



Scoundrel at First Sight (Love at First Sight #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: It's opposites attract and sweet sparks galore in *Scoundrel at First Sight*, the 2nd standalone short story in a brand new series by best-selling author Jillian Eaton! Like a perfectly poured latte with a heart on top, a hug from your favorite person, or a fudge brownie still warm from the oven, these adorable romances are meant to be enjoyed in one sitting and leave you smiling for days afterward.

As the youngest and wildest of the Duke of Abercorn's three daughters, Olivia has been given a single directive for her family's annual summer house party: find a husband.

Olivia, of course, has other priorities.

Like protecting her beloved family of foxes from him.

The seethingly arrogant American who arrives with a rifle in one hand and a bottle of Kentucky bourbon in the other.

Hoyt Culpepper didn't travel across the Atlantic to find a wife.

The only thing he has on his mind is business and maybe a little English foxhunting.

He certainly didn't plan on a sharp-tongued redhead brandishing a sword! Olivia isn't the vixen he set out hunting for...

but if love at first sight has anything to do with it, maybe she's the one he was meant to find.

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Part I

“ Summer has filled her veins with light and her heart is washed with noon.”

~ Anglo-Irish poet Cecil Day-Lewis

In hindsight, it was the stairs’ fault. Had they not creaked when they did, Olivia would have likely been able to sneak out the front door without anyone - especially her mother - being the wiser.

But it had been a wet spring, followed by two months of dry summer heat, and on that momentous morning in August, the third step from the bottom gave a loud, betraying groan when she lightly pressed her bare toes upon it.

Clenching her jaw at the sound, Olivia froze, praying no one had noticed, and she could either make a mad dash for the door or retreat to the attic for the entirety of her parent’s annual house party, an exhausting three-week event filled with dinners, socializing, and pianoforte recitals.

So many pianoforte recitals.

An absurd amount, really.

If she could just quietly - but no, it was too late.

She had been seen.

“ There you are,” the Duchess of Abercorn exclaimed, her blue eyes - shared by her two oldest daughters, Jane and Bethany, but not Olivia, who had inherited her father’s green - lighting with a combination of relief and consternation.

Relief and consternation.

That was Olivia in a nutshell.

To start, she’d been born a month before the midwife told the duchess to expect her. Tiny, pink, and squalling, her arrival in the middle of a blizzard had sent the entire household into an uproar.

Then, when she was seven, she fell out of a tree in front of their Grosvenor Square manor and broke her arm... the day before Jane was to be presented to the royal court.

At the grand age of ten, she announced to anyone who would listen that she was taking her pony - Muffins - and they were running away to join a traveling circus or a gypsy caravan or a herd of elephants.

She hadn’t quite figured out the exact details.

All she did know was that she didn’t fit in.

Not with her perfect, graceful mother. Not with her polished, beautiful sisters.

So she’d packed up a satchel with extra carrots for her best friend in the whole world and made it all the way to the Fernhill Estate three miles down the road before Muffins unceremoniously dumped her in a puddle and trotted back to his best friends - May and Martha, two palomino mares - as fast as his little legs would carry him.

Their relationship was never the same after that.

When Olivia had returned home - wet, hungry, and smelling of horse - her mother was wearing a strikingly similar expression to the one she had now.

Relief that her youngest daughter wasn't hurt or worse.

Followed by consternation that she'd had to worry in the first place.

But such was the bane of having a willful child.

A child that had always struggled to follow the rules that came so naturally to her other two daughters.

A child that detested dance lessons, sneered at anything to do with stitching, and would rather romp in a field filled with wildflowers than waltz through a ballroom filled with eligible bachelors.

"Olivia," the Duchess of Abercorn began in a rather ominous tone that her youngest daughter recognized all too well. "You weren't sneaking out of the house before our guests' arrival, were you?"

"No." Olivia crossed her fingers behind her back. "Of course not."

"That's good, because your presence will be expected in the receiving line. After that, we're having tea on the front lawn followed by-"

"Jane's pianoforte recital in the music room," Olivia sighed. "I read the itinerary, Mother. Just as you requested."

The duchess's brow rose as her gaze traveled from her daughter's auburn curls,

sloppily pinned to the top of her head, all the way down to her bare toes peeking out beneath the hem of an old morning dress with grass stains at the knees.

“I seem to recall also requesting that you make yourself presentable. This is not just a house party, Olivia. It is an opportunity. The best opportunity you will have all summer to find a husband.”

“I’d rather go looking for toads behind the garden shed,” she mumbled.

“I know you would,” said the duchess, not unkindly. “But that is a child’s errand, my dear. And you are no longer a child, but a young woman. A young woman whom I should like to see happily settled with a family of her own.”

“Bethany isn’t married,” Olivia quickly pointed out.

“Bethany is engaged to be wed to Lord Markhaven, as you are well aware. Whereas you have rejected every single suitor that has made an attempt to court you.” The duchess pinched the bridge of her nose. “England’s list of eligible bachelors is not endless.”

Was it not?

Because it seemed that way to Olivia.

By her twentieth birthday in March, she’d had a seemingly infinite number of men paraded in front of her.

Earls, viscounts, barons. Even a duke or two.

Then a most terrible thing had happened.

Lady Annalise Buttercream, a wallflower if ever there was one, had been swept off her feet by the Duke of Tennyson, and the entire ton had lost its collective mind.

Including Olivia's mother.

Because if Lady Annalise, a shy recluse with nary a prospect in sight, could become betrothed to the notoriously debaucherous Duke of Tennyson, well, what was to prevent Lady Olivia from doing the same?

"I... forgot something in the stables," she said, crossing her fingers even more tightly together as she side-stepped her mother.

"Olivia," the duchess began in a low, warning tone.

