



# The Mistletoe Duke (Noble Holidays #8)

**Author:** *Anthea Lawson*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Lord Philip Hartness takes his duties seriously, even when tasked with creating merriment at Christmas. But when the irrepressible

Miss Catherine Fortnum arrives for the holidays, she seems intent on causing nothing but trouble. And trouble is not allowed. Especially where his heart is concerned...

**Total Pages (Source):** 8

## CHAPTER 1

Darton Hall, Darton-on-Rye, West Sussex

December 2, 1816

My dear Philip,

Christmas is fast approaching. And, as I'm sure I've no need to remind you, the terms of your late uncle's will dictate that you and your brother return to Darton Hall over the holidays if you wish to retain the estates and titles he so generously bequeathed you.

Since you are well aware of the legalities, I'm certain you're planning to take up residence shortly. I await your imminent arrival.

Fondest Regards,

Aunt Agatha

Blast . Lord Philip Hartness, fourth Duke of Darton-on-Rye, set the letter carefully down upon his gleaming mahogany desk. His initial impulse had been to crumple the paper into a ball, cast it into the fire, and watch it burn merrily down to ashes.

But that was something his impulsive younger brother would have done. Philip, however, was a man of responsibility, cognizant of the burdens of his title. The obligations he'd inherited weren't so easy to dispose of. Besides, a flippant gesture

like setting his unwanted correspondence on fire was beneath him.

“Would you like to reply to Her Grace?” Mr. Smith, his secretary, asked, preparing to dip a pen into the inkwell.

“Of course.”

Philip always did the correct thing, though in this case he didn’t particularly relish it. Still, Aunt Agatha was the Dowager Duchess of Darton-on-Rye. Not to mention she was absolutely right: he was a duke because of his late uncle’s demise, and said uncle had made a few unconventional stipulations concerning the inheritance. Namely, that ridiculous Christmas Clause.

He ran a hand through his black hair, then straightened his shoulders and nodded at his secretary to begin taking dictation.

“To the Dowager Duchess of Darton-on-Rye,” he began. “Dear Lady Darton, it would be my pleasure to attend upon you for the holidays, and carry out the required activities. I will arrive in West Sussex on the twentieth of December. Regards, Philip.”

There. That should suffice.

He noted Mr. Smith had stopped writing.

Raising one brow at his secretary, he asked, “What is it?”

“Begging your pardon, Your Grace, but aren’t you required to help coordinate certain events in the village prior to Christmas?”

Had he been prone to drinking, Philip would have tossed back a brandy at the

reminder. Again, something his brother wouldn't hesitate to do. In fact, wherever he was, Christopher was probably imbibing at that very moment.

"Yes." Philip firmed his lips. "Thank you for the reminder, Smith. How long does it take to plan such things as an Assembly Room cotillion?"

His secretary blinked at him. "I'm sure I don't know, Your Grace. More than a day or two, certainly."

Very well. Philip pondered for a moment. His mother had used to throw lavish parties, before his father passed away. For all he knew, she still did, but he could hardly summon her from Italy to find out.

"Tell Lady Darton I will endeavor to arrive on the eleventh," he said.

Two weeks ought to be enough. And in truth, he wouldn't be able to stand more than a fortnight in Christopher's company. His brother knew just how to get under his skin. The day after Christmas, Philip would depart for the peace of his London townhouse.

Perhaps, if he were lucky, his feckless brother wouldn't arrive at Darton Hall until a few days before Christmas. It was a distinct possibility. Which meant that, as usual, Philip would shoulder the burdens of the family while Christopher fritted away his time and neglected his obligations.

With a sigh, Philip signed his name to the letter. He didn't look forward to it, but duty called.

From the Desk of Lord Christopher Hartness, Viscount Heatherton

December 3, 1816

Dear Agate,

I've been thinking about uncle's Christmas stipulation, and of course I'll be at Darton for all the necessary shenanigans, but I've been thinking about Philip's situation. He ought to consider getting shackled married by now, don't you think?

Not that I, as his younger brother, could mention such a thing. But as the matriarch of the family, you could wield your formidable influence along those lines. In particular, might you extend a holiday invitation to Lady Fortnum and her daughters? Her eldest, Catherine, is just the sort of young lady who would suit Philip.

It's merely a suggestion, of course, and no doubt there are other eligible young women from proper families whom you might like to include in the festivities.

Just a thought. I'll see you shortly!

Fondly,

Kit

"Would you like to go to West Sussex for Christmas?" Lady Heliotrope Randall, Viscountess Fortnum, asked her two daughters as they took their afternoon tea in the parlor.

"I'd love to," Catherine, the eldest, said promptly. She was always ready for an adventure, and the prospect of being somewhere other than London for the holidays held a definite appeal.

Outside the bow window the rain drizzled depressingly down, and the clouds were a low cap of wool pulled over the city. Despite the room's cheery palette of greens and golds and the coals burning in the fireplace, a drabness had wormed its way into

Catherine's soul.

She was weary of the same social circles where nothing interesting ever happened. Weary of her dwindling prospects, too, though she didn't dare breathe a word of that to her mother. Now that she'd been out for several seasons, everyone seemed determined to push her into the company of the most boring unmarried men of the ton. Which was definitely not amusing in the least.

"West Sussex?" Her sister Abigail took a cautious sip of her tea. "Do we know anyone in West Sussex?"

"The Dowager Duchess of Darton-on-Rye, as a matter of fact," their mother said. "She has invited us to Darton Hall, along with a few others, to help celebrate the season. And I believe..." She paused, giving her offspring a pointed look. "Lord Darton will be in residence. He is a most?—"

"Eligible bachelor," Catherine finished, trying not to sigh. "Yes, we know. He's also a straightlaced bore. Might I change my answer?"

"You may not." Her mother stirred a lump of sugar into her tea. "Really, Catherine. I know you'd prefer not to consider such things, but it's high time you secured your future. Besides, I'd like grandchildren. Sooner, rather than later."

"There's always Abby." Catherine brandished her spoon at her sister and tried to ignore the fact that her mother was right.

Five years was a terribly long time to be on the marriage mart. Outside of one early offer of marriage, which she'd turned down with no regrets, she'd had no serious prospects.

At first, she hadn't minded in the least. Being of an optimistic nature, she was certain

the right fellow would come along. She simply hadn't encountered him yet. Meanwhile, she'd had a marvelous time jaunting about to all the picnics and parties and balls.

Even the parties are becoming boring , her treacherous mind said. She swallowed the thought down with her next sip of tea.

"I'm still too young to marry," Abigail said primly. "Mother's right. You're perilously close to being on the shelf."

The viscountess gave Abby a quelling look. "I didn't say that . Still, I think we all might benefit from spending the holidays amongst friendly acquaintances."

At this reminder of her mother's loneliness, Catherine discarded any further protest. Not that Lady Fortnum ever complained, but the viscount's death had been difficult for her. Although Viscount Fortnum had been a distant father, he'd been a suitably affectionate husband. Even though it had been three years since his passing, the holidays tended to exacerbate the fact of his absence. And his widow's melancholy.

"As for you, Abigail," Lady Fortnum said, turning to her younger daughter, "I understand that the duke's brother will be at Darton Hall, as well. Perhaps you might consider making yourself agreeable to him."

"Mother. You'd really recommend Abby to such a rascal as Lord Christopher Hartness?" Catherine set down her cup with a frown.

"You seem to find him amusing," her mother said dryly.

"Yes, because he cares refreshingly little for what's proper! But he's not husband material."

Not that his brother was any better, though the duke's flaws lay in the opposite direction. Lord Philip was a tightly reserved fellow, known for his rigidity and harsh insistence on observing every propriety.

For the first time, the thought occurred to her that perhaps Lord Philip's manner was a direct result of his younger brother's relentless irresponsibility.

"Hm." Their mother took a bite of biscuit and arched her brows. "One could do worse. And either way, there will be two eligible bachelors under one roof."

"That will be entertaining, at least," Catherine said, her spirits rising. "I don't think they hold each other in very high esteem."

The brothers were rarely seen in close proximity. Indeed, the last time she'd observed them together had been at Farrington's Hunt Ball. As she recalled, Lord Christopher had balanced a glass of sherry on his forehead while juggling three pears. Lord Philip had watched his brother make a spectacle of himself with an expression of disapproval as cold as carved marble.

It hadn't helped matters that, later the same evening, the younger Hartness had been caught kissing the widowed Lady Penrith out on the balcony. Honestly, it was as Catherine had said. Though Lord Christopher was amusing, he needed quite a bit of settling down before anyone would seriously consider him in a matrimonial light. Despite the fact he was now a viscount, marrying him would be nothing but trouble.

