

Under the Kissing Bough

Shannon Donnelly

Copyright 2010 Shannon Donnelly
Cielito Lindo Press
Cover by Albert Slark

For Barb, Dixie, Diane and Diann, Laurie, Paulette and Wendy,
The sisters of my heart,
without whom this wouldn't have been possible.

RWA RITA Nominee Best Regency 2004

"...one of those must-read books.... It will warm your heart and make you smile."
-- *Jani Brooks, Romance Reviews Today*

"Her tale of...the blossoming of a love destined to last forever proves compelling,
heartwarming, and not to be missed."
-- *Judith Landsdowne, best selling author of The Mystery Kiss*

CHAPTER ONE

It was worse that she expected—he was not only young, he was handsome. Devastatingly so. Eleanor stood in the doorway to the drawing room, her hand cold on the brass doorknob. She could not force herself to step into the room where her parents—Lord and Lady Rushton—and her husband-to-be waited. Oh, she could not marry him. Not him. For he would never be happy with her.

No one in the room had yet noticed her entrance, but the drawing room—the finest room in the house—was a cavern of a place, with the chairs and fireplace at one end and the doors at the other. The room took up the entire front of the house, overlooking Berkeley Square. Faint light drifted in from behind the gold velvet curtains that stretched from plastered ceiling to polished floor. She looked down the distance, the windows to her right and portraits of intimidating ancestors to her left, and wished herself anywhere else.

She had always dreaded this place, with its stiff furniture, its cold drafts, and the demanding expectations that its use placed on her. Small as she was, she disappeared in this room. Elizabeth had always teased that it was the print muslin dresses in fashion which made every young lady appear far too similar to the surrounding wallpaper. Eleanor had laughed, but she also noted that the tall, sophisticated Elizabeth—even in sprig muslin—never could be called a wallflower. No, it was not Eleanor's dress which made her a person whom gentlemen looked past and ladies glanced at with little interest. Not in this room, nor in any other.

She was simply not a remarkable person.

For the most part, Eleanor had found it a relief to be so overlooked. She liked to overhear the gossip and observe the follies of those deeply involved in their lives. She liked being a spectator. It was so much...safer.

Only today she was to be put firmly into the center of everything. Today, she was to become engaged. Her parents had arranged everything with Lord Staines. This meeting was merely to confirm that she and her husband-to-be did not take an unreasonable dislike to each other.

But Eleanor knew already that she was no match for this gentleman—the heir to an earldom, and a handsome one at that.

He had golden hair, a thick cap of it that gleamed in the weak November sunlight that slanted in to pull a fair halo from his head. The shining strands lay in casual, curling disorder. *How on earth does he keep his hat from flattening it?* Eleanor thought. Self-conscious of her own appearance, she reached up to touch her own bonnet-flattened brown curls.

His dark blue coat stretched broad over his shoulders and nipped in at his waist, and hung open to show a yellow waistcoat. He did not seem vain, for his cravat was neatly tied but not with great flourish, and his shirt-points were no higher than to his square, firm chin.

His buckskin breeches formed a second skin over long, muscular legs. He stood a shade taller than her own father—and Eleanor knew she would forever be craning to look up at him. Would he also step on her feet with his much larger ones when they danced? Would they dance? And what would it be like to have his so much very larger hands on her?

A treacherous heat flashed across her skin, and she looked down to hide it. She was a lady, and ladies were not supposed to think about a gentleman's hands upon their person. But no one looked at her to see the longing that she knew must be apparent on her face. And why should anyone glance at her, when he was so much easier on the eyes?

She looked up again.

He had his profile towards her, and she noted the perfectly straight nose, the clean jaw line,

the arch of golden eyebrows that rose arrogantly over eyes as blue as a perfect summer sky.

Her heart sank into her stomach. He needed a tall, dark beauty on his arm to make a striking contrast, or a golden-haired nymph who would match his own burnished looks. He did not need a brown mouse such as her. He must have wanted Elizabeth, really.

Looking up, her mother smiled and rose, calling out, "Ah, Eleanor, come and meet Lord Staines, my child."

Eleanor tried to smile back, but her face seemed unable to hold any expression and she could only pray that her eyes did not—as Emma often said they did—look as large as a frightened owl's. She turned to shut the door behind her, using that instant to pull in a breath and smooth the front of her best sprig muslin gown. Oh, how he must be regretting that he had ever allowed his father—and hers—to make this match.

Turning, she came into the room, trying to glide as Evelyn—the youngest of them all at fourteen—could already manage. Eleanor's own bouncing step had been the bane of their governess, despite every effort Eleanor made to control herself. Her father had never understood it and had always complained that it came from her striding about the countryside so much, but even after a season in London, Eleanor could not seem to manage a smooth, delicate step. She had to take long steps simply to keep up with everyone else.

However, even with her stride, it seemed to take years to reach the small group gathered beside the fire. When she did, she did not know where to put her hands or if she should sit or stand, so she bobbed a curtsy and shot a terrified glance at her mother.

Her mother's eyes glowed with sympathy, but her expression also held its usual touch of exasperation, and Eleanor could almost hear her mother sigh that long-echoed phrase, "*Oh, Eleanor, whatever will become of you?*"

Instead of speaking the words aloud, her mother smiled until it strained her face and said, "Lord Staines, may I present my second daughter, Miss Eleanor."

His lordship bowed and said nothing, and his sky-blue eyes glanced at her and away. Obviously, he was not delighted.

Eleanor smoothed her damp palms along the sides of her gown and struggled to think of something clever to say—something that might spark some life into his eyes. Something that might actually make him really look at her. Elizabeth, as the eldest, rightly held the title Miss Glover, and Eleanor wished now that she could be introduced as such. It would make her feel so much more adult to be Miss Glover, not Miss Eleanor.

Her silence earned a frown from her father and a small, distressed sigh from her mother.

"How do you do?" Eleanor finally managed, grimacing inside at how vapid she sounded. Now he would think her hen-witted as well as plain. It was such a shame that burning mortification could not actually kill one, as one so often wished it could.

Eleanor's father smoothed his graying side-whiskers with a finger and tugged his waistcoat down over his thickening stomach. "Yes, well, we'll leave you to it, Staines. Come along, Evangeline."

Alarm shot through Eleanor as her father moved to escort her mother from the room. She sent a stricken glance to her mother, but that lady merely offered another of her encouraging smiles and let her husband bear her away.

When the heavy door clicked shut, Eleanor fixed her stare on Lord Staines's boots and listened to the soft hiss from the coal fire. *How amazing*, she thought, heart hammering and mouth dry. *I can see my reflection in his boots. Mine are never so shiny. Doesn't he ever step in mud?*

"Miss Eleanor?"

Startled at his voice, so much lower than a moment ago, she risked a glance at him. The sight of him, perfect and handsome, stopped her spinning mind and for an instant she could only stare at him, her breath caught in her chest and a warm tingle on her skin.

Reality intruded in a small voice that whispered, *You have nothing to interest the likes of him—save for a large dowry and a well-connected family.* He had chosen her only because of the ties between their families. She must accept that.

"Miss Eleanor," he began again. Raking a hand through his golden hair, he turned aside. She heard him mutter something unsuitable for a lady to hear, so she pretended not to have heard.

Sudden impatience flared in her. Was he going to mutter her name all afternoon and hedge his way around this whole matter? Now that he had seen her, he must be wishing for an escape. Well, she would offer him one.

