

“Lord Ravenport,” Lady Callahan intoned, closing her fan with an expert flick of the wrist. “Please, allow me to present my daughter Miss Sophie Kendall and her friends Miss Fiona Hartley and Miss Lily Hartley.”

Gray exchanged the expected pleasantries, then turned to Fiona. A halo of loose curls crowned her head, and she worried her plump bottom lip. Her pink gown exposed the long column of her neck and the curve of her shoulders; he could almost see her pulse beating wildly at the base of her throat.

His instincts screamed for him to run right out of the ballroom, and yet his boots remained rooted to the floor. Worse, before he knew what he was doing he’d asked her to dance.

“It would be my pleasure,” she stammered, taking his arm.

As he led her to the dance floor he questioned his own good judgment—and not for the first time that day. He’d witnessed Miss Hartley trip and tumble into the orchestra at the Millbrook ball. He’d been dancing with Helena at the time but had paused to help her up.

So much had changed since then.

He had no idea if Miss Hartley’s dance partner had been to blame for the incident or whether she was prone to

falling, but just to be safe he tightened his hand on her waist. And they began moving to the music.

The first measure had barely played before she asked, "You received my letter?"

"I did," he said noncommittally, twirling her beneath his raised arm.

When she faced him again, she looked him directly in the eye. "What do you think of my . . . offer?" she asked, her voice cracking on the final word.

He tamped down an unexpected pang of sympathy. "I think that we hardly know each other."

"True, but that is easily rectified, is it not?" There it was—an unmistakable hint of desperation. And a sense of urgency that even her letter hadn't conveyed.

"It is," he conceded. "However, I suspect that the more we know each other, the less we'll like each other." Cynical but true in his experience. His parents certainly hadn't grown fonder of each other. Neither had he and Helena.

She winced and looked away before regaining her composure. "Perhaps. But we needn't like each other."

Gray chuckled at that. "I never thought I'd meet someone more jaded than I."

"So, you'll consider my offer?" she pressed.

"I will not," he said firmly. Under different circumstances, her fortune may have tempted him. But she was clearly intent on using him for her own purpose—and he suspected that she'd set her sights on him for reasons beyond his title. After all, there were half a dozen peers in attendance right now who'd leap at the chance to marry a young and unconventionally beautiful heiress.

But he was not one of them.

"It seems rather closed-minded of you to dismiss me summarily," she shot back, displaying a boldness that was borderline rude—and refreshing.

“If I said I’d consider your offer, I’d only be giving you false hope. Delaying the inevitable.”

“The inevitable rejection, you mean,” she clarified.

“Yes.” He was still reeling from the sting of Helena’s rebuff and wouldn’t wish anyone that sort of pain and humiliation.

“Please,” she begged. “I realize that it’s highly unusual for a woman to propose marriage—”

“It’s unheard of.”

“Surely you must be curious—as to why I did it.” She looked up at him, her shining blue eyes challenging him to deny the truth of her words.

Gray shrugged. “You have your reasons for making the offer; I have my reasons for declining it.”

“Give me the opportunity to explain,” she pleaded. “Just a quarter of an hour to make my case. If, after that, you remain unconvinced, I promise I shan’t mention it again.”

He must be out of his damned mind to consider engaging in further discussion with Miss Hartley. The very last thing he needed was another conniving, self-serving female attempting to interfere with his life. He had opened his mouth to tell her so when someone bumped into his back—hard.

Gray’s torso collided with Miss Hartley’s chest, and she stumbled two steps before he wrapped an arm around her slender waist, catching her just before she landed on the parquet floor. She gasped and clung to his jacket, her expression an odd mix of relief and mortification.

“Oh dear,” she breathed.

Their faces were so close he could see unexpected dark blue flecks in her irises and the individual freckles dotting her nose. “Forgive me,” he said.

“For what?”

For what indeed? Steering her into the collision? Grip-

ping her waist too tightly? Or for staring at the swells of her breasts and having decidedly wicked thoughts while he *should* have been shielding her from further embarrassment? Ignoring her question, he asked, "Are you all right?"

"I am." Her cheeks turned a charming shade of pink. She blew out a breath and shot him a shaky smile. "When it comes to dance floor mishaps, I confess I've survived much worse."

Gray looked over his shoulder to see how the other couple fared, surprised to find Helena and her dance partner smiling apologetically.

And the truth struck him. For the last ten minutes, while he'd been dancing with Miss Hartley, he'd been completely, blissfully unaware of Helena and what she was doing. Even more remarkable, he'd forgotten that she was in the room.

"Meet me in Hyde Park tomorrow," he said to Miss Hartley, mentally cursing his own weakness. "I will listen to what you have to say, but don't expect anything to change my mind."

The corners of her mouth curled in a triumphant smile. "Thank you. All I ask is that you allow me the chance to explain the advantages of the arrangement—for us both."

"Forgive me if I remain skeptical," he drawled. "I'll meet you near the footbridge. Three o'clock?"

"You won't regret this," she said earnestly, but the prickling sensation between his shoulder blades suggested he would. In spite of her naïveté and candor—or maybe *because* of those things—Miss Hartley could prove far more dangerous to him than Helena had ever been.