"In any case," Lady Fortnum said, "I've decided upon it. We'll depart for West Sussex early next week. The dowager duchess has requested we arrive on December eleventh."

Catherine shrugged, then grinned at her sister's dismayed expression. "Don't look so downcast. There will be dancing and games and all manner of fun. And no matter



what Mother says, neither of us are under any obligation to try and snare a husband. I, for one, intend to enjoy myself.”

Abigail wrinkled her nose. “Not all of us are as frivolous as you, Catherine.”

“Spoken like an old maid. Now who’s the one destined for spinsterhood?”

“Girls.” With a reproving clack, Lady Fortnum placed her cup into its saucer. “No quibbling during tea, if you please. Tomorrow we’ll get you fitted for new gowns. I want my daughters to shine.”

Catherine nodded. She’d spotted a lovely gold satin brocade at the modiste’s during her last visit, and this would be the perfect excuse to talk her mother into the extravagance. Especially if she pretended to agree to set her cap for the stuffy Duke of Darton-on Rye.

### CHAPTER 2

Philip, along with his secretary and valet, arrived at Darton Hall as promised on December eleventh. Aunt Agatha welcomed him, instructed the footmen to deliver his trunks to the Ivory Suite, and led him to the study. With a jerk of his head, Philip indicated that Smith, his secretary, should accompany them.

Stepping into the room, Philip drew in a deep breath and suddenly felt as though he were ten years old, running in to ask his uncle a question. The study was redolent with his late uncle's tobacco, the pipe stand still waiting upon the mantel for the former duke to return and linger over a brandy and smoke.

Darton Hall had always been a refuge. Being childless themselves, the duke and duchess had doted upon Philip and his brother. The family had spent Christmases there until Philip was twelve. Then the tension between his father and uncle had broken into the open with a bitter argument that neither would apologize for, and the happy times at Darton came to an end.

"We have so much to do," the dowager duchess said, her deep purple skirts rustling as she rounded the heavy oak desk. "Do peruse this list."

She slid a paper toward him. With an inward sigh, he picked it up and read:

1. Secure Assembly Rooms for Christmas Cotillion. Ask Ladies Auxiliary for assistance in their Decoration
2. Determine which Tenants are in need of Christmas Dinner. Plan Accordingly

The first items weren't that difficult. He'd pen an appropriately humble request to the Ladies Auxiliary and send Smith to book the rooms. As for Christmas Dinner, no doubt Aunt Agatha had already planned the menu. He and Smith would go over the accounts, with assistance from the dowager duchess of course. Though, recalling his uncle's generosity, Philip suspected that all the tenants would be the recipients of Darton Hall's bounty.

### 3. Deck Darton Hall with boughs of Holly and the like

That seemed a task for the servants. He made a mental note to consult the housekeeper about the traditional Christmas décor, then leave it in her capable hands.

### 4. Prepare for Guests

Tamping down his alarm, he looked over at his aunt. "What guests? If this has become an elaborate house party -"

"Tut, Philip. When did you become such a serious boy?" Aunt Agatha shook her finger at him.

When I inherited a dukedom, he almost said, but bit his tongue. He didn't want to seem ungrateful. In fact, he was beyond honored. It was only that the duties of Darton-on-Rye, on top of the earldom he'd come into upon his father's untimely death five years ago, weighed heavily upon his shoulders.

Meanwhile, Christopher flitted about as though his new viscountcy was of no concern, its responsibilities as light as a feather.

"What guests?" he repeated, a bit tiredly. "I thought this was to be just family."

"Your second cousins are family," she said, arching one brow. "And what is

Christmas without children?"

"Quiet."

She ignored his comment, and continued, "I've also invited two families down from London. The Shelbournes, and Viscountess Fortnum."

"Ah." Realization thudded into him. "If I'm not mistaken, both those families have daughters of a marriageable age. I warn you, Aunt, I'm in no position -"

"Ridiculous!" She waved her hand, batting away his words as though they were pesky gnats. "You are in the very best position. And it's not as though I've invited every debutante of the season. I have it on excellent authority that the young ladies are all of the highest order, and quite suitable."

Philip pressed his lips together and considered what he knew of the families in question. Miss Shelbourne was, if he recalled aright, a quiet, dark-haired girl. He'd been seated across from her at a dinner party once, and she hadn't spoken more than two words to him the entire time.

As for the viscountess's daughters, the younger one had just made her come-out, and the elder was an admirer of Christopher's. Which absolutely disqualified her as a lady he'd be inclined to court.

Well then. Given the limited options, he'd assuage his aunt's expectations by paying Miss Shelborne particular attention. Though he was determined nothing would come of it. No matter what the dowager duchess might think, he hardly wanted to add yet another burden to his back. Especially not a matrimonial one.

He glanced down at the final item on the list.

## 5. Plan Games with Prizes

Games with prizes? Not his forte, and he was tempted to leave that to Christopher. But no. His brother would no doubt suggest entirely unsuitable things, like erotic charades and drinking contests. Speaking of whom...

“Where is my brother?”

Aunt Agatha’s expression turned vaguely apologetic. “I received a letter from him only yesterday. I’m afraid his presence was required a bit longer in London. Something about a sleigh.”

Of course. The Thames had iced over enough for the annual sleigh races, which the young bucks all wagered heavily upon. If he wasn’t mistaken, Christopher participated every year. No doubt his brother would arrive at Darton at the eleventh hour to regale them all with tales of excitement upon the ice and boasts about his near wins.

“Don’t fret,” his aunt said. “I’m happy to provide my assistance in his stead.”

“What about Christopher’s inheritance?” Philip asked tightly, knowing it was in no danger. His younger brother was too charming, too ready to tell people what they wanted to hear. Christopher was a master at eeling out of trouble, leaving others to bear the consequences.

“He’s promised that next year he’ll come early and take on nearly everything,” Aunt Agatha said, sounding as though she believed it.

“Your Grace.” The butler entered the study, inclining his head to the dowager duchess. “Lady Fortnum’s coach is coming up the drive.”

Double blast . Why the devil were the guests coming so soon?

“Excellent.” Philip’s aunt turned to him and patted him on the arm. “Do endeavor to make yourself charming.”

Catherine followed her mother beneath the half-timbered portico of Darton Hall, trying not to be awed by the vast estate. They’d passed acres of bare-branched forest park, a walled garden, and an elaborate trefoil pond with a fountain in the center, quiet for the winter. She’d glimpsed a gazebo, and the ruins of an old castle on the hill behind the mansion.

The house itself, made of quarried limestone, stretched in front of manicured lawns and gardens, its three stories topped with elaborate chimneys and gabled windows. Her own family’s country manor was practically a hovel in comparison.

Still, what good were a stunning mansion and extensive grounds if one didn’t have the temperament to enjoy them?

Certainly the Duke of Darton-on-Rye didn’t, judging by the expression on the man’s face as the butler ushered them into the grand foyer. Truthfully, she’d never once seen the duke smile.

“Welcome,” the dowager duchess said, stepping forward with a gracious nod. “I’m so pleased you accepted my invitation, Lady Fortnum.”

“The pleasure is ours,” Catherine’s mother said. “Thank you for thinking of us. Allow me to present my daughters, Catherine and Abigail.”

“Your Grace,” Catherine said, dipping into a curtsy which Abigail quickly mirrored.

“Excellent.” The old lady gave them the once-over, though it seemed her gaze

lingered a bit longer on Catherine. “I believe you’ve met my nephew, Lord Philip Hartness?”

“Indeed, we have,” their mother said. “Catherine and I were introduced two seasons ago to both your nephews. Though my daughter Abigail has not yet had the pleasure.”

“Miss Abigail.” The duke gave her a dismissive nod. “Welcome, all of you, to Darton Hall.”

Something about his cool manner made Catherine want to spark a reaction from the man. Besides, he’d all but snubbed her little sister with his patent disinterest. Summoning up her most winsome smile, she met his gaze.

“Thank you. I’m certain that, with your brother here as well, we shall have a merry holiday.”

“Indeed.” The duke’s eyes narrowed, and she caught a spark of temper in their blue depths. “Provided he manages to make his arrival.”

“Oh, is Lord Christopher absent?” Catherine blinked innocently, though she was inwardly gloating that she’d been able to pierce his bored facade. “I suppose we’ll have to make do until he comes. Not to give offense, of course. I’m certain you can be most droll, Your Grace.”

He gave her an affronted look, and the dowager duchess let out a cough that bordered on a chuckle.

“Be that as it may,” their hostess said. “The servants will show you up to your rooms. I suggest you freshen up for tea, which be served promptly at four-o’clock in the west parlor.”