She sought at first to find some soft words to hint him away, but then, with her tone far too aggressive for any young lady, she blurted out, "You don't have to do this."

He looked at her. Really looked at her, and her heart sank even lower, because the fire smoldering in his eyes came from pure irritation.

"I am quite aware of what I am doing. Or is this your way of saying you find my..." His chin lifted. His eyes narrowed. "...my reputation not to your taste?" She opened her mouth to tell him that was it, exactly.

Like anyone in London, she had heard the stories. How could any man so sinfully handsome not have left a trail of broken hearts behind him? He was not quite a rake, but she strongly suspected it wasn't from not trying. However, he was young, and he had a title. Eleanor could not imagine that any of those elderly ladies who set Society's rules—and who chose the acceptable guest lists—would ever really brand this man too wild for the polite world and cast him out, like Lucifer thrown from the pearly gates. Not unless he did something really, really awful.

But she had heard enough stories over the past few months, during the spring and through summer, to know that some thought him fast. Some said he'd had his heart broken by another lady. Others whispered that any lady would be a fool to fall in love with such a reckless fellow. *And I am far too wise to be so foolish,* Eleanor told herself.

So she opened her mouth to lie to him and tell him that she did object to his reputation. But, as with any time she tried to lie, the truth tumbled out before she could stop it.

"I don't think....I mean, you're not... well, it's just that I know you're supposed to offer for one of us, and with Elizabeth taken and me the next oldest, I..."

"I must marry someone," he interrupted, scowling at her, as if irritated by this delay to whatever other plans he had had for the afternoon.

"You must?" Eleanor repeated, feeling very dull and stupid. "But why now?" And why me? she thought, but did not have the courage to say.

Impatience twisted his mouth. For an instant he hesitated, and then said, "Because my father is dying and it is his wish to see me married before this year is done, and him with it."

Those blunt words took the breath out of her. He didn't even want her family connections, or her dowry. He simply wanted some...some female. And, of course, why should she—such a plain snip of a girl, such an obedient daughter as her—refuse him? Her nose tingled and her eyes blurred.

She looked down at the carpet again. She would never forget its rose pattern. Nor would she forget the faint pine scent of his cologne, which tickled her nose with its pleasant difference from

everything else she had ever known. And she would never forget how awful he had just made her feel.

How stupid. Of course he had to marry. And of course he would think her the type who could not refuse him, for she did not have it within her to inspire love in a man. His offer was the best she could ever hope for. Of course she must accept.

She wanted to cry.

"I see," she said, mumbling the words, because she really did see all too clearly how it was.

He went on, his voice gruff and a little daunting. "We're to marry at Westerley as soon as they've finished calling the bans. My father can't travel, so your family must come there, and will stay over Christmas. Afterwards...well, I've discussed the settlements with your father, and he's pleased. You'll have a London house, as well as apartments at Westerley. And..." he hesitated the merest second, and Eleanor wondered what to make of that break in this terrifying description of her future. "I expect, you'll be a countess before too long."

"I don't want to be a countess," she muttered to the floor, unexpected rebellion rising inside.

"What's that?" he asked, his voice sharp.

She looked up. Such a mistake. She met the blue eyes, wary now and stormy, and words disappeared from her mind and her tongue. She fell into those eyes, and suddenly she knew how any lady could be too foolish when it came to him, for she wanted to do something to coax a smile from him, to thaw the sudden ice in his glance.

"Damnit, Eleanor, we might as well get this straight from the start."

She didn't wince at his swearing, though she knew that a well-bred girl such as herself ought to at least gasp at his language. However, he looked to be in such a temper that he had not even realized what he had said, and she thought it wiser not to pour oil on his fire by bringing it to his attention.

"Your father says you're a sensible girl," he went on, his words raspy and rapid. "I need a marriage, and I would rather get myself a sensible agreement with a sensible girl. Now, I know da...dashed well I don't need to make good on that silly pact my father made with yours to have one of his sons marry a Glover, but if it gives him some satisfaction in his dying days, then I shall do it. I'd rather not pick one of your sisters—I've...well, let us just say that by what your father tells, you seem the most likely to be satisfied with an arranged marriage. So, do we have an agreement, or not?"

He stood glaring at her, his hands clenched at his sides and his expression almost daring her to decline. He sounded far too much like a man who always got what he wanted. However, the problem was that he really didn't want her. He simply wanted someone sensible. And he thought her sensible.

She stared at him, at those intense eyes, and things—not very sensible things—popped into her head. But he would never want to hear any of them from her. They were fleeting thoughts. Momentary indulgences of the fantasies that she had woven around how it would be someday when someone asked her to marry him. They danced through her mind like dust motes in sunlight, mere glimmers of undefined longing that vanished before she could wrap words around them.

This was nothing like anything she had ever imagined. This was her choice. Take him, or send him away to find a truly sensible woman? Only she did not want to send him away.

It was his eyes, she decided. Or rather, it was what she had glimpsed for an instant deep within those eyes, lurking like some fabulous beast at the bottom of a crystal lake.

All her life, she had been drawn to wounded creatures. She had rescued rabbits from

poachers' traps, had lured stray dogs into following her home, and had raised orphaned kittens. Over the years, her reputation at her father's estate had spread, and they'd even had three babies left on the steps, much to her parents' dismay. But her parents had allowed her her charities, for it was the one thing she had always turned obstinate about. It was a womanly virtue, after all.

So they had allowed her to nurse her animals, and to find homes for the unwanted babies, and to keep the dogs at their country estate in the Lake District.

It seemed she now had a new rescue—or did she?

Why, after all, would Lord Staines, future earl that he was, have that look of a wounded, wild thing, all bristly in case she should think him helpless, and ready to snap out at anyone or anything?

A shiver chased up her arms and down her spine. The muslin gown, with its high collar, seemed suddenly too thin for this room. Her nose twitched with an itch, but she did not rub it.

Her mother had warned that her soft heart would one day be her undoing. That day seemed to have come.

Only, had she been mistaken about that haunted look?

"Well?" he demanded, startling her from her thoughts. "I would have your answer today?"

Stubborn pride rose in her. Leaning back a little, she looked him straight in the eye. "You would? Well, I would like to know what do I get from this agreement?"

For an instant, he held quite still. She wanted to slap a hand over her mouth for letting her thoughts leap out unchecked. Those blue eyes frosted with icy fire, and she knew she ought to beg his pardon, only she did not have that much courage.

The corner of his mouth crooked. "You mean, I take it, that you want something other than a title, my name, and endowment of all my worldly goods?"

It sounded greedy when he put it that way. A flush warmed her cheeks, but she held her ground. "You said you wanted someone sensible. How sensible would it be to agree to something when I do not know if I shall get out of it what I want?"

Light danced in his eyes, and the expression set her heart thudding so hard she thought he must hear it. *Oh, dear.* She felt as if she had stepped out on a slim and terribly fragile branch. But that was silly. She had given up tree-climbing years ago.

With a lift of one eyebrow, he regarded her, and gave a small nod. "Very well, my sensible miss. What do you want?"

The question sent a small, panicked shock through her. Her mind blanked. *Oh, heavens, what?*

She turned away, groping for something to say. She had thought that he would make her an offer. Only he had turned the tables utterly on her. He really was quite infuriating.