"Olivia, don't you dare – blast it all!" As the front door slammed shut behind her most willful daughter, her shoulders momentarily slumped in defeat...

then rose with determination. She would find Olivia a husband if it killed her, which it very much could at the rate things were going.

Not because she wanted her youngest out of the house.

Oh, how she had cried when Jane left! And how she would cry when Bethany did the same.

Quiet tears that only her devoted husband had been privy to.

But because she wanted her daughter to find love, joy, and happiness in a partner who would lift her wings instead of wishing to clip them.

In a life rich beyond measure with all of the gowns, carriages, and jewels that a

fortune could buy, the duchess had discovered long ago that her most important treasure of all was the relationship she shared with her beloved Albert.

A man who had stood beside her in both troubled waters and calm.

A man who had held her hand as she'd brought each of their three children into the world.

A man who had slept beside her every single night since they'd said their vows some thirty years ago, neither of them without any concept yet of what true love was.

The sacrifices it would demand of them.

And the blessings it would bring.

How could she not wish the same for her daughters?

The same sense of fulfillment.

Of contentment.

Of peace in knowing that she loved and was loved in return.

Jane had found her husband when she was a young girl.

She and Thomas had grown up together, and it was only natural that they would marry when they'd never had eyes for another living soul.

Bethany had taken a bit longer. A year and six months to be precise, but Jacob had been consistent in his devotion, and he'd won her middle daughter's hand eventually.

Which left Olivia.

Wild, willful, stubborn Olivia.

Not her favorite - as a general rule, mothers were not allowed to choose those - but the one she thought about the most. She worried about the most. She prayed for the most. If Olivia truly never wanted to marry, and instead live out her days running barefoot through fields of flowers, than the duchess wouldn't stop her.

But she knew, she felt in her very heart, that if Olivia found find a man worthy of her, she would love more fiercely than both her sisters combined.

All the duchess had to do was find that man.

A task easier said than done.

Hoyt Culpepper was everything that the British nobility hated about Americans.

And that was just fine with him, thank you very much.

He was loud.

He spoke his mind.

He was, on occasion, crass.

He drank Kentucky bourbon.

He smoked Connecticut cigars.

He wore what he wanted.

He ate what he hunted.

But his most terrible sin was also the most unforgivable.

He was rich.

Filthy, stinking rich.

The worst part of all?

He hadn't inherited a penny of it.

He'd earned it.

Every damned dollar.

Off the sweat of his brow and the brains in his head, he'd amassed a fortune in property, businesses, and financial positions that expanded from the coast of California to Maryland's eastern shore.

Now he had his steely gaze fixed on England.

In particular, a small, seemingly inconsequential railway that cut across the countryside.

A railway with a depot station only half a day's ride from where he would be spending the next two weeks by invitation of the Duke and Duchess of Abercorn.

When the pearly white envelope sealed with a perfect circle of ruby red wax was

hand delivered to him at the top story of the hotel he'd leased out for the better part of the summer, Hoyt's initial reaction was that of exasperated amusement before he'd tossed it onto a mounting pile of similar envelopes and correspondence.

Ever since news of his arrival in London had broken, he had been receiving any untold number of invitations to any manner of events.

Balls, plays, operas. Even a pianoforte recital, whatever the hell that was.

With his mind on business, he'd had his secretary politely decline each and every one...

until it was brought to his attention that the Duke of Abercorn's country estate was right next to the railway he planned to acquire.

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As much as he loathed doing it, Hoyt understood the value of rubbing elbows with the right people.

And so he'd nearly made his secretary topple over sideways when he'd told the short, thin man with a mustache wider than his head that he would formally accept the Duke and Duchess's invitation to their Annual Summer House Gala.

Whatever the hell that was.

But two weeks later, as his carriage made its way up a winding drive guarded by towering oak trees and stopped behind a long line of other carriages in front of a stately stone manor with a trio of fountains spraying arcs of water into a clear blue sky and white tents set up across a meticulously landscaped lawn - were those swans waddling around?

- Hoyt began to gather just what an English house gala might entail.

And when his boot heels crunched onto freshly raked oyster stone and a servant instantly materialized with a flute of champagne, he had a brief, albeit fleeting thought that he'd made a very rare miscalculation in confirming his attendance.

Over brief periods of time, he could curb his...

rougher mannerisms... and conduct himself with an air of proprietary that would make a dowager duchess smile.

But any longer than a few hours stuffed inside a waistcoat with a cravat choking him,

and he began to feel a bit ornery.

Like a mule, his mother used to say with affection as she'd tousled his dark hair.

But what did mules do when they were aggravated or pushed beyond what they deemed acceptable limits?

They kicked.

Hard.

Taking a sip of his champagne - a refreshing drink on what was promising to be a hot summer's day - he resigned himself to mingling with the growing crowd of aristocrats under the tents. Until, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a flash of movement. A flicker, really.

It could have been a breeze blowing through the trees. Or sunlight reflecting off a carriage. Or one of the sheep grazing in a nearby field. It could have been any manner of small, inconsequential things. Things that were glanced at and then forgotten.

Except there was nothing about the redhead darting under a brick archway and then disappearing from sight that was forgettable.

Utterly bemused, Hoyt took a quick look around to see if anyone else had witnessed the garden fairy in a blue dress with auburn curls streaming down her back. If they had, they were nonplussed about it. While he found himself quite intrigued.

Setting his champagne glass down on the tray of a passing servant, he cut across the lawn.

There was a wall covered in climbing ivy on either side of the archway and a hedge

maze beyond it, the shrubbery nearly as tall as he was.

Presented with a choice to turn left or right, he instinctively picked the latter, his long strides and excellent sense of direction making rapid work of a labyrinth that was likely intended to provide an hour's worth of idle amusement.