The duke frowned at his aunt, as though he'd no idea they were all summoned for tea, and Catherine tried not to grin at his discomfiture. Even if the duke's younger brother was tardy, the visit was off to an entertaining start.



### CHAPTER 3

What an unfortunate beginning , Philip thought as his valet retied his cravat. The timing of Lady Fortnum's arrival couldn't be worse. Although the younger daughter seemed tolerable, the eldest, Miss Catherine Randall, was altogether too full of herself, with those pert smiles, and comments about Christopher. And then to accuse him of being droll! The girl had no sense of decorum.

This was going to be the longest Christmas holiday of his life. Worse even than the one after their father refused to set foot in Darton Hall ever again, and that one had been miserable.

He glanced at the ormolu clock in his dressing room. Nearly four. It wouldn't do for the host to be late to tea, despite the fact that a half-hour ago he'd no idea of his aunt's plans. He certainly needed to have a word with the dowager duchess about when the others were due to arrive. He despised being caught flat-footed at social gatherings.

"That will be all," he told his valet, then strode from his suite.

Though it was beneath his ducal dignity to dash through the upper corridors of Darton Hall, he lengthened his strides. He rounded the corner at a good clip, only to trip over a woman's outstretched foot.

Hopping awkwardly on one foot, he tried to regain his balance without falling upon Miss Catherine Randall who, for some reason, was down on all fours in the middle of the hallway.

“Are you well, Miss Randall?” he asked, going to his knees beside her on the red and gold carpet. It would not reflect kindly upon his hospitality to have his guests falling ill moments after they arrived.

“Quite well,” she replied, looking up at him with eyes the color of fine sherry.

From this position, he could see right down the neckline of her dress to the tantalizing curve of her breasts. He hastily pulled his gaze away, only to encounter the sight of her derriere outlined in blue muslin. Blast .

“Then why, may I ask, are you crawling about on the rug?” Discomfort made his tone harsh.

She blinked, then sat back upon her heels. “I lost an earbob just now.”

“I’ll ring for a maid to find it.”

“No need to trouble a servant. I’m certain it’s nearby. In fact...”

She leaned forward to snatch something off the carpet, and for a moment he caught her scent: lily of the valley and the clean smell of soap.

“There,” she said triumphantly, opening her gloved hand to reveal a bit of gold and garnet. “It matches the rug, you see.”

“Indeed.” He rose and extended a hand to help her to her feet. Would she be polite enough to apologize for creating such a hazard in the middle of the hallway?

She laid her fingers over his and rose with a surprising amount of grace. “Thank you.”

The tall case clock on the landing boomed out four chimes, and Philip frowned, releasing her.

“We’re late,” he said sharply.

“Yes.” She smiled up at him, a mischievous light in her eyes. “And yet, lightning hasn’t struck us upon the spot. I was trying to catch up with my family, you see, when...” She waved the hand holding the earbob.

“I shall escort you to tea,” he said, holding out his arm. He couldn’t simply run off and leave her standing in the hallway. Much as he might prefer to.

“A moment.”

She lifted her hands to her unadorned left ear, attempting to replace her jewelry. Philip tried to curb his impatience, but she was taking a damnably long time. Then the earbob slipped out of her gloved fingers to fall upon the carpet once more.

They both bent at the same to retrieve it, and nearly collided. With an indrawn breath, she grabbed his shoulders to catch her balance. Her chestnut hair brushed his cheek, and a flare of desire went through him, as hot and shocking as the bolt of lightning she’d just mentioned.

He caught her elbows and set her at a safe distance.

“Allow me.” He swooped up the troublesome piece of jewelry and, before he could think too much about his actions, closed the distance between them. “Tilt your head.”

Her lips parted in surprise, but she did as he asked. Her neck was pale and soft, and the back of his hand brushed her warm skin as he gently fastened her earbob on.

“There you are.” He forced himself to take a step back, then offered his arm once more. “Shall we?”

Color rode high on her cheekbones, but she nodded and slipped her hand through his elbow. They said little as they descended the grand staircase. She paused at the landing, however, her gaze going to the large family portrait hung upon the paneled wall.

Surprising, really, that the former duke hadn’t removed it after the schism in the family. A split that, admittedly, his last will and testament was attempting to heal. Not that the dratted Christmas Clause could bring Philip and Christopher into amity, no matter their uncle’s intentions.

The painting showed Aunt Agatha and the former duke seated with their spaniels at their feet. Philip’s father stood behind the duke, one hand resting on the back of his chair, and Philip’s mother held a similar position behind the duchess. Philip and Christopher stood between their parents, and for a moment he recalled how terribly his younger brother had fidgeted all through the portrait sessions.

Even at that young age—he’d been eight, Christopher six—there was a serious light in his eyes, and a wild one in his brother’s. He didn’t mean to sigh, but a soft exhalation left his mouth and Miss Randall looked over at him.

“We’ve both lost our fathers,” she said thoughtfully.

“Yes,” he said, though that wasn’t the reason for his sudden melancholy as he resumed escorting her down to tea. It was the reminder of all the duties awaiting him, stacked up and ready to topple over and crush him if he set a foot wrong.

He had his secretary’s help, of course, and his solicitors in London, plus the estate managers—seven at last count—to look after the various holdings. Aunt Agatha had

charge of Darton Hall, and he was glad to let her continue. But still, running both an earldom and a dukedom was a great deal to ask.

“Your Grace, how kind of you to join us,” his aunt said tartly as he led Miss Randall to the chair beside her sister.

“It’s entirely my fault,” Miss Randall said removing her gloves and taking a seat. “The duke kindly assisted me in finding my lost earbob.”

“Did he?” His aunt shot him a look he couldn’t read. “What a good host you are. And speaking of which, do tell us what games you’ve settled upon for the house party.”

He clenched his jaw and went to take the last empty place, skirting the table piled with tea things to sit on the settee beside his aunt. “I’ve not had a moment to think upon it.”

“Oh, but I adore such things.” Miss Randall smiled brightly. “Do let me assist.”

“An excellent thought,” Lady Fortnum said, nodding at her daughter. “Catherine has a talent for organization. Why, she took over managing our last ball when I fell ill, and did so most brilliantly. Everything went off without a hitch.”

It was a patent mother’s attempt to paint her daughter in a good light, but Philip sensed there was truth to it. At least, he hoped so. He was drowning, and would be a fool not to reach for any rope thrown to him—even if it came from the frivolous Miss Randall.

“I would welcome your thoughts,” he said, turning to her.

“Holiday tableaux,” she said promptly. “Snapdragon, and Spillikins, and Lottery Tickets if there are younger people involved. Carol singing, certainly—oh and

perhaps a musicale or pageant.”

“Very good,” Aunt Agatha said, while Philip blinked at the deluge of ideas. “I’ll trust the two of you to manage it all. Lord and Lady Weston, my second cousins once removed,” she added for their guests’ benefit, “will arrive the day after tomorrow. Although I’m sorry to say the Shelbournes have sent their regrets. It seems a fever has fallen over the family.”

She began pouring out tea and handing the cups around while Philip sat back and digested this information.

“A pity,” Lady Fortnum said, accepting her teacup, though she didn’t look a bit sorry that the competition for Philip’s attentions had just been removed.

As for himself, he was disappointed that Miss Shelbourne wouldn’t arrive to help buffer him from Miss Catherine Randall. Miss Randall had suddenly proven quite disturbing to his equilibrium, and it seemed his aunt was all too ready to throw them together. Though clearly they did not suit in the least.

Somewhat reluctantly, Philip met with Miss Randall at ten-o’clock the next morning in the west parlor. They were chaperoned by her lady’s maid, who removed to the far corner and busied herself with needlework.

“Let’s sit in the sun,” Miss Randall said, pulling a blue wingback chair into the pale light slanting through the mullioned windows. “I hope the weather holds, for my sister and I plan to go riding this afternoon.”

He moved a matching chair across from hers and waited for her to take her seat before doing the same.

“Do you like to ride?” he asked, wishing the inane question unsaid the moment he

uttered it. Of course she did. Hadn't she just said so?

"Very much." She grinned at him—there was no other word for her expression. Most ladies smiled primly, careful to keep their emotions contained, but Miss Randall was unsettlingly exuberant.

And smelled wonderful.

Stop it, he told himself sternly. Her scent was of no account. Even though he'd woken that morning thinking of her, in an uncomfortable condition that required some quick handwork to remedy.

"I wish we rode more often, in London," she continued. "But we've only stable room for the two horses, and they're needed for the carriage whenever Mama goes out. Besides, the weather has been dreadful." She made a face. "It seems much nicer here."

