loved her dearly.

“I would have you happy, Miranda. Please make a wise and worthy effort.” He broke their embrace and kissed her forehead before turning and leaving the room.

Miranda stumbled to her bed, falling back heavily onto the counterpane. Yes, she loved her brother – and her mother – more than anything. She was sorry for the blatant disobedience. She screwed up her face at the next thought. But this changed not her feelings, merely the way in which she would act in the future. She must

find a way to enjoy what remained of her final Season . . . and no longer get caught.

## *Chapter One*

*Oh, what men dare do! What men may do! What men daily do,  
not knowing what they do!*

*William Shakespeare, Much Ado About Nothing, Act 4, Scene 1*

“Madam, you would do well to cease this topic of conversation,” growled Roman de Courtenay, Marquis of Stafford, “for it is in the best interest of your health.”

“And you would do well to speak with honor and respect, my son, and heed my words. You need a wife!” his mother all but shrieked before checking herself, fluttering a dainty hand about her neck. “Your friend, the Duke of Dorset, has now married. The same friend who is of an age with you. The same friend you vouchsafed to me was not of a mind to marry. Nothing should impede you now. I declare again, you need a wife!” This last vow was made with more decorum and less volume, but was no less earnest than the first.

Twas the same thing she said to him at nearly every private meeting they had of late: get a wife. Sometimes it was merely a brief toss of the notion; more often, it was a voluble and voluminous tirade of duty, necessity, and most importantly, heirs. If only his friend, the Duke of Dorset, had not married, his mother would not have flown so precipitously to the boughs and begun to dream of weddings, grandchildren, and a new Marchioness.

“I need nothing other than your promise to desist from this unholy quest of yours. You have made your opinion abundantly clear and with unerring frequency. I have taken note of your words, weighed their relevancy, or lack thereof in this instance, then applied my thoughts toward other matters. So should you.”

He watched his mother take in a deep breath, every inch the Marchioness, and he mentally braced himself. It was evidently

harangue day in Stafford House. He cast his gaze about the room in search of something with which to occupy his mind during her diatribe. He settled for an inordinately focused study of the pattern in the Aubusson rug when he belatedly noticed the unexpected, and highly unnatural, quiet of the room. He raised his eyes suddenly and met the very shrewd and determined stare of his mother.

“We are of course in disagreement over this issue, so I propose we find some common ground. Let us strike a bargain, therefore, in the care of your family. I say you need a wife while you cry nay; on this we cannot meet. I say you need an heir while you cry off and claim cousin Eustace as such. It is your manner of saying that imbecile's name with a straight face that gives me true cause for alarm. You imply his hands would be just so in taking care of your mother and sister, should something unfortunate befall you. If this you truly believe, then I shall call on our solicitor this day to begin commitment papers on you immediately.” The Marchioness barely paused to draw another deep breath. “You seem to care well for the title and the responsibilities to estate and name that you carry, but I find I must beg you take greater interest in the security of your most immediate family. It would not do for us to be beholden to Eustace for anything, the least of which be our food and shelter.”

Roman's breath hitched at the validity of her remarks. She was correct. Eustace was thick-headed and selfish, a most lethal combination in any gentleman, but of significant detriment to the future solvency of this marquisate. Her accusations were pointed, her aim true, and she had drawn blood in this round. He took a few steps away toward the window overlooking the busyness of St. James Square, lest she pick up on the scent of the wound she had inflicted. His cravat felt unbearably tight of a sudden as he ran his finger under the folds about his neck.

“Mother, I assure you I would not leave you without prospects should I expire in an untimely manner.” This was a complete fabrication, for he had done just that. He had no true idea what provisions lay in the estate plans of his late father. He met daily with his secretary and received and read weekly reports from his stewards, but such was the extent of his attentions to the title. He would rectify that this very

afternoon, if possible. She had upset his equilibrium, and he grudgingly wandered back to the topic from which he had sought to distract her. “And I do not plan to avoid marriage forever, just for the immediate future. There is no rush. All is well.”

“All is not well, you obstinate child!” she rounded on him. “I call you such for it is exactly appropriate: you think only of yourself while you ignore the title, pawn your responsibilities off on your stewards, and subsist only on what interests you. Your affable negligence leaves me the responsibilities for running this household, rather than your wife, as it should be. You had not the obligation to launch your elder sister whilst your father lived, and he did a most excellent job, leaving a fitting example for you to follow. Your younger sister is out this Season, as you know, and I have been left adrift to chaperone and deflect unwanted attentions. Rowena matched quickly and well under your father's supervision, but I fear Rosalind will not be so amenable to a calm and sensible suitor. This is badly done, Stafford, and you well know it! You shame your father's name! You shame us all.” This last was uttered with a small cry as his mother tucked a handkerchief to her mouth and fell down into a seat, swiveling to turn her back on him.