The sun warmed the nape of his neck and the heavy floral scent of honeysuckle invaded his nostrils as he followed a path that was worn slightly more than the rest. A glimpse of blue increased his pace; a teasing hint that it wasn't his imagination that had lured him into the thicket of green but a real flesh and blood woman with curls the color of firelight.

Unlike a maze that challenged its quarry to enter at one end and find a way out at the other, a labyrinth was designed to end in the center. And when he finally found the center - far more quickly than he was meant to and not nearly as fast as he would have liked - Hoyt found her .

Like a picture from a fairytale, she sat in a pool of glimmering light on bench made of white marble.

Her silhouette was long and slender. Her wild mane far more glorious up close than far away.

She had her back to him, but her shoulders stiffened when she heard him approach, and her chin turned, offering him a view of her profile.

All angles and creamy skin with a spattering of freckles across arching cheekbones.

“Are you chasing me?” Her voice was as melodious as a babbling brook rushing over smooth rocks, and Hoyt, who had never fancied himself much of a romantic, found he was intrigued. With her sound. With her beauty. With her mystery.

Her clothing was simple, her skirts slightly rumpled and stained with streaks of green.

That, combined with her feckless attention to her hair, gave him reason to assume she was a servant shirking her duties or a local villager's daughter that had wanted a peek at how the wealthy lived.

Not that it mattered to Hoyt. The British were the ones who placed such enormous importance on bloodlines and titles, whereas he couldn't care less if someone was a baron or a blacksmith.

It was almost better that his fairy wasn't of blue blood, because when he asked her to marry him - and he was going to ask her, his mind was already made up - her family wouldn't have cause to object to the union due to his humble beginnings.

"Should I be chasing you?" he drawled, removing his hat and skimming his blunt fingernails along the edge of his jaw where a day's worth of stubble grew in a dark sweep of shadow.

"That depends," she said seriously.

"On what?"

"On whether you intend to catch me."

The corner of his mouth quirked upward. "I was under the impression I already had."

"Oh, no." Amusement glinted in brilliant green eyes framed with thick, luxurious lashes when she turned to face him, revealing her full countenance.

Bold brows a shade lighter than all those coppery curls.

A delicate nose that tilted ever-so-slightly at the end.

A rounded chin that lent itself to stubbornness.

And her mouth . Good Lord. Pink and plump and topped with a cupid's bow, it was the most glorious thing he'd ever beheld.

If they were in a church, he would have married her right then and there.

A bold proclamation for a man who had never been in love.

But neither had his father until he laid eyes on his mother.

Or his grandfather.

Or his great-grandfather.

Culpepper men didn't fall easily... but when they did, the entire forest shook.

"You've found me, Lord..."

"Culpepper." Fascinated by the flecks of gold shining in her irises, he took a step closer, inadvertently crushing his hat in his hands as heat thrummed through his body.

"Mr. Hoyt Culpepper."

"Mr. Culpepper." Those heavy lashes skimmed across the top of her cheeks, then coyly lifted. "But you haven't caught me. You're not even close. Because I've no patience for arrogant men who take it upon themselves to follow women into solitary places and disturb their quiet."

Had he likened her voice to a babbling brook?

More like an ocean crashing against the shore.

And he was the shore.

“Ah, I believe you’re mistaken,” he said, blessing her with his most charming grin.

A grin that had made a debutante swoon two days ago when he’d accidentally deployed it in the hotel’s crowded foyer.

“I can assure you it was not my intention to disturb your quiet. I merely thought you might like some company.”

Her brows arched as she rose to her feet and put her hands on her hips. “And what made you think that, Mr. Culpepper?”

“Well,” he began, but she cut him short with a sharp laugh.

“What is it about certain men that makes them believe they can go wherever they like and talk to whomever they please? If you were not blinded by your arrogance and self-importance, you would be able to clearly see that I came here to be alone. Yet here you are. Assuming that somehow it is your company I seek, even though we’ve never met before. ”

“We’re meeting now,” he pointed out.

“No, Mr. Culpepper. I’m leaving now. Please do not follow me.”

As she sailed past him with her stubborn child held high, Hoyt belatedly realized that he’d made an egregious error. Not in following her here. That he didn’t regret in the slightest, even though she was right. It had been presumptuous of him. No, his mistake had been in comparing her to a fairy.

Fairies were dainty, ethereal beings.

This woman was a vixen. A vixen with sharp teeth and even sharper claws that she was clearly used to sinking into people.

Men in particular.

But while she had scratched him, he wasn't deterred.

He was completely, utterly, and irrevocably captivated.

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Part II

“ W hatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same.”

~ Emily Bronte, English novelist and poet

The nerve of some men.

No, Olivia corrected silently as she stuffed her foot into a dancing slipper and yanked the silk ribbon around her ankle, not some men.

Just one.

Hoyt Culpepper.

She didn't recall her mother mentioning that an American would be in attendance at this year's house party. To the best of her knowledge, her parents had no affiliations, personal or otherwise, with any Yankees.

Yet here he was.

Six feet of brawny muscle, black hair pushed back from an annoyingly striking face, and breathtaking swagger.

She'd judged him to be around her age, mayhap a few years older.

The emerald green waistcoat that had hugged his broad shoulders and fell in a straight

line away from his waist revealed that he had an excellent tailor, and thus likely had money.

She may not have paid as much attention to fashion as her two sisters, but even she knew the difference between gold buttons and tin.

The way he'd worn his pomposity like a well-fitted glove had also been revealing.

Hoyt was obviously a man accustomed to women throwing themselves at him, and his flabbergasted expression when she'd done the exact opposite had almost - almost - made up for him ferreting out one of her best hiding spots.

Because of him, she'd have to find somewhere else to conceal herself after she made a brief appearance at Jane's recital.

Her mother had stationed a scullery maid at the entrance to the attic stairwell, so that was out unless she wanted to attempt to scale a four-story trellis.