"I couldn't say." If he answered in a contained manner, perhaps it would blunt some of her unladylike enthusiasm.

"Oh, yes." She turned her clear-eyed gaze upon him. "You don't spend much time here, do you? Even though you are the Duke of Darton-on-Rye."

"This is Aunt Agatha's home. I wouldn't want to displace her."

"Goodness." Miss Randall looked toward the parlor door, as if she could take in the entire house with one glance. "There must be upwards of twenty bedrooms here. Surely there's more than enough room."

"I'm happy to leave the estate in the dowager duchess's hands." He didn't mention that moving to Darton Hall would be the proverbial straw that caused his back to

break.

“But it’s a lovely estate. Certainly, you’ll take up residence here when you choose your own duchess?”

She was so forthright it made him wince. “Are you suggesting yourself for that position?” He couldn’t help the coldness in his voice.

“Oh, heavens no!” She gave him a horrified look, so genuine he believed her. If she truly were angling for him, she would have responded with a great deal more coyness.

Relief tangled with his injured pride. “I believe myself slighted.”

She glanced down, a blush coloring her cheeks. “My most sincere apologies, Your Grace. I spoke thoughtlessly, and meant no insult to you. I only meant that my own taste in a husband might differ. The ton feels differently, as you’re no doubt aware.”

He gave a single, sharp nod. At the few events he’d forced himself to make time for, the debutantes swarmed around him like bees circling a particularly fragrant flower. Or wasps about a rotting apple; he couldn’t decide which.

“Tell me about these cousins of yours arriving tomorrow,” she said, pulling a small notebook and stick of graphite from her reticule. “I’ve jotted down some further ideas for games, but some of them require a certain number of participants. And the younger set can’t be expected to frolic late into the evening. How old are the children?”

Philip wasn’t intending to frolic late into the evening either, as she put it. Truly, Miss Randall was a creature of much flash and little substance. Perfect for Christopher, really. They deserved one another. Particularly as she’d just made it abundantly clear



she was not at all interested in Philip.

Nor was he interested in her, he reminded himself. He should be glad of her disregard.

“Lord and Lady Danville are my second cousins on my aunt’s side,” he said stiffly. “They have three children: Olivia, who is nine, and the twins, Roger and Reginald, who are seven. And, to put it mildly, full of energy.”

If anyone could match their wildness, though, it might be Miss Catherine Randall. She would, he thought, make an excellent mother to rambunctious children.

What was he thinking? He yanked his mind away from anything that might lead him into carnal musings about the lady in question. No matter how soft her skin or tempting her lips...

“Excellent,” she said, scribbling in her notebook. “We’ll have such fun.”

After another half-hour, where Philip agreed to a number of amusements and vetoed others, Miss Randall pronounced their work finished.

She closed her notebook with a snap and grinned at him. “There. That wasn’t so bad, was it? A word to the butler and housekeeper, and we’ll have games right up until Christmas. What night is the Cotillion again? The twenty-third?”

“Yes.” He ran a hand through his hair, trying to think if he’d missed anything on his aunt’s list.

He’d been up at first light, drafting a letter to the Ladies Auxiliary. When it was finished, he’d sent Smith into the village to deliver it to Mrs. Abernathy, who was apparently in charge of such things, and to secure the Assembly Rooms. Of course,

no one else would dare to hold an event while the Duke of Darton-on-Rye was considering hosting a ball there, so the rooms had been entirely free.

The Darton Hall guests had arrived, with the exception of the cousins, and had turned out to be fewer, and perhaps less burdensome, than he'd originally feared.

Christmas dinner delivery—well, he'd speak with Aunt Agatha about that in due time.

Thanks to Miss Randall's help, games and prizes were well in hand, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Perhaps the holidays at Darton wouldn't be so excruciating after all. Especially if Christopher continued in his tardy ways.

"Where did you go?" Miss Randall was leaning forward, full lips pursed, giving him an intent look. "I didn't suspect you of being a daydreamer, Your Grace."

"Ha." The bitter laugh was out of his mouth before he could contain it. "Nothing of the kind. I was merely going over my various responsibilities in my head. My apologies for neglecting you for a moment."

"You need one of these." She brandished her notebook at him. "As a matter of fact, I might have an extra one with me that you could have."

He glanced at the riotous bouquet of flowers illustrating the cover of her notebook, and quickly shook his head. "That won't be necessary."

"Oh." She followed his gaze, then burst out laughing. "Never fear! I've one bound in burgundy leather. Surely that won't offend your masculine sensibilities."

Burgundy leather seemed a tad ostentatious. Why not plain brown? But it would be impolite to refuse her a second time.

He gave her a reserved nod. “Very kind.”

As to that, a notebook might prove useful. He had the niggling feeling he’d forgotten something...

“Thank you for allowing me to assist.” Miss Randall rose, and he hastily got to his feet. “If you’re free this afternoon, you’re welcome to come riding with us.”

“My duties call, I’m afraid,” he said. “But thank you for the offer. And for your work here this morning.”

“I enjoyed it,” she said, sounding slightly surprised by the admission. “At any rate, Your Grace, I’ll see you at luncheon.” She dipped a curtsy and, trailed by her lady’s maid, left the parlor.

For some reason, the sunlight seemed a touch colder once she’d gone.

### CHAPTER 4

“Of course you’ll go riding with her,” Aunt Agatha said, swatting him lightly upon the arm.

Following an excellent luncheon, he’d decamped with the dowager duchess to the study to report on his progress. She’d inquired about Miss Randall, and he hadn’t meant to mention her invitation, but it had somehow slipped out.

“I really don’t think -”

“Tut. Besides, you’ve forgotten the Darton Hall decorations.” She gave him a reproving look.

“Ah, yes.” He’d known there was something.

“It could be a most efficient outing,” she said. “You can be on the lookout for likely patches of greenery while also entertaining our guests.”

“Your guests,” he reminded her. “You might have consulted me.”

She waved her hand. “I consulted your brother, which seemed sufficient.”

Mention of Christopher brought his hackles up, as usual. “He suggested our guests?”

“Lady Fortnum and her daughters, most particularly,” Aunt Agatha said, with a knowing look.

Of course. Philip recalled Miss Randall laughing gaily at Christopher's antics at the Hunt Ball. Christopher meant to court her, clearly, and ensuring she was invited to Darton for the holidays was the first step. But, true to form, he'd been distracted by other pleasures, leaving Miss Randall cooling her heels in the countryside.

Thoughtless—and typical.

Firming his lips, Philip nodded at his aunt. “Very well. As my brother isn't here to perform his duty, I'll go riding with the Misses Randall.”

“You think too much about duty,” she said. “Go out and have fun, for once. But keep watch for holly and ivy, and pine boughs.”

“Your Grace.” He bowed over her hand and turned to go.

“And mistletoe,” she called after him, amusement lacing her voice.

He made no reply to this frivolous suggestion. He'd no intention of scattering aids to Christopher's mischief about the house. Greenery to adorn Darton Hall was all well and good, but he drew the line at mistletoe.

To Catherine's surprise, the duke joined her and Abby on their ride. A groom accompanied them at a suitable distance as Lord Darton led them into the forest surrounding Darton Hall.

“I do like the woods in winter,” Catherine said as they rode on a wide track beneath the bare branches.

“It's peaceful, I suppose,” the duke said.

“It's not, though. It's...subtle.”

“Subtle?” Lord Darton glanced at her curiously.

“Yes.” She inhaled. “You have to pay closer attention to catch its beauty. Smell the wet leaves, not the flowers. Catch a glimpse of a robin darting between the trees for a bit of color.”

“I thought you’d prefer the more obvious seasons,” he said.

“Oh, I do.” She shot him a grin, glad to have pulled him into conversation. He was so prickly, yet she’d caught glimpses of an interesting person behind that coolly cultivated facade. “But that’s not to say the difference can’t be appreciated. Which season do you like best?”

He frowned faintly. “I’ve not given the matter much consideration.”

“Yes, yes, always too busy with your responsibilities.” She kept her voice gentle, however.

It hadn’t escaped her notice that Lord Darton took his duties quite seriously. On balance, she supposed that was better for the estates under his care than ignoring them entirely, as many lords of the ton seemed to do.

Including the duke’s brother.

Still, one could be responsible without becoming an utter stick.

“I prefer the spring,” Abby said from her place beside her sister. “It’s the prettiest.”

“It is, indeed,” the duke said.

He didn’t take the opportunity to make some flirtatious remark about pretty girls

liking pretty seasons, Catherine noted. Did Lord Darton even know how to flirt?