Stalling for time, she walked to a side table. There, on the silver platter that the butler must have brought in to her parents, lay his card with small black print on the white laid cardstock.

Geoffrey F. Westerley, Lord Staines

Inspiration struck.

She picked up the card and turned to him, her skin cold. Well, now he would either give a sharp laugh and walk out—and, she told herself firmly, she would be much better off if he did—or...or....

Her voice shook a little and she had to clear her throat before she said, "I have heard that some gentlemen offer a *carte blanche* to some...ladies? Not the ones they wish to marry, but to the other sort."

Both golden brows lifted and he looked down that long, straight nose of his from his rather

awesome height. "What of it?" he asked, his tone bleak enough to send shivers across the back of her bare arms.

She hesitated only a moment, preparing herself for his anger. Then she said, "I want *carte blanche* to name what I wish from this arrangement."

* * *

Geoff stared at the slip of a girl before him. This was not going the way he had planned, and irritation flared into snarling anger that she wasn't acting her part. Why did she not drop a meek curtsy, say yes, and let them both get on with it? Her parents had talked of her as if she knew her duty and her manners.

Damnation.

But the humor of it slipped under his guard and began to unravel his dark mood like a teasing jester.

He had always had the most damnable luck when it came to affairs of the heart. Why should that change now? And, by God, she was more than sensible to make certain she got what she wanted out of this bargain.

Wary, he eyed the blank card. Her slim hand held it firm and fast. She had nerve, at least. And nice hands, with tapering fingers and smooth, round nails. He glanced up at her face. She also had a stubborn chin. It stood out in contrasted with those doe-brown eyes which seemed to dominate her face. Which should he heed more—those soft eyes or that square chin?

"Well, Lord Staines?" she asked again, the faintest tremor betraying that she was not as confident as she seemed.

Oh, devil take this bit of Eve. What did she really want of him? There seemed but one way to find out.

"Very well. Write what you want and give it to me at Westerley. You may have what you will from me for your bride gift as well as a Christmas gift, so I will have back that card before we wed."

She stuck out her hand to him.

He almost laughed at the absurdity of it. What a way to propose and take a bride, with a handshake and a bargain. Still, he had tried it once before in a more conventional sense, with confessions of devoted love and passionate embraces, and what a nightmare that had ended.

Still, it rankled that she seemed so in control. For an instant, that devil inside him tempted him to sweep her into his arms—she'd tuck neatly into his grip, small as she was—and kiss her light-headed. It would give him infinite satisfaction to do so, and then to demand of her if she were still willing to make a bargain with him. Only, devil take it, he needed a wife. And he needed one now. He could not afford to frighten a second one off.

So he took her slim hand in his and gave it a firm shake. She had soft hands, but strong, and she wore no rings. At least she did not seem to be a vain, rapacious sort of female. She probably wouldn't demand gems or riches.

What would she ask for?

"Then we have an understanding," he said, letting go of her, and folding his own hands behind his back. Lord, what should he do now? Ask about the weather? About what ball she had attended last night.

He rocked on his heels a moment and watched her stare down at the blank card in her hand.

Oh, devil take it!

"Well, good-day then." He gave a quick bow and started for the door, unable to keep his long stride from betraying his need to escape.

Her voice, small and light as a bird's song, stopped him at the door. "And will I see you tonight, Lord Staines, at Lady Farquar's autumn ball?"

CHAPTER TWO

He turned and stared down the length of the room. She looked even more tiny—a slip of a thing with brown curls, and brown eyes, a white gown with flowery bits strewn over it which covered her from neck to toes. What the devil was he doing, asking to marry such a child? Still, that was what he'd heard was best. Marry 'em young, before they learned to expect anything. And she was not as young as Cynthia had been.

His mind skirted away from that thought.

He gave her another bow. "Do you wish me to come?"

Even from the distance across the room, he saw the sudden panic in her eyes. "That's not what I want to write on the card. That's not my one wish."

He started to smile and had to wipe the expression from his face. He did not want her to think he was laughing at her, for it was himself that he found amusing. She made him sound like some sort of magical wizard, and nothing could be further from the truth. "A bride-to-be may also make requests of her husband. I shall be honored to escort you."

Turning away, he fled before she could ask anything else of him.

* * *

"If you're trying to get drunk, you're doing a damn bad job of it." Lounging in his chair, Patrick Westerley regarded his brother over the glass in his hand.

Geoff glanced around at the long faces gathered in this dim corner of White's gaming club and wished that he was drunk. This early in the evening few gentlemen had yet to wend their way to the exclusive club on St. James's Street. He and his brothers had this corner to themselves. What had he been thinking of to try and celebrate this blasted betrothal in his current ill-humor?

Trying to force a lighter mood into his soul and a wry tone into his voice, he gave back a twisted smile. "If I were trying, I would not have ordered champagne. This is a celebration, damn it, now are you going to drink to my wedded bliss or not?"

"Geoff, old fellow, you're not marrying for love, so I don't see how bliss enters into it. Shall we drink to a long life instead?" Andrew asked, his voice as dry as the champagne in his glass. Two years younger than Geoffrey, he looked like a man intended for a career in the Church—soberly dressed, with his slender form and his serious manner. However, the mischief in his blue-green eyes rather spoilt the full effect of a dark-clad clergyman.

"No, let's drink to a sensible agreement for our sensible brother," Patrick said, raising his glass again, his voice drawling and teasing.

Geoff regarded his brothers with unease. Patrick, the youngest of them at twenty-three, looked most like their late mother. He was the sturdiest of them all, and the dark one of the family, with only a shading of gold in his brown hair. He had, however, the straight Westerley nose and the same height as his fair-headed brothers. He also had the family blue eyes, and the devil's own light in them when he intended trouble. Right now, Geoff could see the warning

glints and knew his brother intended to roast him unmercifully. He should have let them read the damn announcement in the paper, like the rest of the world.

"And what do you think I should have done, instead?" Geoff demanded, wishing he did not feel so petulant about all this. Damn it, why couldn't he laugh about it with them? Perhaps because it was his own future being ridiculed. "Should I wait another decade or two, perhaps? I'm twenty-eight, and I ought to know...."

"Exactly what's in your stubborn head, and not much more," Andrew said, interrupting. He poured the rest of the champagne from the dark glass bottle into the crystal goblets and lifted a narrow hand for the waiter to bring more of the smuggled French wine to them. "But this is hardly the occasion to brawl about it."

Geoff took up his glass and stared into the dissipating bubbles. A brawl would suit him just now. However, one was not supposed to celebrate an engagement with a fight. What the devil was that girl planning to write on that card, anyway? She'd have her own house. Servants. Money. What else could she want? His fidelity? His love? Scowling, he tossed back his champagne. She would do better to ask for all the stars in heaven.

"Are you certain you must go through with it, Geoff?" Andrew asked, his expression sober now and worry tugging his long face into a frown. "The old man's been on his death bed before."

"Before?" Patrick gave a rude snort. "He has had more dying moments than Kean's run of Hamlet. He sent me at least twenty letters at Oxford, all of them urging me to take my degree with honors before he turned up his toes. And fat lot of good any honors ever done me in the Home Office."

Patrick fell to grumbling into his drink, muttering about his stalled political career.

Geoff hadn't wanted to tell them, but now he decided the moment had come. They would know the truth of it soon enough.

"This time it's different," he said, his tone flat. "This time Ibbottson wrote me."