So was the garden shed and the stables. The Duchess of Abercorn had eyes everywhere, and they'd all been told to immediately report any sightings of her wayward daughter.

Leaving Olivia with a limited number of places to hide, especially given the sheer size of the manor and surrounding estate.

The labyrinth had been a stroke of sheer genius.

It was so obvious that her mother never would have looked for her in there.

But then he'd followed her.

Stalking her to ground as if he were a hound and she one of her beloved foxes.

The nerve!

Sitting up, Olivia cast her appearance a withering glance in the mirror propped against her dressing table before she sprang to her feet and hurried out of her room.

After being late for the receiving line and skipping the tea party altogether, she knew she was already running the risk of straining her mother's patience beyond its tolerable limits.

The duchess was an understanding woman, but she wasn't without her temper.

After all, that was who Olivia had gotten hers from.

Scratching her scalp where her lady's maid had jammed in a series of pins in a desperate attempt to tame her defiant curls into something vaguely resembling a coiffure, she fell into line with the rest of the guests making their way toward the music room, an elegant space in soft blues with matching armchairs lined up in neat, orderly rows facing a raised dais where Jane was already seated in preparation for her performance.

She made sure to catch her mother's stare before melting into the second-to-last line of chairs, choosing the one closest to the doorway to expedite a silent retreat after the first musical number was over.

At the same time, the majority of the crowd, including her family, flocked to the front seats.

With one notable exception.

“Pardon me, my lady,” a familiar male voice drawled and Olivia caught her breath on a hiss of incredulity as Hoyt Culpepper slid in front of her and then sat directly beside her, completely ignoring the empty row to his left.

Stretching his legs out in front of him and lacing his fingers together over the flat plane of his abdomen, he shuttered his gaze. “Let me know when I should applaud.”

“You’re not even going to watch? ” she said, conveniently forgetting the fact that she’d had her exit planned since before she’d even entered the music room.

“It’s a recital,” he said without opening his eyes. “I believe you’re supposed to listen.”

“You’re supposed to pay attention,” she snapped.

The edge of his mouth curled in a smirk. “Oh really? Is that why you’re all the way back here?”

“Where I’m sitting is none of your concern.”

“It’s not? Because you seem awfully concerned about - you .” Finally, Hoyt cracked his eyes open and they momentarily went wide before narrowing to thin, suspicious slits of icy blue. “What are you doing here? Why are you dressed like that?”

“Like what?” she asked, ignoring a foreign twinge of self-consciousness as she grasped a handful of her skirts.

Her mother had selected the violet gown for her.

Never in a thousand years would she have chosen such a soft, frilly dress.

It had lace on it. She hated lace. She'd also hated sitting still while her lady's maid had gone at her hair with a pair of hot tongs and an army of pins.

Left to her own devices, she'd have made do with a plain braid and the pair of breeches she'd paid a stable boy for and kept hidden under bed lest her mother find them and burn them, as she'd done the last pair.

She even had a corset on. Although she preferred to call it what it really was: a torture device.

Meant to squeeze the air from a woman's lungs so that she couldn't contradict a man when he said something idiotic.

"Like the daughter of a duke." Hoyt twisted toward her, resting his elbow on the top rail of his chair. "This isn't what you were wearing this morning."

"People have a special ability you may not have heard about before. It's called changing their clothes."

His rich laugh turned a few heads from two rows in the front of them and created an odd fluttering in her belly.

Likely indigestion from the corset.

"Are you always this sarcastic?" he asked, grinning at her.

"Do you find me sarcastic? I've always been told that I am a delight." Pointedly, she turned her head to the stage. "Quiet, if you please. My sister is about to begin."

"Your sister?" The hand he'd placed on the back of his chair inched toward her own and she nearly jumped a foot in the air when his fingertips casually glided across her

exposed nape before settling on the rail of her chair.

“The program said the recital was being performed by the duke and duchess’s eldest daughter.”

He was too close, she thought crossly. Even worse, he smelled divine.

Like pinewood with an underlying hint of the soap used to clean leather.

And she hated that she’d noticed. Hated even more that she found his scent pleasing when she didn’t want to like anything about him.

Not his face, which was also quite pleasing.

Not the color of his eyes. Not the crease of a dimple that had flashed high on his right cheek when he’d chuckled.

Especially not his accent, with its flat vowels and husky undertones.

“Yes,” she said in a clipped tone, keeping her gaze pinned straight ahead. “My sister, Jane. The eldest. Tomorrow, Bethany, the middlest, will be performing an original song.” Her chin lifted a notch. “I am the youngest.”

“Then that would make you Lady Olivia.” The way he spoke her name - like a velvet caress - had her toes curling in her too-tight slippers. “Aren’t you full of surprises. And what talent will you be gracing us with, my lady?”

“Hopefully, the ability to make arrogant Americans disappear with the snap of my fingers,” she retorted, bringing her thumb and middle finger together. “Pity. I’ll have to work on it.”

He chuckled again, angling his head so that she felt his breath against her neck as he murmured, “Do you want to go practice somewhere else?”

Was this it, Olivia wondered as the edges of her vision grew hazy and the butterflies in her belly went mad.

The it that she’d heard other ladies, including her own sisters, giggle about behind open fans and closed doors.

The thing that made them act all sorts of peculiar, like when Bethany, who was terrified of heights, had snuck out her bedroom window to meet Thomas in the moonlight.

Or when her friend Elizabeth, otherwise sensible and of sound mind, had gone for a stroll with an earl and married him six months later.

Olivia wasn’t sure.

She’d never felt it before.

She’d never felt like this before.

Warm and flushed, almost as if she was about to come down with fever.

Except she wasn’t ill, she was tingly. From head to toe, her entire body was a mass of tiny little vibrations.

Every sound was louder than it should have been.