Roman felt profound regret as the full weight of her accusations fell on his chest, a new-found and unwelcome sense of ignominy taking root. He sank into a chair, suddenly weary. Rowena, his elder sister by three years, did marry well, and had been happily settled with her earl for over ten years. Rosalind, the youngest de Courtenay sibling at eighteen, lacked the docility and reserve of her sister. Instead, she was prone to willfulness, to put it mildly. He *had* neglected his familial duties and failed to consider the heavy burden of worry and responsibility it had placed on his mother's shoulders. Shoulders that were looking decidedly drooped and frail of a sudden. His sigh was loud and tinged with regret.

“You are correct, Mother,” he confessed, causing the Marchioness to spin back around. “I am sufficiently chastened. I will endeavor to be more circumspect in my duties,” he stressed.

“*All* duties, my lord? Even those pertaining only to you and your own

future happiness?" she queried, turning on her perch on the settle to face him, her gaze piercing in its directness.

Another loud and heavy sigh blanketed the room. "Just so," he acquiesced with a foreboding sense of doom.

The twitch of her lips was slight, and the flash of triumph in her eyes was infinitesimal, but Roman thanked his heavenly Maker that he saw them both, else he would have fallen irrevocably and irretrievably into her trap. *Mother is a wily one*, he thought with reluctant admiration. It had been nearly a month since their last confrontation. The lack of practice had made him vulnerable to attack, but he was back on the mark now. So that was how she meant to play it this time: draw him into a marriage contract under the guise of helping everyone else in the family, thus taking the focus off the noose around his neck, and placing it potentially on the others for whom he had responsibility. He cast a calculating look her direction. She responded with a look of total innocence as she straightened in her seat, arranging her violet skirts and picking an imaginary piece of lint from her glove.

He rose from his seat and walked again to the window, watching as the world went about its normal day. His mind raced quickly through possible scenarios of distraction when a carriage with a familiar ducal crest stopped in front of the house. The Dowager Duchess exited first followed by Her Grace, Juliet Leighton, the new Duchess of Dorset. Jonas had done very well for himself. His Duchess was both beautiful and intelligent, and the love between the two was unfashionably apparent. Lady Miranda exited last, eyes flashing and curls bouncing as she followed her family toward his door. He was reminded about the handful that was Jonas' sister and he smiled, remembering their last encounter at the Holborn cockfight, of all things. In addition, the rigs she had run a little over one month past had inadvertently led to the most-talked about match of the Season, that of her brother and her best friend. He silently thanked God again that his sisters were not quite so high-spirited or bold, when sudden inspiration ran through his mind.

Lady Miranda's family wanted her to marry and settle herself down, just

as his own mother wished for him. Lady Miranda wanted to continue to live life without such shackles, just as he wanted for himself. Could they somehow join forces, giving their families the impression they were doing what each family desired? He had thoroughly angered her at their last meeting, he acknowledged ruefully, but there was no doubt in his mind that the lady would do most anything to avoid marriage, and would be especially game to pursue any means involving subterfuge. At the very least, they could avoid any real entanglements for the duration of the Season. It was so mad a scheme it just might work.

He turned to glance again at his mother, who yet struggled to disguise her satisfaction at his supposed capitulation. *Oh, yes.* He would play her game to the fullest, and his partner in crime, although she was yet unaware of her new status, was soon to be announced to the room.

## ***Chapter Two***

*For what is wedlock forced but a hell, an age of discord and continued strife?*

*William Shakespeare, Henry VI, Part 1, Act 5, Scene 5*

Lady Miranda glanced around the drawing room at Stafford House with unseeing eyes, entirely focused on her thoughts and not on the ladies and gentleman with whom she shared company. Jonas and Juliet had returned early from their honeymoon at the ducal seat in Kent. She had thought after the whirlwind courtship and marriage, they would have been more apt to extend rather than shorten it. With their return came the end of her freedom and the return of the plans to marry her off to any willing gentleman. Her mood this day was foul with frustration over her situation.

Juliet had approached her this morning with a steely resolve to do the bidding of her husband and mother-in-law, and Miranda could understand her difficult position. But, dash it all, her life was careening at sixes and sevens! The disgrace of being pushed off on a family friend because you were presumed incorrigible (and slightly so, she would allow), was a sobering realization. The anger that had boiled furiously at the end of the discussion with her friend now simmered quietly. Her maid, of all people, had reminded her of the old Italian proverb 'You catch more flies with honey than vinegar.' It was anathema to her to yield even the slightest bit, but Miranda was determined to succeed in the end, by fair means or foul.