She'd continue teasing him and see if she could loosen his stays a bit. Metaphorically speaking. It was the best course of amusement at hand, until his relatives arrived.

"Since you appreciate the winter forest," he said, "you may help me look for greenery to deck Darton Hall. Johnson here"—he nodded at the groom behind them—"can note the location and come back later with the servants to collect it."

"We passed a holly tree already," Abby said. "I know, because it nearly snagged my skirts."

"It didn't have any berries, though," Catherine said, having noticed the same tree. "We definitely need berries. Holly without that bit of red is hardly deserving of the season. It must be festive."

The duke shot her an unreadable glance, and she narrowed her eyes at him in a mock glare.

"Do you take issue with festivity, Your Grace?" she asked. "You don't strike me as a complete puritan, but perhaps I'm mistaken."

"There is a time and place for such things," he said in a repressive tone.

"But it's the holidays!" Abby said, leaning past Catherine to look at him. "Surely the most festive time of the year."

"If one is constantly celebrating," he said, "then the very act loses all meaning."

Oh heavens. Lord Darton was an unspeakably lost cause, after all.

Catherine sighed and shook her head. “Neither my sister nor I are suggesting a frenzied state of revelry day and night, Your Grace. But one might unbend a little during Christmas.”

He merely regarded her, his expression cold. She stared right back, challenging him to argue.

Their standoff was broken by Abby’s exclamation of glee.

“Look,” she cried, pointing into the trees ahead, “holly with berries!”

The duke looked away, and Catherine let out a sniff. She’d count that as her victory.

“Take note, Johnson,” he called over his shoulder. “And if you come across ivy and pine boughs, gather those up, too, and deliver the whole lot to the housekeeper for Christmas Eve decorations.”

They rode in silence a bit more, and Catherine let her annoyance with Lord Darton drain away. The man couldn’t help being an insufferable stuffed shirt, any more than his brother could stop being an irrepressible rakehell.

The trees thinned and they came out to a meadow, the brown grasses bent into hummocks. On the far side lay the remains of an orchard, the few stalwart apple trees draped with green balls of mistletoe.

“Aha,” she said. “There’s one more thing your man needs to collect.”

Lord Darton glanced at the ground. “Soggy grasses? I thought you had better taste in decor than that, Miss Randall.”

She frowned at him, then spotted the glint in his eye. Why, was the Duke of Darton-



on-Rye teasing her? How remarkable.

“Indeed.” She nodded solemnly. “It’s an ancient Yuletide custom to festoon the doorknobs with sedge, don’t you know?”

He looked at her for a moment, lips twitching. And then he smiled, and his entire face transformed. His chiseled lips softened, his dark blue eyes warmed, and, most shockingly of all, she saw he had a dimple to the left of his mouth. Lord Darton went from being middling-passable to one of the most handsome men she’d ever seen, and she inhaled sharply at the change.

Their gazes caught and held, but this was not the stony challenge of earlier. No, this was something that made Catherine’s breath flutter oddly in her chest.

“Are you all right?” Abby reached over and touched her arm, breaking the spell, and this time it was Catherine’s turn to look away.

“Certainly,” she replied. Her cheeks felt flushed, but she rallied and gestured across the meadow. “Look there. Mistletoe.”

Abby let out a squeak that set her horse dancing a few steps to the side. “Perfect!”

“Mistletoe?” The duke’s tone was back to disapproving. “I don’t think that will be a necessary addition to the greenery.”

“Come now.” Catherine felt like she was coaxing a feral animal that had scurried into hiding—albeit one with fangs and claws. “Every ceiling won’t be festooned with garlands of the stuff, if that’s your worry. Just one piece, tucked into a kissing bough. Subtly.”

He gave her a frosty look. “While some households might embrace such inherent

improprieties, I assure you, Darton Hall does not.”

“It’s not just for those courting,” Abby chimed in. “But for anyone at odds to embrace under in peace and goodwill and leave their enmity behind.”

“I am aware of the history,” Lord Darton said dryly.

“Then take mistletoe in that spirit,” Catherine said, “rather than a wanton one.”

The word seemed to hang in the air between them in a plume of misty breath. Wanton .

His expression went from ice to fire as he gazed at her, his eyes suddenly smoldering with promises. She set one gloved hand to her throat, breathless. She’d encountered that look a time or two after a stolen kiss, and expected it from the rakes of the ton . But not from the oh-so-proper Duke of Darton-on-Rye. Coming from him, it made her feel as though she’d just stepped into a fire.

She swallowed, glad to be seated on horseback, as her knees were suddenly a bit weak.

The duke gave himself a little shake and turned away.

“Very well,” he said, looking across the meadow at the trees in question. “One sprig. But that is all .”

### CHAPTER 5

Philip's second cousins arrived, and Darton Hall was suddenly filled with a sense of life. Perhaps a bit too much life, as the twins ran and screeched and constantly seemed to be in trouble of one kind or another.

He caught them sliding down the banisters of the grand staircase, having given their poor nanny the slip once again. After he delivered a proper scolding, one of them looked at him with innocent eyes.

"But Miss Randall showed us how," he said.

"She also said not to get caught," his brother piped up.

What could Philip say? He shook his head and admonished them to stay off the stairs, then let them run off.

Miss Randall had shown them? The woman was a menace. One moment, he felt as though she was the most regrettable lady he'd ever met, and the next he craved her company beyond all reason. It was maddening and confusing and not at all in keeping with how a duke should behave.

He glanced at the wide wooden banister and had a sudden vision of the lady in question, skirts rucked up about her legs, arms twined about the railing -

Bloody hell . He turned to the wall and took a moment to adjust his trousers, taking deep breaths to clear his head. Obviously, it had been too long since he'd kept a

mistress. But they were so much work. One had to think of them, and send gifts, and keep a house for their use, and make sure they didn't feel neglected...

Ultimately, the cost had outweighed the benefits, the result of which being that it been well over a year since he'd last been with a woman. That must be the reason he'd been having so many completely improper thoughts about Miss Randall.

And perhaps—only the tiniest bit—because somehow her presence brought a sense of lightness. Because she's ridiculously optimistic, he told himself. And prone to wearing unsuitably bright colors, and laughing too much, and exclaiming over the littlest thing as though it were something precious: holly berries, lemon scones, even the sound of rain on the slate roof, for heaven's sake.

Miss Randall was like a showy bird one kept about for its sweet song and pretty plumage. Pleasant, but ultimately frivolous.

Yet even as he tried to make himself believe as much, he knew it wasn't true. Catherine Randall was very intelligent—not bird-witted in the least. For the past week, she'd kept a steady stream of entertainments going each afternoon and evening, seeming to organize such things effortlessly. When he'd commented upon it, and how everyone seemed to be enjoying the games and music, she'd brandished her ever-present notebook at him.

"One simply needs the proper tools," she'd said with a smile.

The next morning, he'd discovered a parcel wrapped in brown paper outside his door. He'd undone the wrapping to find the burgundy-leather journal she'd promised, with a note tucked inside.

Dear Lord Darton,

I was saving this for your Christmas present, but then thought you might like it earlier, so as to help keep your thoughts organized. I've come up with a system of sorts, in my own tracking of various activities, that I would be delighted to share with you — if you'd like. Not to presume, of course! You may use this notebook however you see fit.

Except not for starting fires, for that would be a sad waste of such lovely paper.

I jest.

Mostly.

At any rate, I also want to take this opportunity to thank you for so graciously allowing my mother, my sister, and me to join you here at Darton Hall for the holidays. I hope it hasn't been too much trouble, but even if it has (arguments over mistletoe notwithstanding) we've had a delightful time thus far.

My most heartfelt gratitude to you and your aunt.

Merry Christmas,

Miss Catherine Randall

He'd read the note over several times, and then, unaccountably, placed it in the drawer where he kept his important papers. She was having a delightful time. The words warmed him, and he carried them about with him all day.

Any satisfaction of spirit he felt, however, fled entirely the next afternoon. His brother Christopher, Viscount Heatherton, at last made his appearance at Darton Hall.

The butler attempted to announce him, but Christopher swept past him into the

drawing room, brown hair slightly tousled and a charming smile upon his face.

“Here I am,” he said, throwing his arms wide.

“My dear boy!” Aunt Agatha rose from the table where she was fruitlessly attempting to win at Spillikens against the children. Whether she bumped the table on purpose or not, Philip couldn’t say, but the game came to a quick end.

“Your Grace.” Christopher bowed over their aunt’s hand, then glanced at the assembled company.

He greeted their cousins, even the children, then turned to Viscountess Fortnum and pressed an ostentatious kiss upon the back of her hand.