The others looked at him, their expressions arrested, but Geoff could see that their thoughts now mirrored what had been his own overwhelmed shock when he had read that letter. Dr. Ibbottson had been treating the Earl of Herndon, and his family, for twenty years. A heavy-set, blunt-spoken man, Ibbottson had never once indulged their father's attempts to use his forever failing health to rule his sons' lives. But if Ibbottson had written that the earl had little time left, well then....

Silence descended on the trio. From the other room the rattle of dice in a dice box could be heard. It sounded a damn death rattle.

For Geoff, the champagne soured in his mouth. He would be married in less than a month, at Christmas time, the season of joy and goodwill to all, and he was like to see his father buried shortly thereafter. A joyous season indeed, he thought, the pulse beating hard in his clenched jaw. He filled his glass from the fresh bottle set down by a waiter and threw back the cold, bubbling liquid. Its faint bitterness echoed the mix of regret that already lay inside him.

Well, that Glover girl would certainly earn whatever it was that she wanted from him. She'd earn it all right, if she married him.

Uneasily, he wondered if she might cry off when it came to the sticking point. He doubted she would, not if she were really the sensible creature he had been told she was. But he'd have to make damn sure she didn't learn the truth about him before they were properly shackled. After all, even a sensible woman might not care to marry a man who had no heart.

"Geoffrey?"

He glanced up to see Andrew staring at him as if expecting an answer.

"Come out of your thoughts and decide. Do you have Patrick for your groomsman, or me? And don't ask me to perform the rites, for it'll have to be the new vicar—what's his name, Cleverly...Cheesley...."

"Cheeverly," Geoff said, almost spitting out the word.

Andrew and Patrick exchanged a dark look. Then Andrew sat up and forced a brighter tone. "Yes, well, Cheesley or whatever will have to do it up since I've yet to take my orders. But I don't think your bride will mind."

"Don't know about that," Patrick said. "Seems to me, you give a female a wedding and all of a sudden they've an opinion on every detail of your life. Happened to poor Smyth-Winston when he married that Telford chit. She had him jumping through hoops for her. Taking her everywhere. Buying her everything."

"Oh, damn," Geoff muttered, suddenly recalling he had indeed made a promise to take his intended somewhere. He glanced down at morning clothes, in which he had made his proposal and afterwards had wandered about London for far too long. They were not the formal breeches and coat he would need to attend any sort of do.

He swore again, put down his glass and rose. "Your pardon, but I must go."

"Go? Go where?" Patrick asked, startled.

Geoff paused, a cynical smile on his lips. "I have a hoop to jump through."

Andrew and Patrick watched their elder brother stride across the deep carpets and out the portal of White's. Andrew gave a deep sigh. "Ten to one this doesn't turn out well."

Patrick's scowl deepened, and a lock of dark hair fell across his forehead, making him look like a brooding poet. "It can't end like last time. Geoff may not say much about it, but I'm not having him cut up like that again. And you heard him when he spoke that fellow's name."

Andrew let out a sigh. "Yes, I'd hoped he'd have it out of his system by now. But I am not certain what we can do about any of this. Geoff won't thank us for any interference. He's too accustomed to being the capable elder brother."

Patrick studied the bubbles in his glass a moment before he looked up, his mouth set and the look in his eyes stubborn. "Yes, he is. But if we don't do something, I'll lay you ten to one that Geoff makes a mull of this with that temper of his. You know that must be what happened last time."

Stirring in his chair, Andrew shot an uneasy glance at his brother. "I know no such thing. And neither do you. But you are right on one account. We'd best keep an eye on proceedings." He tossed back his champagne and smiled. "So who is on guard duty tonight?"

* * *

It took three tours of the Farquar's ballroom for Geoff to find his quarry.

He had started to think that Lord and Lady Rushton had brought their daughters and taken them away again when he finally spotted her, for the rooms were not that thick with company. How could they be on a chilly November night, with so many already fled from London?

Fox hunting had begun, and so had pheasant season. Society bucks had fled either to the hunt field, taking their mistresses with them, or to the shooting boxes on their country estates. A few peers had stayed to attend to Parliament, but when that business was done, they, like the rest of the decent world, would abandon London, leaving it coal-yellowed skies to the merchants and the unfashionable until next spring came and the weather improved again. Christmas was the season for country parties, and pleasant entertainment at tidy, warm estates.

However, even a London thin of company was still a place where the world craved its entertainment. Events had to be held for gossip to spread and scandal to form. Hence the Farquar's ball.

It occurred suddenly to him that Lady Rushton would want to hold an engagement ball. He did not want to linger in London, but perhaps his bride-to-be, and her family, wanted to make the most of her success. She would probably want to shop, as well, for bride things and such, although he had no clear idea, he realized, just what she might want for her trousseau. Bride clothes had not occupied his mind the last time he had proposed.

Scowling at that thought, he pulled his attention back to his current situation and away from useless, ruined desires.

The two Miss Glovers, Elizabeth and the younger Eleanor, sat together near the far wall. As he watched, a man in military garb came up to them, bowed over the blushing Elizabeth's hand and took her away for a dance, leaving Eleanor to herself. Without company, Eleanor folded her hands in her lap, and Geoff watched her make herself disappear.

It was actually quite an amazing process, involving more not-doing than doing. Head up, she became quite still, and soon seemed to become part of the furnishings. When two gossiping, old ladies took the seats next to her, Eleanor's lips quivered once or twice, but she said nothing and did not look at the gossips. He felt quite certain, however, that this was how she had acquired her knowledge of men who gave scandalous women a *carte blanche*.

Folding his arms, Geoff leaned against the wall near a tapestry and set to watching his betrothed. He ought to ask her to dance, and so he would—eventually. For now, he only wanted to study her, to try and see beneath that calm exterior which she presented to the world.

It had been a stupid thing to agree so blindly to her condition of naming what she wanted from a marriage. He had only wanted to be done with the matter, to have it over and fixed so that he could not change his mind. He had needed a bride, and now he had one. But what sort of woman was she that she could seem so meek and yet make such a nearly scandalous demand of him?

Carte blanche indeed!

And his lips twitched at the memory of that scene. He could not think of any other miss who would have made such a shocking request. No, usually, they were falling over themselves to charm the heir to an earldom.

Eyes narrowing, he studied his bride to be. She sat so still, her head down, not looking at anyone. Not talking. She looked far too shy for any man's taste, and an uneasy doubt made him wonder if he had chosen badly. His future countess would have certain public duties, after all.

The image of her with her chin up and her hand out as she asked him for a *carte blanche* stirred in his thoughts again, teasing him with the same question.

What did she want?

As he watched, her lips curved into a secret smile. She kept her stare focused on the tips of her white satin slippers, but that smile had his fingers twitching with the desire to tip up that stubborn chin so he could see what secret amusement lay hidden in those infernally downcast eyes.

What was she smiling at? Gossip? Some secret thoughts?

Had he gotten himself some clever female who hid unreasonable desires in her heart? Was she thinking up some sensible request to make, or would she ask for romantic nonsense?

Pushing away from the wall, he straightened. Damn it all, he was going to have to find out just what sort of female he had gotten himself here. And if she had any quixotic notions about

him, he would just have to make certain he eliminated those from her head before they were bound together as man and wife. At least that was one thing he was good at. He knew how to make a lady cry, and how to destroy her faith in him forever.