She could hear her own pulse roaring in her ears.

She could discern the thrum of her heartbeat.

And even though hair had no feeling at all, she could have sworn she felt Hoy's fingers gliding along the edge of a rebellious curl that had already escaped the confines of her coiffure.

"I..." Her throat was dry. She swallowed, then tried again. "I would very much like if you would leave me be so that I can give my full attention to my sister."

Hoyt's shrugged. "As you wish, my lady."

"Thank you." Pinching her lips together, Olivia stared unwaveringly at the stage where Jane was about to begin her first sonata.

And she tried. She really did. For the first piece, and even the second, she didn't look at Hoyt.

She didn't even breathe in his direction.

But she couldn't help but be aware of him. He was simply too large to ignore.

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By the third song, an exceedingly slow rendition of Mozart's Requiem in D Minor , she was all but squirming in her seat.

She simply wasn't designed to sit still for such a long period of time, and she definitely wasn't meant to sit next to him .

The American bane of her existence. But if she left, she feared he would follow her.

And if he followed her... if he followed her, she was very afraid of what might happen next.

When the recital finally reached its conclusion, Olivia was the first one out of her chair. She made a desperate lunge for the doorway, but - as was the case this morning - she wasn't quite quick enough to escape her mother's purview.

"Olivia!" called the duchess, and the crowd obediently parted to make way as she cut an elegant path from the front of the room to the back. "Olivia, darling, you're still here. What a lovely show of support for your sister."

"Yes," she said with a false sense of airiness. "You know me. Always happy to sit through a three-hour recital if it means being able to listen to Jane's remarkable musical talent. But now that it's over-"

"Mr. Culpepper." The duchess's gaze went over her shoulder as the corners of her eyes creased in a smile. "How nice to see you again. Have you been introduced to my third daughter, Lady Olivia?"

“Your Grace.” Hoyt’s flawlessly executed bow caused his thigh to brush against hers before he straightened, took her hand, and brushed his mouth across her gloved knuckles before she had the wherewithal to snatch it away.

“I had the immense pleasure of meeting your daughter this morning. She is an absolute delight.”

The duchess’s smile grew wider. “She is , isn’t she? I am so glad you both have already had the opportunity to make each other’s acquaintance. It will make dinner so much more enjoyable.”

“Why is that?” Olivia asked warily.

“I’m so glad you asked. We’re doing our seating chart a bit differently this year. Instead of changing each night, I’ve assigned everyone a partner. I will be next to your father, of course. Jane and Bethany will be beside their respective husband and fiancé.”

“And where will I be?”

“Why, beside Mr. Culpepper. Every dinner. For the next fourteen days.”

Hoyt had never seen someone choke on their own tongue before, but he had a feeling he was witnessing it now.

When Olivia’s mouth began to take on a distinctly blue hue he raised his hand, ready to slap her on the back, but to his relief - and amusement - she managed to clear her throat without assistance.

“What?” she sputtered, loud enough to gain them an audience of curious onlookers.
“That’s - that’s absurd. I cannot sit next to him .”

“Why not?” Duchess Abercorn queried.

“Yes, why not?” Hoyt echoed, sliding his hands into the side seam pockets of his trousers.

“Because...” Olivia’s eyes brewed green fire as they flashed between her mother and Hoyt. “Because he is intolerable!”

“Are you?” the duchess asked him, arching a brow.

He lifted a shoulder. “From time to time.”

“Excellent,” the duchess declared. “So is my daughter. I’m sure you’ll make a wonderful pair.”

“ Mother -”

“If you’ll excuse me, I have other guests to attend to.” As Olivia’s mother glided away, she turned on him with the ferocity of a lioness.

“I am not sitting next to you at dinner,” she hissed, grinding her heel into the floor.

He lifted his hands, palms facing outward in a gesture of feigned helplessness.

“I don’t know if anyone has ever told you this, my lady, but you’re not exactly fine company yourself.

Unfortunately, I’d hate to repay your mother’s wonderful hospitality by defying her

seating chart. Those are hard to organize, you know.”

Twin plumes of pink appeared in the middle of Olivia’s cheeks. “She’s doing this on purpose. A wonderful pair. She’s not even bothering to be subtle about it anymore.”

“Subtle about what?”

“Marrying me off to the first man that can stand the sight of me.”

“Marrying you off to the first man who... wait!” He fell in step behind his recalcitrant dinner partner as she sailed out of the music room on a huff of hot air, his gaze straying a bit further down than polite society would have deemed permissible. But how could he stop himself?

Olivia was beautiful was she was calm.

She was gorgeous when she was angry.

The color in her cheeks reminded him of a sunset and her eyes burned like emeralds set aflame.

For too long, he’d found himself surrounded by pale, prim princesses afraid to step outside lest they get a smudge of dirt on their perfect hemline and here Olivia was charging full bore for the front door, her glorious curls bouncing in her wake as every step loosened the pins trying to hold them in place.

A footman hastily opened the door and she sailed through it without breaking speed.

Hoyt tipped his head at the fellow, commending him for his quick reflexes, before he hastened his own stride so as not to lose sight of Olivia when she went around the side of the house and through a rose garden to a white gazebo.

“Better?” he asked, pausing with one foot on the top step and his arms braced on the supporting pillars.

“A bit,” she said, her bosom heaving from the exertion of her hasty exit from the manor as she leaned against the railing.

Once again, Hoyt’s gaze slipped further down that it should have.

“I can’t... I can’t breathe in a room like that.

Full of people staring, all of them silently questioning why I didn’t turn out like Jane or Bethany.

All of them feeling sorry for my mother and father.

Sorry for me , that I am the way that I am. ”

“I don’t feel sorry for you,” he said quietly, his eyes seeking her face. For the first time, he made himself look past the beauty. Past the anger. Past the stubbornness. All the way down to the dismay and the self-doubt.