“Lady Fortnum, what an extreme pleasure to find you and your daughters here. One couldn’t want for a better Christmas gift.”

“Lord Heatherton.” The viscountess smiled warmly at him, then turned to her daughters, with whom she’d been playing cards. “You remember my girls, of course—Catherine and Abigail.”

“How could I forget two such beauties?” Christopher made them each a gallant bow, as though he were some sort of chivalrous knight. “I trust you are enjoying your visit?”

Philip’s mood darkened as he watched their interchange. His brother was all smoothness and flattery.

“Very much,” Miss Catherine said. “Though I’ve no doubt it will become even more pleasant now that you’ve arrived.”

Clenching his jaw, Philip stepped forward. "Hello, Christopher. I wasn't sure you'd manage to make an appearance."

"Well!" Christopher turned, laughing. "I'm pleased to see you, too, brother. How fine it is to be at Darton Hall again for the holidays, don't you agree?"

For someone shirking their responsibilities, certainly. Now that all the work was done, he'd no doubt Christopher would have a grand time in the remaining days before Christmas.

Philip forced himself to nod in response. "Indeed."

Not that their uncle's will had given them any choice about it. A part of him had been hoping his irresponsible brother wouldn't arrive at all, and thus, finally, be seen as the scapegrace he was. No such luck, however.

"You're just in time! The Christmas Cotillion is the day after tomorrow." Aunt Agatha beamed at Christopher as though his tardiness was something to celebrate, not deplore.

"Splendid," Christopher said. "You must save me a waltz, Agate."

Philip frowned at his brother's pet name for their aunt. It wasn't proper in the least, and certainly not for use before guests.

"I see Philip has swallowed a lemon again," Christopher said. "Don't worry, brother mine, there are plenty of other ladies for you to dance with. Indeed, I believe Miss Randall to be very light on her feet."

His words sent a hot, unwelcome stab of jealousy through Philip. Christopher had danced with Catherine Randall. Well, of course he had. No doubt Christopher had

danced with every eligible—and ineligible—woman of the ton .

And now his brother had put him on the spot. Philip looked over at Miss Randall and found she was watching him, a thoughtful expression on her face.

“I hope you will save me a waltz, Miss Randall,” he said, hating the stiffness in his voice.

“It would be my pleasure.” Her voice held an unexpected gentleness.

Christopher glanced between the two of them, brows drawing together as though he’d expected a different sort of interaction.

“Well then,” Aunt Agatha said briskly. “It will be a lovely evening for all of us, to be sure.”



### CHAPTER 6

There was something excruciating about watching Lord Christopher Hartness torment his older brother. Catherine had first observed it upon their meeting in the drawing room, and it was present in each subsequent interaction between them.

And where once—even a mere fortnight ago—she would have thought the duke’s increasingly rigid demeanor and stilted replies amusing, now she found herself more inclined toward sympathy. It was obvious his brother wanted nothing more than to scratch and scratch until he drew blood.

Oh, the attacks were couched as flippant remarks in a teasing manner, but she knew Lord Darton well enough now to see how each word his brother spoke left a wound. As the days went on, the duke became progressively more brittle, until she feared he might break.

The night of the Christmas Cotillion, they all dressed in their finery and took the ducal coaches into the village. The dowager duchess rode with Catherine and her family, remarking upon how well they all looked, and in particular commenting upon Catherine’s gold satin.

It was a lovely gown, if she said so herself. Paired with a matching topaz necklace and earbobs, she felt quite ready to attend a ball. No matter that it was to be held in the local Assembly Rooms and not the grand ballroom at Darton Hall.

She’d explored the mansion, in company with Abby and their ladies’ maids. Judging by the cobwebs in the corners, the ballroom hadn’t been used in some time. She

didn't blame the servants for skimping on the cleaning of it, either. The house was immense, and the small staff seemed inadequate to tend such an enormous estate.

Lord Darton, his brother, and Lord and Lady Weston were in the other coach. The children had been left with the nanny for the evening and Catherine hoped the twins wouldn't cause too much trouble. The boys were wonderfully sweet, but also impossible little tornadoes of chaos. Indeed, she quite liked them.

Their party was greeted at the Assembly Rooms by the village mayor and his wife, and then it seemed everyone was intent on meeting Darton Hall's guests. Finally, the crowd thinned and Catherine was able to take in the rooms.

Just ahead of the entryway was the dancing space, decorated with what seemed a hundred bouquets of hellebore bound up with scarlet ribbons. Dozens of silver candelabra lined the wide windowsills and mantel, shedding a warm golden light over the polished oak floor, while overhead a crystal chandelier glittered, contributing to the radiance.

"How lovely," Abby said, coming to stand beside her.

"It's enchanting," Catherine agreed.

She'd been in ballrooms decorated with fanciful ice sculptures and exquisite arrangements of exotic blooms, or swathed with purple bunting and overflowing urns of lilacs. But she'd never seen anything quite so magical as these simple Assembly Rooms.

The small orchestra off to the side struck up a lively polka, and an earnest fellow with freshly scrubbed cheeks asked Catherine if she would like to dance. They'd been introduced moments before, and he was clearly going to seize his opportunity.

“It would be my pleasure, Mr. Clark,” she replied, recalling his name in the nick of time.

He led her to the dance floor, and Abby followed soon after, on the arm of another farmer lad.

After that polka came another, with a different villager, and then a more sedate set dance. Both she and Abby had no shortage of men asking them to dance, and she found it a bit more challenging to navigate the requests without the aid of a dance card.

The musicians called a short break, and Catherine was glad of the respite. She glanced about, looking for Lord Darton, and saw him escorting a young woman toward the refreshment table. An excellent thought.

As an older woman ladled her out a cup of punch, the duke turned and saw Catherine. It might have been her imagination, but she thought one corner of his mouth turned up ever so slightly before he schooled his expression into its usual formality.

“Miss Randall,” he said, coming over to where she stood. “Are you enjoying the cotillion?”

“Yes.” She grinned at him. “It’s quite convivial.”

“I’m glad to hear it’s not too country-mannered for your London sensibilities.”

“Not at all! I find the country very pleasant, if you hadn’t noticed.” As she spoke the words, she realized they were true. She’d been enjoying her time at Darton Hall a great deal: putting her organizational talents—and notebook—to good use, riding almost every day, bantering with Lord Darton... All of it had been deeply satisfying in a way she was almost afraid to identify.

Something had changed in her, but she wasn't ready to consider it too closely. Wait , her mind said. Wait until after Christmas . Once she was back in London, everything would become clear.

So, she sipped her punch and caught her breath, and when the orchestra started up with a waltz, she gladly agreed to dance with the duke.

He was, as it turned out, quite an accomplished dancer even under the challenging conditions of a crowded floor packed with less-than-practiced dancers. He held her firmly, yet not too tightly, at a proper distance—except when he was required to pull her closer to avoid collisions with neighboring couples.

“My apologies,” he murmured each time, until she finally tired of his politeness.

“Stop apologizing,” she said, the next time he gathered her against him. “It’s quite all right.”

It was, she had to admit, more than all right. Little flickers of sensation went through her whenever their bodies brushed together, as though he were a wind and she a birch tree quaking at his nearness. When the dance ended, she was sorry to part.

“Will you dance with me again?” she asked, gazing into his eyes and knowing she was being quite forward.

He opened his mouth to reply, then shut it and looked past her, his expression going hard. Without turning, she knew that his brother had come up behind her.

“Do spare Miss Randall another turn in your arms,” Lord Christopher said, then smiled at Catherine when she turned to face him, as though they were sharing a joke at the duke’s expense. “I have arrived to save you, milady.”

For a moment she considered giving him the cut direct. Not yet, though. She wanted to tell him precisely what she thought of his treatment of his brother.

“By all means,” Lord Darton said, taking a step back. “Don’t let me spoil your evening.”

She frowned at him, wishing she could shake some sense into the man. “It’s not spoiled in the least.”

“Not since I’m here.” Lord Christopher scooped up her gloved hand and pressed a kiss upon the back.

She pulled out of his grasp, but when she looked up, the duke was gone.

“I’m sorry I was tardy in rescuing you from my stick of a brother,” Lord Christopher said as the next dance began to form upon the floor. “What a killjoy he’s become.”

She met his gaze, and for the first time noticed that the spark of mirth in his eyes seemed a bit forced. Perhaps he and his brother were like magnets, obliged by nature to push against one another through no fault of their own. But, unlike magnets, they were capable of changing. She hoped.

“I confess, I’m not in the mood to dance at the moment,” she said. “But might I speak freely, milord?”