* * *

Eleanor sat with her eyes downcast as she listened to an utterly unsuitable story of how Lady Charlotte Wellesley had eloped with Lord Paget this past spring. The lady had left her husband and four children for the gallant cavalry officer. He, in turn, had been drawn by love to abandon a cheating wife. It all sounded terribly improper, and the gossiping ladies had nothing but criticism for the couple. But wistful delight curled into Eleanor.

How wonderful to love and be loved so passionately that nothing else mattered.

She let out a small sigh, and then became aware that a pair of gentlemen's evening slippers had moved into her view. Her stare traveled up from those black slippers, over strong calves encased in white, clocked stockings, over buff satin breeches that lay smooth over muscular legs, to a gold-shot brocade waistcoat and a dark green evening coat, and to the impassive face of Lord Staines.

Her mouth dried and her heart thudded into her throat, leaving her unable to speak.

He took her breath away, with those burnished locks and the heart-stopping perfection of his face. But he regarded her without fire or flash in eyes as chilly as winter ice.

She smiled and stammered out a good evening.

With a short bow, he held out his hand. "May I have this dance?"

Startled, she glanced around herself. No one ever asked her to dance. And she remembered that, of course, he would have to ask her. They were to be married, after all.

Putting her gloved hand in his, she rose. He held her hand firmly, but he kept a polite distance between them. Remembering all the lessons she'd had with the dancing master this past season, she kept her stare fixed not on her feet—as she longed to—but on the glinting emerald tucked into the folds of his perfect, white cravat. She had to look somewhere, and she did not trust herself to stare into his face and remain the sensible girl that he expected.

The small orchestra engaged for the evening played the opening bars to the dance. Lord Staines bowed, she curtsied, and they moved into the steps. The dance had them separate, and then they came together and he took her hands to turn her.

"Is this punishment for my being late?" he asked.

Her gaze flew to his face, but those devastating blue eyes regarded her only with slight curiosity.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "I...I was just minding my steps."

The dance separated them again—thankfully—and when they came together, he leaned closer. "Are the steps more interesting than I am?"

Her stare shot back up again to his face. This time she glimpsed a spark of devilment in his eyes. She tensed. She was done for if he started flirting with her. She was not like Emma. If he started to tease her, she might fall under the spell of his charm, and that would be a fatal mistake in what was only a marriage of convenience. No, she must honestly be sensible about this.

The dance forced them apart and Geoff cursed himself for thinking a country dance any place for conversation. He felt like a damn jack-in-the-box, popping up at odd moments to say something to her and popping away before she answered. However, he had seen the flare of panic in her eyes when he had teased her about minding her steps. He felt as if he had kicked a

kitten. He wanted at once to say something to reassure her, but the movement in the dance took him away.

When they met again as partners, she took his hands for another turn. With a smile fixed in place, she said, "It is my company that is not very good, I fear."

He had been thinking just that, but her admission—made in such a soft, wrenching voice—instantly had him wanting to deny any such thing.

They reached the end of the line of dancers and had to stand out, and at last he could talk to her. And he decided that a new approach was needed. Something more direct, for they had dealt better than this when they had both spoken plainly this morning.

"Why do you think you are not good company?" he asked.

She glanced up at him, and he saw the gears turning behind those wide brown eyes. *Well, it is not a dull mind that keeps her silent.* And his shoulders relaxed a little. Like his father, he did not suffer fools well, and he had not even realized until now how unbearable it would be to be shackled to a dull woman.

Hesitating over her words, she wet her lips and said, "Good company in London seems to consist of either making cutting comments about others, or smiling stupidly and giggling at everything a gentleman says. I don't do either."

Her answer amused him. She had described the catty ladies and the simpering misses that he knew all too well. "Your smile is intriguing, Miss Eleanor. Quite intriguing. In fact, I wonder what it is that makes you smile? It is not, I gather, a cutting comment?"

He had stepped closer as he spoke, and now fear sparked at the back of her eyes. Cursing himself, he stepped away at once. He must remember to keep himself in check. He would not let that side of himself out again. Not with a lady at least. He did not want her knowing what sort of monster courted her.

The dance shifted, pulling them back into the line.

Allowing her to keep her stare focused on his chest, he tried not to feel like such a bloody idiot. He had presumed too much. In that brief moment of companionship, he had acted as if they knew each other, when in fact they were utter strangers. No wonder she looked at him with alarm.

This was not going well, he thought, angry with himself for already making such a botch of it.

At last the dance ended. Eleanor made her curtsy and stood there, wondering what she ought to do. Did she ask him to take her back to her parents? Or did he just do that on his own? He looked so terrifying, so perfect and terrifying. She did not know what to do with him.

Normally, the very few gentlemen she danced with were friends of her fathers. Older men who joked with her and made her forget her nervousness. They did not have intense blue eyes. They did not have powerful shoulders. And the touch of their gloved hands on hers did not make her stomach flutter. For an instant, when Lord Staines had stepped close to her, she had felt that sweep of intense male virility close around her, and she had frozen.

Would he touch more than her hand? She had wanted him to, and the strength of that desire shocked and frightened her.

She had been grateful when he stepped away—but she had almost reached out her hand to him to make him come back to her.

Oh, you stupid girl. He wants a sensible bride, not some half-infatuated ninny!

Straightening, she swallowed the dryness in her mouth and smiled at him. "Thank you for the dance."

He took her hand and started to lead her off the floor, but the first notes of a lively jig sounded. She glanced over her shoulder, at the other dancers starting to assemble—the ladies with eager faces, the laughing gentlemen. Oh, how much fun they were having, she thought, the smile already forming on her lips for their pleasure.

When she turned back, she found Lord Staines staring down at her, his eyes narrowed and his look measuring. She blushed, glanced down, but looked up again. She would not have him thinking that she found the floor more interesting than him.

The mischief glinted again in his eyes, as irresistible as fairy gold. "Shall we shock the gossips and dance a second time in a row?"

"We shall have everyone talking. It is just not done, you know."

He grinned. "It's past time London noticed you, Miss Eleanor Glover."

And he led her into the fast-paced jig.

The dance gave her no time and no breath for talk. But Eleanor needed neither. With him smiling at her and dancing her up and down the line, she needed nothing. The world whirled past in bright music and sweet colors, and she even allowed herself to laugh. She threw back her head and let the happiness out for the world to see. She had never danced like this. Not even at home with her sisters.

It ended before she was ready. The musicians struck the last chord, drawing it out for the dancers to pay honors to their partners. But the music still hummed in her—and so did a rare delight.

He led her from the dance floor, taking her all the way to the sidelines this time. And she turned to him, thinking that now she could talk to him. After all, how could anyone feel shy with someone who had spun them about. But the smiling man she had danced with was gone.

He was looking elsewhere, and she followed his gaze to see him staring at a man who must be his brother, for the straight nose and tall, handsome form was so like him. The man gave a nod to Lord Staines, who returned the greeting with a gesture.

Turning to her, polite and distant, the perfect gentleman, he gave her a bow. "Thank you for the dances, Miss Eleanor."

Then he was gone.

It was like stepping from sunshine into deep shade. She blinked and glanced about her. The ladies around her whispered and gossiped behind their fans—probably about her having danced twice with the same man. With the reckless Lord Staines, in fact. Gentlemen eyed her, their stares now assessing, as if seeing to find what it was that had attracted Staines's attention. Blood rushed into her cheeks in a fierce heat. Too conscious of being in the center of things, the panic caught in her chest.