How many others, he wondered, bothered to search that far?

From what little he’d observed thus far, it was clear that the Duke and Duchess of Abercorn adored all three of their daughters.

It was also equally clear that the eldest two were held in far higher regard by the ton than the youngest, and Olivia wasn’t oblivious - or immune - to High Society’s opinion of her.

No matter how much she pretended otherwise.

“That’s because you’re an arrogant American,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “You don’t feel sorry for anyone.”

“True,” he acknowledged. “Why do you think men cannot stand the sight of you? I find you breathtaking, myself. You’re the most stunning woman I’ve ever seen, Olivia. That is not a compliment. It’s a fact.”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “My hair is red .”

“Red so happens to be my favorite color.”

“I have freckles .”

“Gifts from a life lived in the sun.”

“My mouth is too small, like a bird.”

“Your mouth is perfect.”

She glanced downward. “I’m flat-chested.”

“Now that just isn’t true.” He entered the gazebo, approaching her as a he might a feral animal. With respect, wonder, and a healthy dose of caution. “Who told you all of these things?”

“Different people.”

“Different men?” A muscle ticked in his jaw when she gave a small nod. “Tell me their names and I’ll shoot them for you. I brought my Kentucky Long Rifle.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s not important.” She crossed her arms. “My point was that

every potential suitor my mother has tried to match me up with has gone running. Now there's no one left, and she's gotten desperate enough to go searching for my mythical future husband across the pond."

He scratched his chin. "Why do I have a feeling some of them ran off because you insulted them?"

"It's not my fault no one appreciates a woman who speaks her mind."

"There can be a fine line between speaking one's mind and disparaging them."

"I did try. I did ," she exclaimed at his skeptical glance.

"For the first half dozen, I was on my best behavior. But even my best wasn't good enough.

Even being the daughter of a duke wasn't good enough.

I always said something too political. Or I accidentally stomped on their foot during a minuet.

Or I spilled lemonade on their beloved grandmother's cat. "

"That last one is oddly specific."

Olivia sighed. "Both of my sisters have made excellent matches. I would have hoped my parents would be content with that, but it seems they won't be happy until all three of us are married off."

"Or they won't be happy until you're happy."

“I am happy,” she said defensively.

“Are you?”

“Yes.”

“Then prove it.” He reached out and traced his thumb along the delicate line of her jaw, then cupped her cheek. “If love, romance, and marriage genuinely hold no appeal for you, then don’t kiss me back.”

Her eyes darkened. “Who said I want you to kiss me at all?”

He lowered his head until his lips were a hair’s breadth above her own. “Tell me to stop,” he whispered huskily. “Tell me I’m terrible, and you want nothing to do with me, and I’ll stop right now and never bother you again. Tell me, Olivia.”

“I...” Her gaze dropped to his mouth. “I can’t.”

On a soft groan, Hoyt pressed his lips to hers.

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Part III

“ I love her and that’s the beginning and end of everything.”

~ American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald

Olivia had been kissed three times in her life.

The first was a dry peck that had reminded her of a chicken.

The second had been wet and sloppy, like being engulfed by a salmon.

And the third... the third didn’t feel like a kiss at all, because if the first two had been kisses by definition, then this was... this was something else entirely.

Hoyt’s mouth was shockingly tender as he gently passed his lips back and forth, encouraging her own to part so that he could deepen the kiss.

On a small moan, she sank helplessly into his embrace as if she were sinking into the pages of an excellent book.

A book that both thrilled her and warmed her heart.

A book that she already mourned finishing before she was halfway through.

A book that made her gasp with delight. A book so good that there were parts where she had to close the pages and then close her eyes to imprint the words upon her soul.

Hoyt's kiss was a book.

A book that she did not want to end.

"Olivia," he murmured, angling his head to trace a light line of kisses down her neck and then up again to her ear.

"Hmmm?" she said on a sigh.

"You kissed me back."

Had she?

Yes, she supposed that she had.

"You're still an arrogant American." She was holding his waistcoat, she realized dazedly.

Clutching the fabric in her fists as if the satin brocade was the only thing anchoring her to the ground.

She slowly opened her hands as Hoyt shifted his weight onto his heels, his expression almost unbearably smug.

"You kissed me back," he repeated.

When her fingers itched to brush an ebony swath of hair off his temple, she put her arms behind her and leaned against the railing, putting as much space between them as she could given he was standing right in front of her. A tall, towering scoundrel with a devil's grin and the mouth of an angel.

“This doesn’t change anything,” she said quickly, lest he get a wayward idea in that thick skull of his. “I still don’t like you.”

“That puts us in a predicament, doesn’t it?” he said, clasping his neck where his skin turned to bronze above the straight edge of his collar.

“Why is that?”

“Because while you profess not to like me, I confess that I’m falling in love with you.”

Olivia’s mouth, still tingling from the kiss, fell open. “Take that back this instant.”

The corner of his lips twisted in a lopsided smirk that would have been adorable if her heart wasn’t lodged in the base of her throat.

“I won’t.”

“You just met me this morning.”

“And in thirty years, when your exquisite red hair is beginning to shine with threads of silver, I’ll still be falling in love with you.” He touched her cheek. She swatted his hand away.

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not.”

“You are .”

“Olivia...” His blue eyes searched hers, drawing her into someplace she wasn’t sure

she wanted to go. "I'm not."

"If my mother put you up to this-"

"The only thing the Duchess of Abercorn did was extend an invitation to a summer house party that I am now infinitely glad that I accepted."

Her gaze darted to the side. She felt... she felt... well, she couldn't describe how she felt. Hot and cold, all at once. Happy - was this what her parents had wanted? - but also nervous. Excited and frightened.

If this was love, she didn't want anything to do with it.

"I have to go," she said, bolting past him down the gazebo steps.