“You’re free to complain to me about Lord Darton any time you wish, my dear.” He drew her away from the dance floor and toward the bank of windows where the candle flames shone, doubling their reflections in the glass. “You’ll find me a sympathetic listener. Is it my brother’s dreadfully boring way of speaking? Or perhaps the oh-so-proper -”

“It is nothing of the sort.” Her voice emerged too fiercely, and she attempted to modulate it. “It’s the way you treat him so dreadfully.”

Lord Christopher drew back as if she’d slapped him, his smile slipping. He blinked at her twice, then he pasted it back on. “Ha, ha. You’re having a joke at my expense. But surely you can see that he’s the dreadful one, not me.”

“No.” She shook her head. “He is not dreadful. Lord Darton is perhaps overly concerned with propriety, and overburdened with his duties. But at heart he is a good man and means well. Sadly, I cannot say the same of you.”

His expression hardened and he leaned forward. Catherine took a step back, knocking against a candelabra. She whirled to catch it, but it tipped, the flames brushing the inner draperies. The sheer material caught fire in an instant.

Oh no! This was all her fault.

She hastily bent and removed her slipper, then began beating at the blazing curtains in an attempt to extinguish the flames. She was dimly aware of Lord Christopher bellowing “Fire!” and a confusion of shouting and movement throughout the Assembly Rooms.

The flames had run up the length of the draperies and spread to the next ones over. Catherine followed, still attempting to quash the flames. If only she could halt the fire! Some of the draperies would be ruined, but surely, if she were more vigorous in her defense...

Smoke billowed around her, and she bent over, coughing. When she straightened, eyes stinging, she realized the rooms were Deserted. Empty of everything except the acrid smoke threatening to overwhelm her.

Shallow breaths , she told herself, crouching down in search of clearer air. If she crawled, certainly she could make it to the doors. Though they seemed strangely distant...

### CHAPTER 7

Philip watched his brother lead Catherine away, their heads close together in conversation, and clenched his fists in useless frustration. He could never compete with his charming, feckless brother, and he'd been an idiot to even try. If Christopher had decided to court Miss Randall, then she was lost to him.

Not that she'd ever been Philip's in the first place. They'd gone riding together, true, and had a great deal of pleasant, and even witty, conversations. She'd spent an entire afternoon with him going over the finer points of her journal organization system, which he had to admit was impressively thorough yet deceptively simple.

He'd thought that, perhaps, they might be at the beginning of a tentative friendship. But now he realized her warmth toward him was simply her nature. She was kind to everyone.

And now she was gazing up at Christopher with an intensity she'd never shown to Philip. He forced himself to look elsewhere and found Aunt Agatha watching him, a knowing expression on her face.

What was his aunt conniving about, anyway? He was striding toward her when a commotion on the dance floor made him turn. The room was bright. Brighter than it should be.

"Fire!" Christopher yelled. "Everyone out!"

There was a panicked rush for the doors. Philip scooped up Aunt Agatha, then spotted



Miss Abigail flailing in the crush and drew her against him.

“There’s another stairway,” he said, steering his charges around the crowd to the smaller stairwell.

In a matter of moments, they were outside, and quickly joined by the frightened participants of the abruptly ended Christmas Cotillion.

“Mama!” Lady Abigail cried, waving wildly.

Lady Fortnum pressed through the throng to join them and embraced her daughter. Then she looked over at Philip and asked, “Where is Catherine?”

Where indeed? A spike of dread went through him.

“I’ll find her,” he said, searching for his brother’s form in the crowd.

It didn’t take long to locate Christopher. Anger pulsed through Philip when he realized his brother stood alone.

“Where is she?” he asked, grabbing Christopher by the collar. “Where is Catherine?”

His brother’s expression shifted from confused to guilty to afraid in a mere instant. “I...she...” He waved toward the burning windows of the Assembly Rooms.

“You left her inside ?” The words came out a growl. Philip didn’t wait for Christopher’s response, but sprinted for the stairs, his pulse racing.

Fear for Catherine alternated with sheer rage against his brother as he pushed his way past the stragglers fleeing the Assembly Rooms. Near the top of the stairs the air grew thick with roiling black smoke. The last of the guests dashed past him. None of them

were Catherine Randall.

Pulling a kerchief from his pocket, he held it over his nose and mouth and hurried into the rooms.

“Catherine!” he called, his voice muffled by the cloth. “Miss Randall!”

No answer.

Panic roared through him. He pushed forward, coughing, his eyes stinging. She and Christopher had been standing near the far wall...

A sheen of gold caught his eye. An instant later he was on his knees beside the prone figure of Miss Catherine Randall. She lay on the oaken floor, one arm outstretched as though she'd been crawling toward the door. His chest squeezed tight with despair.

“Catherine.” He bent, pressing his face next to hers. “Breathe. Please.”

For a horrible moment she lay perfectly still, and his heart shattered within him.

Then she inhaled raggedly, and he gasped with relief. Then he doubled over, coughing, as flames crawled up the flocked wallpaper and began traversing the ceiling.

Holding his breath, he hoisted her into his arms and dashed for the door. His lungs burned and sweat trickled from his temples, but he pressed on. Whether they made it out without collapsing from asphyxiation, or not, he would accept that fate.

Until that moment, he had not understood. But now he knew that his life was worth nothing without Catherine Randall in it. If that meant he must challenge Christopher for her affections, so be it. It was a battle he was prepared to win.

Halfway down the stairs, the smoke cleared enough to gulp some air. He slowed, then inhaled deeply and glanced at the woman he carried. Her eyes were closed, her cheeks and nose smudged with soot. He'd never seen anyone more beautiful in his life.

"Can you hear me?" he said softly. "Catherine, take a breath. You're safe. I've got you."

She stirred in his arms and choked. Then she began coughing so hard he almost dropped her. He hurriedly sat down upon the stairs, holding her by the shoulders as she gasped and cried and fought her way back to consciousness.

"Lord Darton?" she whispered hoarsely once she'd finally caught her breath.

"The very same." He couldn't help smoothing his hand across her cheek to wipe away her tears.

"Thank you for saving me." Her voice was smoke-roughened and low.

"Hush." He knew he should stop cradling her face in his hands. "Don't try to speak."

"I must." She caught his gaze. Held it. "This is entirely too forward. But...I believe myself to be in love with you."

He stiffened as though he'd just been shot, his senses zinging with adrenaline. "What do you mean? I thought you and Christopher..."

"Him? Heavens, no. Never."

Joy rushed through him, a delirium of relief that brought him to the very edge of tears. He swallowed and then, greatly daring, brushed his lips over hers. She returned

the kiss, her mouth tasting of salt and smoke and new beginnings. Despite the abandoned stairwell, their battered and smoky condition, there was no sweeter thing in the world than the feel of her in his arms. The shape of her lips, warm and pliant beneath his.

At last, breathless, they pulled apart.

“I believe I feel the same,” he said.

The ghost of a grin tilted her mouth up. “Well, I’d hope so. I didn’t take you for the sort of gentleman that goes about kissing ladies whenever the whim takes you.”

He stared into the depths of her sherry-colored eyes. “Only you.”

“Good.” She nodded. “Now please, take me home.”

He picked her up again—a slightly trickier maneuver on the stairs, though helped this time by her sliding her arms around his neck. When they emerged into the chilly night, the crowd let out a cheer.

“Oh, my darling.” Lady Fortnum rushed forward, Miss Abigail at her side. “I was so worried. All you unharmed?”

Catherine nodded, though when Philip made to set her on her feet, she clung to him tightly. Very well. He was happy to hold her for hours if she liked. Years. He’d almost lost her, after all.

Because of his brother’s utter selfishness. What the devil had Christopher been thinking, abandoning her like that? He searched the crowd, but saw no sign of the blackguard.

“If you’re looking for your family, Lord Christopher took your aunt and cousins home in the other coach,” Lady Fortnum said. “As you can imagine, everyone was quite shaken, and the duchess blames herself.”

“Why would she?” he asked.

“She regrets her insistence on holding a Christmas Cotillion, I believe. But come. The fire brigade has arrived, and we’d best take my poor girl home.”

Philip nodded. “I’ll send for the doctor, too. Breathing in smoke is a nasty business.”

He carried Catherine to the coach, then tucked her between her mother and sister and took the opposite seat. It was a subdued trip back to Darton Hall. The evening had nearly ended in catastrophe, but every time he looked over and met Catherine’s gaze, he couldn’t help feeling a sharp prickle of joy.

### CHAPTER 8

Catherine slept soundly, probably due to the laudanum the doctor had administered to ease her throat. When she finally awoke, it was midday on Christmas Eve. She lay quietly a moment, listening to the distant sounds of the twins laughing and Abby playing a carol on the pianoforte in the drawing room below.