As she continued stewing over her situation, she slowly became aware of the silence of the room, as well as the heat of Juliet's gaze. She met her friend's look in time to see a questioning expression cross her face.

"So sorry, I was woolgathering, I'm afraid," Miranda spoke into the awkward silence.

“I merely asked if you were pleased your brother and new sister have returned from their honeymoon,” spoke the Marquis of Stafford at her elbow, his eyebrow raising as an amused smirk crossed his face. The combination of handsome features and charming temperament made the gentleman of six and twenty a boon companion to males and sought-after husband to females, and the devil of it was he knew it. She surveyed his thick brown hair, strong jaw, and straight nose, and admitted the smooth combination of his features was terribly attractive, but Miranda had always thought his eyes his best feature. Their color fell somewhere between blue and green, and often a mixture of the two. Further, his every notion and thought were often mirrored in those eyes, expressing his feelings on whatever subject he contemplated. She usually found the change of color intriguing, but at this moment she only saw his expression of amusement at her expense, and consequently began to seethe.

The Marquis was far too close in temperament to her brother, the Duke. The two had formed a fast and lasting friendship that began as young boys at Eton and continued through their studies at Oxford. That friendship was further refined by the trial of them both losing their respective fathers without warning in the same carriage accident just two years past. It was unfortunate that he should remind her of Jonas, especially when she was not disposed to like her brother or his plans for her particularly at the moment, but there was nothing for it.

Her mind rejoined the current conversation and Miranda suppressed her glower, raising a quizzical brow in return, save for the fact that both her brows rose. The effect was a look of focused surprise rather than the one of disdain for which she aimed. “Indeed, my lord, terribly pleased. The house has been far too quiet and the company exceedingly dull without their presence.”

“Really? I had heard you were much about Town these past weeks, and that you had an exceedingly entertaining time.”

Miranda could not prevent the show of exasperation on her visage at this remark. “I said the house has been dull, my lord, not Town.”

“Ah, I see the difference.” His reply fairly dripped sarcasm.

“I'm sure you do not,” Miranda muttered under her breath, rolling her eyes. At his shout of laughter, she looked back to his face, his eyes sparkling again with mirth. Her attention was momentarily captured by those eyes as she appreciated their deep blue color. Her own eyes had been described as icy and glacial, but she would label the Marquis' warm and cool, like a pond in summer. His blue eyes also meant he was most definitely diverted.

“Your tongue is as sharp as your wit is quick, my lady.”

“Stafford, will you escort Lady Miranda to the garden? Rosalind is there and I am sure they would be happy to renew their acquaintance,” interrupted Lady Stafford with a smile.

He clicked his heels together in mocking salute. “Your servant, madam.” Turning to Miranda, he proffered his arm. “Shall we?”

Miranda was in no mood to spar but acquiesced graciously, nodding to her mother, Juliet, and Lady Stafford as they departed. She wondered briefly what relevant facts she would miss in conversation as she was shuttled outdoors, but knowing the topic was the somewhat embarrassing subject of foisting her off onto the de Courtenays, she decided the garden sounded the more pleasant place to be.

“What brings you ladies to St. James?” he asked with a grin as they moved down the main hall to the rear of the house.

Miranda's face screwed up in a grimace. “Merely to request your mother allow me to attend various functions with Lady Rosalind. My family seems to think I will be less likely to rebel against their dictates, and that my proper upbringing will force me to behave while under another's supervision.”

His smile faltered. “So it is still to the altar with you, is it?”

“So it would seem.” Miranda was neither foolish nor shallow. She knew she needed to make a good match sooner rather than later, especially

as her obvious disdain for dull and mindless prattle had made more than one gentleman cross her off his list of possible wives. The more men came to know her, the more they would likely despair of her. If one thing unnerved a gentleman of the *ton* more than an intelligent female, she had yet to discover it. She also was not selfish. She did not wish to become a burden to her family through ostracization from society nor by becoming irredeemably eccentric. She certainly did not plan to spend the rest of her life watching Jonas and Juliet raise babies and coo at each other!

She was, however, determined. She was a single lady, in possession of a good fortune, and was in want of one last Season of diversion. She was not yet in want of a husband.

Miranda watched from the corner of her eye as Stafford fell into thought while they moved across the empty ballroom toward the rear garden. His build was tall and slim, but his broad shoulders hinted at his strength. Her glance slid down his frame, taking in his narrow waist and long legs; legs that she could not fail to notice rippled with muscles, his snug breeches revealing he was a man of action rather than sloth. She returned her attention to his face, taking in his expression of concentration, his eyes now a more steely, cobalt blue. *He does have the most fascinating eyes*, she thought.

He looked at her, catching her gaze, and abruptly stopped at the threshold to the rear terrace. "I think I have just had one of your cracked ideas, and I wonder, should I speak of it aloud to gain your insights?"