Taking deep breaths, she forced herself to walk back to her chair, her back straight, her face on fire. And she knew suddenly that the biggest danger before her was that it would be all too easy to fall in love with her husband-to-be.

Only would that really be so awful?

She glanced over to him, to the fine line of his back which he presented to the room. Already, some other lady—beautiful and dark, wearing diamonds and a gown cut to reveal almost everything—had come up to him. She leaned on his arm to whisper something in his ear and he turned and leaned closer to her. A twisted smile curved his lips, and a dangerous light glittered in his eyes.

Oh, yes, it would be awful to love him. Awful and wonderful, and heart-breaking.

Eleanor folded her hands tight together on her laps, and wondered what Lord Staines would

do if she simply wrote on the back of his cards—*I want your heart.*

Of course, she would not. She could not. She'd die if she did so and he laughed—and of course he would, for such words were ludicrous coming from a mouse of a girl such as her.

But if she didn't write that, what was she to write?

CHAPTER THREE

"So, what did he say? And what did you say? And what did he say in answer to your having asked?" Emma asked, sounding more as she had at thirteen than the sophisticated sixteen she had recently become.

"You sound such a magpie," Elizabeth scolded, and turned back to Eleanor. "But when he proposed, did you really ask for a... a...."

"A *carte blanche*," Evelyn said, now lying upside down on the sofa in what had once been the nursery. The room, with its scarred floor, faded carpets and worn green velvet draperies, seemed to Eleanor, at the moment, to be the safest of havens.

For Eleanor, it held both treasured toys and memories: Poor Anne Boleyn, who had been so named after Evelyn somehow lost the doll's head; George the much tattered hobby-horse who had been christened after the uncle who presented him one Christmas, and whose color had changed to suit each girl in turn. The walls held their youthful efforts in watercolors and embroidery, including Emma's dreadful still-life paintings, and Elizabeth's colorful but crooked needlepoint homilies. During all the years that the girls had come to London with their parents, even before they stepped into society, this had been their home from home.

Eleanor let out a sigh. All too soon this would no longer be her home. She would be married and moved elsewhere. The thought terrified her.

She had retreated that morning to the nursery to be with her sisters and ask their advice about her card, and about this marriage that loomed before her. Now she wondered if that had been such a wise thing, for they seemed more inclined to pelt her with questions than to offer any wisdom.

In response to Evelyn's pert answer about Eleanor having asked for a *carte blanche*, Elizabeth scolded, "You are not supposed to know such things!"

"Rubbish. I'm just not supposed to talk about them," Evelyn said, and grinned. They all knew that Elizabeth's anger came out as soft as her words.

Eleanor regarded her sisters, her upcoming loss starting to weigh on her. Would she see them often after she married? Or would she live most of the year at Westerley? Well, if that happened, she would just have to invite them to stay, for she could not bear the thought of not seeing them.

Elizabeth, the eldest, was the beauty of the family, with her cloud of warm brown hair and her deep green eyes. But Emma, with her bright blue eyes, her infectious laugh and her plump curves, drew almost many eyes as Elizabeth's quiet beauty. Even Evelyn, only fourteen and still in that age of being more legs and arms than anything else, seemed blessed with the promise of beauty in her dark hair and eyes.

Eleanor loved her sisters too well to begrudge them their gifts, but there were times she had wished that she were something more than their sensible Eleanor. Now she was to be that something else. She was to be Lady Staines. And she had that wretched blank card hanging over her. Why could she think of nothing to wish for from him?

"It is all true," she said. "And there is no getting out of it." She held out the copy of *The*

London Times that she had pirated from her father's morning mail and pointed to the pertinent column. It had been nearly a week since her dances with Lord Staines at the Farquar's ball, but apparently that evening had not given his lordship second thoughts about sending in the notice that let the world know their plans.

She had seen little of his lordship, but that did not surprise her. Her days seemed full of shopping—hats to buy, and dresses, and linen, and china, and calling cards to order with her new title and direction. She had had so many fittings for so many dresses that she had begun to feel like a pin cushion.

Emma leaned over Elizabeth's shoulder, and even Evelyn sat up for a better look at the announcement, which made the engagement official to the world, and iron-clad, as far as Society was concerned. If Eleanor were to reject Lord Staines now, the world would brand her a foolish jilt, and she could not endure thrusting her family into such horrible scandal. Better to marry and live quietly in the country forever than that.

Lowering the paper, Elizabeth watched her sister with worry deepening the green in her eyes. "Oh, Ellie, I do wish you could marry for love, not just because you must marry someone." "Love!" Evelyn wrinkled her nose. "Ellie doesn't need that. She's going to be a countess. Ellie, you should ask him for your own stable."

"But he must have a stable already, silly," Emma protested. She had just come out of the school room this year and more often than not forgot to act like a lady rather than a boisterous schoolgirl.

"That's not the same as having your own," Evelyn insisted, returning to her upside down position, with her long, dark brown hair hanging onto the floor and her heels hooked over the back of the sofa.

Emma turned back to Eleanor, her expression serious as she strove for a superior sophistication that would put Evelyn in her place. "Ignore that child. You should ask him to be faithful and honor his vows to you."

Eleanor drew back, shocked. Over the past week, she had learned more of Lord Staines's reputation with the ladies—not respectable ladies, of course, but with those creatures who existed on the tattered edge of Society and whose business it was to give men pleasure. There was no one woman she knew of whose name had been linked with his. However, Eleanor had gone out of her way to listen to every conversation that concerned Lord Staines, and there seemed to have been a depressing list of lightskirts who had caught his eye over the past season.

"But what if I make him miserable with such a demand?" she said. "What an awful marriage we should have then."

Gracefully, Elizabeth rose. She took Emma's hand, and then urged Evelyn upright and ushered both girls from the room. "I wish to talk to Eleanor alone. Emma, why do you not go and read to mother, you know how she loves your voice, and..."

"I know, I know. I should be at my studies," Evelyn said, with a deep sigh and her heels dragging.

Reluctantly, both girls left, but as soon as the door had shut, it popped open again, and Evelyn poked her head in the doorway, her dark eyes sparkling. "Ask him for a black phaeton picked out in purple trim," she said, and ducked out as Elizabeth shied a faded velvet pillow at the door.

"I hope you know that they only want the best for you," Elizabeth said, coming over to sit next to Eleanor.

Eleanor smiled as Elisabeth took her hand. "Of course I know. It's just....oh, Liz, I was so

stupid to ask him for this *carte blanche*. Now I must ask him for something. And he will feel honor-bound to oblige me, no matter how it ultimately festers inside him. I thought I was being clever at the time, and that it would make him recant his offer. But I have put myself in a corner!"

And I want to ask him for something I haven't the nerve to ask for, she added silently. Not even to her sister could she confess the desire that had taken root inside her that she might ask him for just a little of his affection.

Elizabeth's eyes darkened, and a worried frown drew her eyebrows together. "I do wish, my dear, that you had waited to find someone who loves you."

Eleanor had to look down as she bit off the sharp words that she might have waited forever in that case. Elizabeth's face glowed with love, and the jab of jealousy twisting inside Eleanor shocked her. She, like Emma and Evelyn, had been so happy when Elizabeth had fallen in love with her Captain Singleton. Of course, they had taken it for granted that he would love her. Everyone loved Elizabeth. Who could not love such a sweet and kind and beautiful creature?