Darton Hall felt like home.

She drew in a deep, careful breath, relieved when it didn't trigger a coughing spasm.

"Catherine?" Her mother rose from the chair she'd pulled up beside the bed.

"Mama," she croaked, then smiled ruefully. "I've become a frog for Christmas."

"I'll ring for a posset," her mother said. "Cream and honey and a bit of brandy to soothe the throat will be just the thing. And then..." She hesitated and firmed her lips. "Christopher wishes to speak with you."

Catherine wrinkled her nose. She didn't want to speak to him, particularly.

"I believe he wants to apologize," her mother added. "He's fallen quite out of everyone's favor, which is a pity, as -"

She broke off, blushing, and Catherine gave her mother a sharp look. Had the viscountess actually...?

No, she decidedly did not want to know anything about whatever her mother and Lord Heatherton had, or had not, been up to.

But he certainly owed Catherine an apology. She hadn't considered it at the time, but it was quite terrible how he'd abandoned her while the fire raged.

So, she nodded, and obediently drank her posset when it arrived, and sat up in bed and drew her dressing robe about shoulders her when Lord Heatherton tapped at the door. To her relief, her mother stayed to chaperone, and there seemed to be no hint of anything untoward between them.

"Miss Randall," he said, a look of contrition on his face as he settled in the chair beside her bed, "I have behaved reprehensibly, and I am so very sorry. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me?"

It was a pat apology, and she stared at him, trying to see how much of it he truly meant. On the one hand, his usual devil-may-care attitude had been replaced by a hangdog look. On the other, well, she couldn't trust that anything he said was genuine.

"I will," she said hoarsely. "But there are conditions. Firstly, that you cease needling your brother so incessantly. Secondly, that you take your own duties as Viscount Heatherton more seriously. And finally, that you and Lord Darton agree to shake hands beneath the mistletoe and a call a truce."

"We're hardly at war," he said, clearly trying to make light of it.

"You are, and it must stop." Especially if things turned out as she hoped. "Do you promise?"

He met her gaze, a light of challenge in his eyes. "Do you forgive me?"

“For so long as you hold up your side of the bargain, yes.”

“Very well.” He let out a heavy sigh. “I’m not sure what to do with myself, if I’m not trying to tweak Philip’s nose at every turn.”

“You’ll find something,” Lady Fortnum said dryly. “A bit of maturity sits well on a man, I do believe.”

Catherine pretended to fit of coughing then, which quickly turned real, and Lord Heatherton took his leave.

Her next visitor was much more welcome, and she couldn’t help smiling widely as Lord Darton stepped into her room.

“Cath...er, Miss Randall,” he said, shooting a guilty glance at her mother.

“Your Grace.” Lady Fortnum rose from the bedside chair. “I must step out a moment. Please, take my seat and keep Catherine company.”

It was all Catherine could do to keep from rolling her eyes at her mother’s transparent ploy to leave them alone. Still, she didn’t argue as she and the duke were given their privacy.

“My dear Miss Randall.” He stepped to the edge of the bed and reached for her hand, which she gave willingly.

“My dear Lord Darton,” she replied, wishing her voice wasn’t quite so rough.

He met her gaze, and she saw the hint of his brilliant smile lurking about his mouth. “Might I hope that you might one day call me Philip?”

“One day soon, I hope. And you will call me Catherine.”



He pressed her hand, his face undergoing that transformation that melted her heart.

“Or perhaps,” he said, “Your Grace, the Duchess of Darton-on-Rye.”

“Or perhaps,” she said, her heart suddenly beating like a hundred wings in her chest, “beloved.”

“Always that,” he said, and she couldn’t believe she’d ever thought him stuffy and impossibly proper as he bent and pressed a fervent kiss against her lips.

She returned the kiss, pulling him toward her. They were lost in delicious sensation for quite some time, until Lady Fortnum, obviously returned, cleared her throat.

“Ahem,” said Philip, pulling back and adjusting his cravat.

“I take it your suit was successful?” Catherine’s mother asked, a glint of mirth in her eyes.

“He hasn’t actually asked me yet,” Catherine said, but held up one hand as Philip began to speak. “I have a request, however.” She met his gaze. “Ask me in one hour, beneath the mistletoe.”

His brows rose, but his own smile remained. “It would give me the utmost joy to do so.”

An hour later, the household assembled in the drawing room. The whole of Darton Hall was redolent with the smells of roast goose, baking bread, and evergreens. In the center of the room, the servants had hung a kissing bough fashioned of holly, ivy, and gold ribbons, along with the single sprig of mistletoe Philip had oh-so-reluctantly allowed into the house. It felt an eon ago, as though he’d been a different person then. And perhaps he had.

He'd been, he could now admit, a bit of an ass; so caught up in his responsibilities and worry over what was proper that he'd almost missed the treasure right beneath his nose. In that regard, he supposed he could forgive Christopher, for helping bring him and Catherine together.

But that goodwill was entirely erased by the fact that his brother had left her in peril, only concerned with saving his own skin.

"What's going on?" one of the twins whispered loudly, twisting to look up at his mother.

"A Christmas surprise," she said.

"Is it a horse and sleigh?"

"I want one, too," the other boy declared.

"Hush, children," Catherine said, walking into the room with Lady Fortnum at her side. "The gift is for me."

Her voice was still throaty, and once again Philip cursed his brother. But she looked lovely, garbed in a cream-colored gown sprigged with scarlet flowers. He met her gaze, and felt a thousand years younger that he had the day before.

"Miss Randall." He moved forward to take her hand, but she forestalled him.

"First, I have a gift for you." She glanced at Aunt Agatha, on the settee beside young Olivia. "For your entire family, I hope. I understand that your husband and his brother parted at odds, and were never able to mend that rift."

"Yes." The dowager duchess nodded sadly. "It's the reason for the clause in his will requiring that Philip and Christopher spend Christmas here. He saw them growing

apart, and wished to keep them from going down the same unfortunate path.”

“Too late,” Philip said quietly, but Catherine shook her head.

“Perhaps not,” she said. “Lord Heatherton, please enter.”

A moment later, Christopher stepped around the corner. He carried himself with shoulders bowed, and for a moment Philip recalled the boy he’d been.

“Philip.” His brother took a deep breath, then let it out and came forward to stand beneath the bough. “I’m sorry for...well, for all the cruel things I’ve said. Even those that have some truth to them.”

Catherine gave a pointed sniff, and Christopher glanced at her, then back to Philip.

“I don’t think we’ll ever be friends,” he continued, “but it is my hope that we might, at least, not be enemies. In the Christmas spirit of peace and charity, will you shake my hand here, beneath the mistletoe, and agree to let bygones be bygones?”

“Oh, well done,” Aunt Agatha said softly as Christopher extended his hand.

For a moment, Philip stared at it. Could he forgive his brother for everything he’d done? All the little jabs and sneers, yes. But Christopher had been the worst kind of coward to abandon Catherine at the Assembly Rooms.

Yet, his brother seemed contrite. Perhaps he’d finally realized that he had to start thinking of more than just himself at every moment.

“Philip?” Christopher asked, his hand still outstretched. It was the vulnerable note in his voice that did it.

“Yes.” Philip stepped forward and clasped his brother’s hand. “I accept your offer of

peace.”

Their gazes met, and he was glad to see the honesty in Christopher’s eyes. Perhaps things would be better between them after all, going forward.

“Huzzah!” Lord Weston cried, and his sons were delighted to take up the cheer.

Aunt Agatha wiped a tear from her cheek, while Lady Fortnum patted her shoulder.

“Wait.” Philip released his brother’s hand and raised his voice to be heard above the crowing of the twins. “I’m not finished.”

Christopher stepped back, the twins subsided, and, with a smile Catherine moved to stand beside him. He took her hand and then went to one knee on the Aubusson carpet.

“Now what’s happening?” the first twin asked.

“A wedding, silly,” his sister answered.

“The precursor to a wedding,” Philip gently corrected, then returned his gaze to Catherine. “My dearest Miss Randall, will you do me the very great honor of consenting to become my wife, my duchess, my notebook-keeper and keeper of my heart?”

She grinned at him, and he grinned right back.

“Yes,” she said simply. “Now stand up and give me a kiss.”

More cheering ensued, and, conscious of the watching crowd, Philip kept their embrace chaste. Mostly.

“Aren’t you glad I talked you into the mistletoe?” she whispered against his mouth as the kiss ended.

“I am glad of everything about you,” he replied softly. “And I always will be.”