A silence fell as Miranda waited for him to continue, yet he stood still and quiet, staring purposefully in contemplation. "Well? It needs only speaking or forgetting, and sooner rather than later, preferably," she retorted, her smile taking the sting from her words.

Stafford laughed and the mirth returned to his eyes. "Yes, I will likely regret this decision, but I will share my idea. Forces beyond our apparent control have decreed that you need a husband, and that I need a wife. It seems we are perfectly suited to be the answer to each

other's problem.”

Miranda's eyes widened, her mouth gaping in shock. This was not a topic she would have ever guessed for discussion between the two people most disinclined toward matrimony! For certain, she misheard his words. “Am I mistaken, or did you just make me an offer?” she rushed out in a gust of breath. By the immediate look of surprise and dread mingling across his face, she knew she had indeed misunderstood.

“Good God, no!” he shouted before catching himself, looking around the room to see if he had been overheard. He pushed her toward the door, and they exited into the dim sunshine of the partly cloudy day. “I meant only that we could work together to help each other *avoid* marriage, since we are both desperate to do so.”

Miranda took in a deep breath, relieved, but also a little perturbed. She would be a fine catch for any gentleman, and should not inspire such a look of utter affright. He needed chastising. “And here I thought you were suddenly overcome with madness and devotion. I felt sure that was a most impassioned proposal.”

The tightness around his mouth eased, and he relaxed his rigid stance. “I should have known you, of all people, were jesting.” He raked a hand across his face and rubbed his eyes with a finger and thumb. “Rest assured. There will be no proposals of matrimony from me of any kind in the foreseeable future.”

“Nor any acceptances from me. We are in agreement, my lord, at least on that subject. So . . . your actual proposal is thus: to avoid marriage, we must pretend an interest in each other. It would be remiss of me, however, if I failed to point out, since we have shown no such inclinations previously, that hurdle will be difficult to overcome.”

“Perhaps with those who have been in our company of late, but not those who have been absent, such as a brother and sister recently returned from one month's rustication in Kent.”

Miranda's mind began to churn with thoughts and ideas of bringing this

new plan into action. She had to admit – but only to herself – it really was terribly well-conceived. But it would take a deft touch to keep others from suspecting. She *did* so love a challenge!

“We must tread carefully, to prevent others from thinking our interests developed too soon, and also to prevent charges of caprice against ourselves when we eventually fall out of favor with each other. We must 'kill two dogs with one stone.'”

He blinked in confusion over her last statement before he burst out laughing. “I should think you meant mean kill two *birds* with one stone. 'Twould be difficult to kill one dog with a stone, let alone two. And what kind of monster kills a poor hound?” he asked with another laugh.

“There is no call to mock me, sir. I merely quote the sayings of others, like 'a wolf in sheep's clothing' or 'a coin in the hand is worth two in the bush.'”

Her last citation brought forth another burst of laughter from the Marquis, causing a lock of his wavy brown hair to fall across his brow. “‘A *bird* in the hand is worth two in the bush.’ You have a decided problem with your bird idioms, my lady.”

“That is not the only animal with which I have a problem,” she replied with a huff and accompanying pointed look. “But, let us return to the meat of our conversation.” She reached out and grabbed his hands, squeezing them in her excitement. “This is a marvelous plan. I cannot fathom I did not think of its like myself. How shall we begin?”

He looked down questioningly at their joined hands before replying. “If what you think is true, it would seem Their Graces are arranging the 'when' as we speak; what remains is merely the 'how.' It is likely we need only to dance and converse at the next few gatherings we attend.”

“Yes, my mother is no doubt lamenting with yours over having children so disinclined toward 'doing their duty.' Juliet, if successful in her assignment, is throwing me right where I am supposed to be: at the side of your sister and the rest of the debutantes. We must needs alter

this arrangement for our benefit. At the first possible event, you must make an effort to be seen attending me without the company of your sister. We could drive one day, or meet on the street and share an ice or other treat. We must move slowly, but we must move decidedly forward." A look of distaste stole across his features. "Oh, don't look so dejected. It's not as if you must put forth any effort, other than driving your team and purchasing a small treat. I shan't require any poetry or loving glances in our May Game."

"I fear this seems too easy, then," he remarked pensively, his eyes drifting over the garden. "We merely attend the same events, pass time in each other's company a few times about Town, and the gossips will take our tale the rest of the way." He turned again, offering his arm as they walked the winding path through the flowers in search of Lady Rosalind. "Can we keep this from getting out of control?"

"Of course we can," she scoffed. "The important thing is to keep our actions simple, not to fawn over or make ridiculous conversation with each other. What could possibly go wrong when we are in absolute control of the entire process?"