But now Eleanor feared that she would spoil Elizabeth's happiness with this loveless match she had made for herself, and with these silly notions that she had begun to indulge. She must get hold of herself, and simply stop daydreaming about Lord Staines as if he were some golden creature from a fairy story. She really must. She would be reasonable about this, and she would think up a nice, reasonable request. Maybe she would ask for that stable, as Evelyn had advised.

"Just promise me one thing, Ellie," Elizabeth said, her voice unusually firm.

Eleanor looked up. "I will if I can."

"Please, make certain that you ask him for something you honestly do want. I cannot imagine that any man would care to find out his gift is not truly valued."

Blinking, Eleanor stared at her sister. She had not thought of this, but she saw at once that Elizabeth was exactly right. She could picture Lord Staines's eyes icing over if she trivialize her demand by asking for something inane—such as a stable. He would find out, too, if she asked for something that did not really matter to her. He was not a stupid man, and she was all too transparent with her emotions.

Eleanor looked down at the newspaper in her hands. She wet her lips, pulled together her courage, and asked, "Do you think, then, that I should ask him for his..."

A knock on the door interrupted, and their mother swept in, all bustling smiles. "There you are. Emma said you were hiding up here. But you must hurry and change for we are to go out. And, Eleanor, you cannot wear that old gown. You must change quickly into that new, fawn dress of yours."

"Change? But why? Where are we going?" Eleanor asked as her mother shepherded them out of the nursery. She glanced at Elizabeth, who could only stare back, a helpless sympathy in her eyes. Eleanor looked back at her mother.

Lady Rushton's smile took on a set look, and a chill shivered inside Eleanor. That look always foretold something that was for the girls' best interest—whether they liked it or not.

Her mother said, "Lord Staines has come to escort us shopping. And we must do our best to please him, and make him realize what a wonderful treasure he has gotten in our dear Eleanor."

Eleanor smiled weakly. She disliked shopping. All those choices. All those opportunities to choose wrong. And now she would have to make all those mistakes that she always made about selecting too strong a color and too garish a design under Lord Staines's all-too-uncomfortable stare.

* * *

"My God, I hope that child's not the one you're marrying. She looks an utter handful."

Geoff glanced over to the entrance of Lady Rushton's drawing room. He and Patrick stood near the fireplace at the far end of the room, and Patrick had spoken low enough so as not to have been heard by the girl who had just danced into the room, bobbed a curtsy and then darted out again with a giggle.

"That's not her," Geoff said, fretting his watch fob with his fingers. His cravat seemed ready to strangle him, and he wished that he had not thought of this idea to go shopping. With November now gone, however, and the days shortening to Christmas, it seemed an ideal way both to amuse the Glovers before they left London for Westerley, and to gain a better idea of Eleanor's about that damn card by observing her tastes.

Patrick had offered to come along.

A simple shopping expedition had now become an outing that included Patrick, Lady Rushton, and two more of the Glover daughters. They would need a bloody wagon to haul them about if anyone else joined the fray. To add the final delight to the day, the windows showed a view of gathering clouds that hung low and heavy over London.

Rain and a parcel of chattering women. Just lovely.

The door opened again, and this time three young ladies came in with Lady Rushton. Geoff assumed that the child they had glimpsed must have been banished for her impertinence in showing herself. She had certainly been far too young to be seen outside the schoolroom.

As the ladies came forward, Geoff leaned closer to his brother. "Mine's the one in fawn. The invisible one."

Patrick glanced at him, eyebrows raised, but Lady Rushton was upon them and introducing her offspring to Patrick.

Recognizing the tallest of the three as Miss Glover, Geoff studied the girl. Classically beautiful, he could admire her fine-spun golden-brown hair, her delicate features and her green eyes with dispassionate interest. In the other times he had met her, she had struck him as a sweet enough girl, a lady who would never trouble any man overmuch.

Her sister, Emma, seemed a different proposition.

Clad in blue to match her eyes, Emma Glover came forward to make her curtsy, confident and smiling, her chin up and her assessing stare almost too bold. Pretty chit, Geoff judged, with an eye honed by his recent months of indulgence with the female form. All curves and mischievous smiles. He liked her at once for that pert stare of hers—the one that measured him up and almost dared him not to be good enough for her sister. But she was no more in his style than were her sisters, really. He had always preferred fair women. Fair and charming.

Like Cynthia.

He tried to banish that ghost, and forced his attention back to these ladies, to his sensible Miss Eleanor, and to Lady Rushton who was still rattling on, sounding too anxious to please.

Devil take her, what is she so worried about, Geoff wondered? Emma's possible misbehavior? Eleanor's being too withdrawn?

Geoff made the ladies known to his brother, and some imp prompted him to ask, just to see what Lady Rushton would say, "But did we not see one more Glover daughter a moment ago? Are we to be denied her acquaintance?"

Flustered, Lady Rushton forced a stilted laugh. "Dear Evelyn. She so wanted to meet you, which is why she came in to see you, but she has her studies to finish."

A smile twitched at Geoff's lips, and he wondered if "Dear Evelyn" was now studying decorum, and writing a hundred times, "I will not introduce myself to gentlemen."

Lady Rushton went on with shopping plans, all the while seeking Geoff's approval for every possibility. The beginnings of boredom nibbled at him. It would be a dull afternoon if Lady Rushton was intent on treating him with all the awkward deference due his station.

The unpleasant sensation flashed through him that the woman's careful treatment of him smacked of his being a prize trout about to be netted. Immediately, an image of Lady Rushton hip deep in water, a net in one hand and a pole in the other, flashed into his mind. His lips twitched and he cleared his throat to cover his smile. Awareness of being watched feathered across the back of his neck and he glanced to his right.

Eleanor's stare fell to the floor as soon as his gaze caught hers. He watched her, willing her to look up, wondering if she had caught his smile and what she made of it.

And he could have sworn that the faintest answering smile teased her lips. Had the same thought crossed her mind? Or did she hug some other secret amusement close to her?

Before he could move next to her to ask, Miss Glover—Elizabeth—came forward to make small talk with him, and Emma Glover paired up with Patrick, and the ill-assorted group gradually meandered to the front doors and the carriages.

With six in the party, two carriages had to be taken. Geoff sent Patrick to sit with Lady Rushton and young Emma in the Glover's closed carriage. He took up Eleanor and her older sister, Miss Glover, in his town coach.

After handing Miss Glover up the steps, he turned to offer his assistance to Eleanor. She took his hand and hesitated. Looking up into his face, she said, "It is very good of you to give up your pleasure for us."

"Oh, this is my pleasure," he corrected, the polite nothing slipping out in an automatic response. It was the sort of nonsense one spouted to ladies. He had learned that much over the past few months in London.

She eyed him, her expression serious, and shook her head. "I doubt you shall believe that in another hour."

Stepping up into the carriage, she left him frowning at her and irritated. Devil take her! Either she said nothing, or her words came out too blunt. And what did she think him, anyway? An oaf with no polish? He had been shopping with ladies before—some of them respectable, most of them not. He knew how to admire their selections, praise their taste, and weave some pleasant flirtation into the process.

But she acted as if they were all headed for imprisonment in the Tower.

Devil take it, but it could not be all that bad to squire four women about a few shops for a few hours. And he vowed to himself to make it so.