"Olivia," he called after her. She could hear his grin. "I'll see you at dinner."

She did see Hoyt at dinner. That night, and seven consecutive nights after. During the day, he found all kinds of ways to annoy her.

He brought her flowers.

He read her poetry.

He went riding with her.

And when no one was looking, he kissed her.

She liked the last part.

She liked the last part very much.

But the rest... the rest she wasn't sure about.

Even though her mother was elated.

"Oh, Olivia," the duchess gushed on the ninth morning of the house party.

Yesterday it had rained, trapping everyone inside.

But today had dawned bright and beautiful, with a clear blue sky that matched Hoyt's eyes and a light breeze that stirred the downy curls on Olivia's nape as she stood on her mother's balcony overlooking the stables.

"Mr. Culpepper is just wonderful, isn't he?

So very polite and attentive. The bouquet of flowers he brought you were lovely. Dahlias. Your favorite."

"I like them better when they're growing in the ground instead of slowly dying in a vase," she grumbled under her breath, and even to her own ears her words sounded catty and ill-mannered. "Yes, you're right. They're beautiful."

And she did love waking up to them beside her bed every day. The colorful pink and yellow blooms were the first thing she looked at when she woke and the last thing she saw before she went to bed. But just because she loved the flowers Hoyt had picked for her didn't mean that she loved him .

Did she?

Honestly, she wasn't sure anymore.

“How did you know?” she asked suddenly.

“Know what, dear?”

“That you and father were meant to be together.”

“What an excellent question.” The duchess smiled. “I’m glad that you thought to ask it.”

“It doesn’t mean anything. I’m merely... curious.”

“Of course. You always were a curious child.”

“Mother—”

“I didn’t know. Not at first. Not for a while, actually.

I’m sure that when I am old, counting what remains of my life in months instead of years, I will regret those weeks that I wasted being afraid to fall in love with a good man that was already in love with me.

But,” she said, making a clucking sound with her tongue, “you cannot change the past. You can only learn from it, and hope that it’s given you enough wisdom to guide your children in a better direction. Oh look, there they are!”

“Who?” Olivia asked, following the direction of her mother’s finger as the duchess pointed toward the courtyard in front of the stables.

She saw a dozen men, all on horseback with Hoyt among them, his muscular frame easily distinguishable from the rest atop a large black gelding.

The edges of her mouth turned downward in a small frown when she noted he was carrying a long brown cylinder over his shoulder.

From this distance, it almost looked like a—

“The hunting party,” said the duchess, raising her voice to be heard above the loud baying of brown and white speckled hounds as they came cresting over a nearby hill, following a rider in a scarlet jacket with a gold horn pressed to his mouth. “Now Olivia, before you become upset—”

“My foxes!” she cried, her heart turning to ice inside her chest. “They’re going to kill my foxes!”

“Foxhunting is a time honored tradition that the gentlemen look forward to every summer, including your father. I’m sorry you don’t agree with it, but—”

Olivia didn’t hear the rest of the sentence.

She was already running out the door.

As a general rule, Hoyt was in favor of hunting.

When it had a purpose.

Using grown men on horseback with rifles and twenty four hounds to run down and kill one single fox didn’t seem very sporting to him, but as it seemed to be of particular importance to two lords whose parcels he needed to purchase in order to advantage his railroad, he was amenable to the proposition.

Until he learned how long it would take.

“Seven hours?” he scowled, gathering his reins and spurring his horse into a medium canter that kept him steady with Lord Atlee, a middle-aged viscount who had taken it upon himself to teach the uneducated American all about one of England’s favorite past times.

“Are we taking the damned fox to London for a pint?”

Lord Atlee gave a hearty laugh. “It depends on the wiliness of the vixen, Mr. Culpepper! The more intelligent they are, the longer the chase.”

Hoyt knew that to be true.

Over the past week, he’d done everything he could think of save get down on bended knee to curry Olivia’s favor.

He’d made her smile. He’d made her roll her eyes.

Once, he’d even made her giggle. But no matter how hard he tried or what he did, he couldn’t make her fall in love with him.

For a man accustomed to getting whatever he wanted, when he wanted it, not being able to get the thing that mattered most was... frustrating.

No, it was infuriating.

And now here he was, chasing after a poor defenseless animal when the true object of his desires was back at the manor likely forgetting all about him.

“The hell with this,” he muttered under his breath. “Railroad or no railroad, I’m

turning around.”

“Listen!” Lord Atlee yelped as, in unison, the pack of hounds out in front of the horses began to howl. “They’re giving tongue!”

“They’re giving what?” Hoyt said politely.

“It means they’ve caught the scent! The hunt is on!” Hunching low over his horse’s neck, the viscount kicked him onward as the entire field took to a gallop, led by the bellowing hounds and the field master in red.

Squinting, Hoyt was just able to make out the two men he’d come along to cajole into selling him their land. He could catch them, if he put in his heels. But regardless of what he’d originally come to the summer house party to attain, he now had a far greater treasure in mind.

Olivia.

“Sorry, Muffins,” said Olivia, casting her old pony a baleful glance as she anxiously waited for the footman to finish tacking her mare, a shiny chestnut Arabian named Delphine. “You’re not going to buck me off today.”

Shoving her shirt into the waistband of the breeches she’d yanked out from under her bed – she was always fastest when she rode astride – Olivia grabbed the reins the instant Delphine was ready and was in the saddle before the mare had cleared the courtyard.

“Hurry,” she urged the attentive chestnut. “Ember and Ginger are depending on us!”

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She'd discovered the mated pair almost three years ago, completely but accident.

During an autumn house party – shorter than the summer, but with no less people – she'd been hiding in the garden shed when she heard a peculiar sound.

The half whine, half mowl, had lured her into an investigation that had ended with her finding a young female fox, not yet a year old, crouched under the shed.