The rain held off as they toured Mr. Wedgwood's showrooms in York Street, St. James's Square. But Lady Rushton had obviously given firm instructions to her daughters on their behavior. All of them, even the saucy-eyed Emma, acted like automatons of virtue. They spoke only when spoken to. They kept their observations to the worries over the worsening weather, which had now added a cold bite to the December wind. And in all matters, they deferred to his taste.

If he admired a vase in Wedgwood blue, Eleanor found it lovely. If he looked at a set of teacups, Lady Rushton said at once that Eleanor must have them, and Eleanor dutifully agreed. Some demon tempted him to admire something vastly hideous, but he held back, for those choices he knew would end up shortly enough at Westerley and he dared not risk it.

With the sky darkening, they went onto Charles Blyde, cabinet-maker and upholster. And Geoff thought with an inner sigh that it really was too bad that it was not flooding, so that he would have an excellent excuse to end this day.

But he was, he vowed to himself, enjoying it.

At Blyde's, Eleanor ordered a writing desk. Or, that is, Geoff watched as her mother ferreted out his tastes and chose something to match his preferences for her daughter.

He began to worry that his bride had no will or thoughts of her own. And he could not help but compare her to Cynthia.

Cynthia would have found a way to tease him out of his dark mood. She would have made fun of his taste, and would have chosen for herself with that impeccable sense of style he had seen in her since her family had first moved to the village at Westerley. What had she been? Eleven? No, twelve. That was right. He had been sixteen and just about to go off to Oxford, and he'd been heart-struck at once by her wheat-golden hair and her bright silver-gray eyes and sprite-like figure. She had grown up during the years, but she had never lost that sense of girlish, fey charm.

"What do you think? Will this rain hold off for one more hour?"

He glanced around to realize that they now stood outside of Mr. Blyde's shop and that Patrick had addressed him.

He blushed at his own poor manners in drifting off to another world—a world both past him, and a future forever lost. It had been his own fault that he had lost it. And now, here he was punishing Lady Rushton and her daughters with his lack of attention.

Forcing a smile, he decided he would make amends to them. He glanced up, measuring the sky. The darkening clouds had not yet deepened to the black that boded a soaking rain. "I think we might at least manage a stop at Schomberg House for refreshments. Some tea or chocolate?"

Patrick stared at him, surprise rising on his face, but Emma's expression at once lit up and even the quiet Elizabeth said, "Oh, yes. Please, Mother, may we?"

Lady Rushton hesitated before she said, "Well, I suppose it would indeed be a nice treat."

Eleanor said nothing, Geoff noticed. But no one else seemed to pay any heed to that.

It was but a few minutes' drive to Schomberg House, a handsome, four-story mansion, built for the Duke of Schomberg in the late sixteen hundreds, but now converted into shops that offered small furniture, drapery hangings, and refreshments to those worn out by their efforts in spending money.

Eleanor looked about her, hanging back a little from the others as they entered and mounted the staircase. She had not visited here before, but she knew from reading her London guidebooks that Thomas Gainsborough had lived and painted here until 1788. That such a famous artist had occupied the house awed Eleanor, and she stared about her, wondering what he had found to inspire him to greatness.

A deep voice pulled her out of her thoughts. "Miss Eleanor?"

She glanced up into Lord Staines's handsome face. Expecting to see a frown, relief eased into her when she saw that a smile softened his mouth instead.

He gestured to the baroque grandeur, the gilt and carved wood. "Are you lost in admiration?"

"Actually, I was wondering if grand rooms inspire grand thoughts. Or do they too often instead inspire grand ambitions, and grand arrogance?"

He cocked his head and his eyes took on a sparkle. "I was about to say we have even more impressive stairs at Westerley, but now I fear I would be inviting comparison to arrogance or

ambition."

Her face heated. "I did not mean...that is, I should have known you would have at least one house this grand."

Still smiling, he seemed not at all inclined to take her words amiss. "I have many more, and I can assure you that the ambition they tend to inspire is to keep them all well-roofed and managed. And the arrogance is tempered by the rest of the world's inability to conform with one's wishes."

Stopping at the top of the stairs, she regarded him. He had spoken with a light and teasing tone, but there was that look in his eyes again. That deeply wounded and defensive look. What was it that he had wished for that had not come to him?

He glanced at her, puzzled, that wounded look vanishing from his eyes. He offered his arm to lead her into the room on the second floor where the proprietors served tea, sweetmeats, wine and coffee.

"Come," he said, "Let me find you a seat near the windows. There is a fine view of St. James's Park, and out to the Surrey Hills as well, but I doubt we'll see so far today given the weather."

A little shy of him, she put her hand on his arm. He led her forward, talking about the quality of the refreshments to be had and offering stories about the room, which had once served as the breakfast room of the house. He seemed to be going out of his way to be pleasant, and she began to relax a little.

At the table, Emma was chattering, talking about all they had seen and bought, and she quizzed Elizabeth and Lord Staines's brother on what had been the best bargain of the day. And Lady Rushton soon engaged Lord Staines in a discussion of the upcoming wedding and the invitations to be sent.

Eleanor had nothing to add to any of this. She smiled as Lord Staines ordered her tea. And she sat there, staring out the window, onto the dampening street.

Once, Emma asked about the tea set Eleanor had bought, if she did not indeed prefer the other pattern of strawberry leaves. Unable to even remember what had been picked out, Eleanor merely smiled, said she was content, and went back to staring out the window.

Fat rain drops had started to fall against the panes and onto the street below. The park lay empty, its trees already barren of leaves. And just down the way, Eleanor glimpsed a donkey-cart being loaded.

She could just make out the forlorn figure of the gray donkey, its ears flattened back and its head low. As she watched, the goods piled higher and higher in the cart behind the small donkey.

The poor thing will never pull all that, she thought, anxiety tightening inside her as if someone had asked her to carry that load herself.

The cart's owner came forward, a ragged, thin man with a black, wide-brimmed hat pulled low against the wet. He tugged on the donkey's reins. The donkey strained forward in its harness, and stopped. And the man's arm rose and fell, and Eleanor flinched as if she had heard the whip crack next to her.

She looked away from the window.

Lord Staines had that bored look on his face, but her mother held his full attention with details of guests to be invited for the wedding—which was set for Christmas Eve—and how to keep the list reasonable. Lord Staines's brother—Mr. Westerley—held both Emma and Elizabeth spellbound with stories about the recent political upheavals, which included the facts behind Lord Castlereagh's duel with George Canning, and tales of the late Duke of Portland, the former

Prime Minister, falling asleep as he read over state papers with his Cabinet.

Eleanor's stare wandered back to the scene outside the window. She did not care about duels and Prime Ministers—alive or dead. But she did care for those poor creatures who suffered in silence, and who could not defend themselves.

The donkey was still there, struggling with its impossible load.

Forcing her gaze away, she told herself that she could not help. Besides, it would be rude to leave. And it was really none of her business.

She sat staring into her half-empty tea cup, but she could not still the tears of her heart.

Very quietly she said, "Pardon me a moment." No one seemed to notice as she rose and stole out from the room.

What she missed seeing as she fled, however, was Lord Staines glancing up, sighting her empty chair and starting to look for her.

[Buy on Amazon Kindle](#)

[Buy on Barnes & Noble Nook](#)

[Buy at Smashwords for Sony eReader, iPad, or other ebook Formats](#)

For other novels by Shannon Donnelly visit www.sd-writer.com