The fox's paw had been caught in a snare that she'd dragged along with her from whatever terrible trap a hunter had set.

After stealing some chicken from the kitchens, Olivia had managed to distract the vixen just long enough to cut the wire with sharp a pair of shears.

The fox had sprang away into the woods, but she'd returned the very next day...

presumably seeking more chicken, which Olivia had happily provided.

Over the next several months, whenever she was at the estate, she'd made sure to leave some food out for her newfound furry friend.

And in the spring, just as the earth was beginning to thaw and the daffodils were springing up in cheerful yellow bunches, the fox she'd dubbed Ginger had reappeared from under the garden shed...

this time with three adorable fuzzy kits frolicking and rolling behind her.

The male, Ember, was far more reclusive than his counterpart. Olivia had only caught glimpses of him, and those from a great distance. He was both larger and darker than Ginger, and every year – including this one – he passed his luxurious coat onto at least one of his offspring.

A luxurious coat that was now in danger of being hung on some awful lord's wall.

When she heard the exhilarated bay of the hounds, dread settled in the bottom of her belly as she urged her loyal mare for even more speed.

Together, they flew through the woods, twisting their way through brambles and birches at a breakneck pace in an attempt to cut the fox chase off at the top of the long, sprawling field where Ember liked to catch mice and voles and other small game to bring back to his family.

The place where he was used to being the hunter... and was now the hunted.

Shifting her weight into her left stirrup to help Delphine balance around a sharp turn to the right, Olivia felt a sweet wave of relief as she spied the field through a clearing up ahead and saw that the hounds and riders were still at the bottom, having not yet crested the peak and spilled onto the other side.

But her comfort was short lived, for along the wood line, running for his life, she saw the unmistakable burnt orange of Ember's coat as he frantically tried to outrun the pack of two dozen bloodthirsty hounds and cowardly men with guns.

"Faster," she pleaded with Delphine. "Please, go as fast as you can."

As if the mare could understand her words – and perhaps she very well could – she went beyond a gallop to a rate that Olivia hadn't even known existed.

United as one, they dashed under branches, whipped around corners, leapt over a

fallen tree...

and nearly crashed headfirst into Hoyt and his black gelding.

Olivia's scream intermingled with Hoyt's shout of alarm as their horses swerved in opposite directions. Miraculously, they both stayed astride and managed to rein their startled horses into dual sliding stops beside each other.

"You," they said in unison.

"Me?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Enough," Olivia exclaimed, throwing up her hand. "You're in my way."

"You're wearing breeches." Hoyt gave a low, appreciative whistle that would have likely made her blush were she not panic-stricken to get to Ember before the field master did. "I like them. You should wear breeches more often."

"Will you please move your horse from the path?" she pleaded, tears born of frustration burning in the corners of her eyes. "I have to save Ember!"

Hoyt's countenance instantly sobered. "Who is Ember?"

"The fox that you went out to kill!"

"I didn't go out to kill a fox. I went out to buy land." His alert gaze flicked from Olivia to the field and back again. "But we'll speak about that later. Come on."

"What are you doing?" she cried when he reached out and pulled on Delphine's bit, encouraging the mare to fall into line behind his gelding as he spurred the horse back

into a gallop.

“Saving Ember,” he roared back as they barreled down the narrow bridle path and leapt out into the field, their mounts soaring effortlessly over a pile of dry brush.

“You don’t even know who Ember is!”

“Is he important to you?”

She nodded helplessly.

“Then he’s important to me.”

In the end, they saved Ember.

Well, Olivia corrected as she dismounted from her exhausted horse, gave her an apple, and then left her with a groom to be washed and put away, Hoyt had saved Ember, as he was the one that had dared stand up to the field master.

A man of such importance that even the Duke of Abercorn respected his wishes, but not a brash, bold American with eyes the color of a winter sky and kisses that tasted like heaven.

Apparently his brazen act had cost him some type of a railroad, but he didn’t appear bothered by it.

His first – his only – concern was her .

And wasn’t that delightfully baffling? That someone as handsome as Hoyt would pick her first. That he would see her first. That he would want her first, even though

he undoubtedly had his pick of any woman he desired.

“There you are,” he murmured when she emerged from the stables into the glow of an afternoon summer sun. “I still like those breeches, you know. You wear them well.”

Removing her hat, she shook out her hair and gave him a wry smile. “I’m not supposed to be wearing them at all. Hoyt, I’d like to... thank you. For your help today. You didn’t have to do that. I know it cost you in your business.”

He raised his shoulder in a negligent shrug. “I’ll find another way. I always do.”

“Do you?” she asked quietly.

“Yes, Olivia.” He met her gaze without blinking. “I do.”

When he held out his hand, she took it without hesitation.

And when he drew her into his arms, she nestled against the broad plane of his chest as if it had been designed just for her.

Closing her eyes, she inhaled pinewood and leather soap...

and exhaled all of her doubts, her protective measures, and her criticisms.

“I’m falling,” she whispered, her lips moving against his jacket.

The arms around her tightened. “What was that?”

“I said” – she tilted her head back so that she could look him in the eye while she spoke the words she knew he’d been waiting for – “I’m falling. In love. With you. Or maybe I’ve already fallen. I’m not entirely sure how it’s meant to go.”

“Like this,” he said hoarsely before he kissed her. “It’s meant to go just like this, Olivia. Because I’m in love with you, too. I’ve been in love. From the first moment you asked if I was chasing you.”

“Were you?” she asked, arching a teasing brow.

“You’re damned right I was. And now that I’ve caught you, I’m never going to let you go.”

Somewhere under a garden shed, a very weary fox made his way home to his mate. She licked his sore paw, nuzzled his nose, and together they curled up to sleep away from the heat of a beautiful summer afternoon.