



BOOK **III** THREE

THE DARING DERSINGHAMS



A Trace of Roses

LYNNE CONNOLLY

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Publisher's Note](#)

[Additional Dragonblade books by Author Lynne Connolly](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

A Trace of Roses
The Daring Dersinghams
Book Three

By
Lynne Connolly



Copyright © 2020 Lynne Connolly

Text by Lynne Connolly

Cover by Dar Albert

Dragonblade Publishing, Inc. is an imprint of Kathryn Le Veque Novels, Inc.

P.O. Box 7968

La Verne CA 91750

ceo@dragonbladepublishing.com

Produced in the United States of America

First Edition March 2020

Kindle Edition

Reproduction of any kind except where it pertains to short quotes in relation to advertising or promotion is strictly prohibited.

All Rights Reserved.

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

License Notes:

This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook, once purchased, may not be re-sold. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it or borrow it, or it was not purchased for you and given as a gift for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. If this book was purchased on an unauthorized platform, then it is a pirated and/or unauthorized copy and violators will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Do not purchase or accept pirated copies. Thank you for respecting the author's hard work. For subsidiary rights, contact Dragonblade Publishing, Inc.



ARE YOU SIGNED UP FOR DRAGONBLADE'S BLOG?

You'll get the latest news and information on exclusive giveaways, exclusive excerpts, coming releases, sales, free books, cover reveals and more.

Check out our complete list of authors, too!

No spam, no junk. That's a promise!

[Sign Up Here](#)



Dearest Reader;

Thank you for your support of a small press. At Dragonblade Publishing, we strive to bring you the highest quality Historical Romance from the some of the best authors in the business. Without your support, there is no 'us', so we sincerely hope you adore these stories and find some new favorite authors along the way.

Happy Reading!

CEO, Dragonblade Publishing

Additional Dragonblade books by Author Lynne Connolly

The Daring Dersinghams Series

[A Touch of Silver](#)

[A Hint of Starlight](#)

[A Trace of Roses](#)

***** Please visit Dragonblade's website for a full list of books and authors. Sign up for Dragonblade's blog for sneak peeks, interviews, and more: *****

www.dragonbladepublishing.com

[Amazon](#)

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Publisher's Note](#)

[Additional Dragonblade books by Author Lynne Connolly](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)



Chapter One

June 1756

“SUCH A WASTE!”

Several people turned away from watching the orchestra and dancers to stare at Dorcas as she gazed at the abundance of flowers decorating the Rotunda at Ranelagh Gardens.

Their stares didn't deter her, but she lowered her voice. If they were enjoying the music, good luck to them. “They'll be dead in a week,” she murmured.

Her sister-in-law Annie hunched a shoulder in a shrug. Her interests lay elsewhere, and as a Londoner born and bred, flowers came from markets. But Dorcas had also lived in the city for most of her life, and yet she had an abiding love of plants.

The man sitting next to her grunted. The Duke of Blackridge could converse in grunts. He had one for every occasion. Dorcas found the habit endearing. A duke was usually impeccable in dress and manners but Blackridge was an exception. Dorcas, who felt like an exception herself, understood. To a certain extent, at least.

He glanced at his mother, lately arrived in London, although not his younger brother. His brother was staying in the duke's villa at Greenwich. Dorcas had visited the villa once when Blackridge's family was not there. She would never forget his kindness when she'd fallen unexpectedly ill during a visit to Greenwich. If anything, she'd have thought that would have put him off. But it hadn't, a miracle in itself.

An elegant woman, the duchess' dark hair, powdered white for tonight, was sleekly brushed back into the high bun favored by fashion. She turned her head to meet her son's gaze. She nodded. He smiled back.

Her glance flicked to Dorcas and her smile grew rigid. Dorcas didn't let her response show, because she sensed the lady wanted to see it. Her grace was so, well, *gracious* she put Dorcas' teeth on edge.

But Dorcas would have to make the effort, because Blackridge had courted her all season. She might be the third member of the family to become a duchess. Society would have a collective fit. Dorcas' branch of the Dersingham family had been comfortably obscure until her brother Gerald had inherited an earldom. Now look at them, she thought gloomily.

Dorcas heaved a sigh, and studied the dying flowers rather than listening to the orchestra. There was a plethora of daisies and roses, with abundant greenery ripped from the earth to fill in the gaps. “Surely small troughs of plants would be better?” she wondered aloud. “They'd last longer, for one thing.”

“So they would. You should suggest it to them.” Laughter echoed in his voice.

She turned her head and found the duke watching her, rather than the dancers. He didn't look away when she looked at him. Warmth shaded his brown eyes and despite her naggy mood, he made her smile.

Few people saw him like this, relaxed and open. He had a reputation for surliness, but she'd never experienced it. His huge hulking body tended to favor that interpretation of his

actions and words, but in her mind he was taciturn rather than surly. At any rate, he didn't sulk. He had a reputation for a temper that flared hot, but she'd never seen it.

"Now, tell me what's really wrong," he murmured, leaning back and crossing his legs in a negligent way. "It can't be the flowers. They've been here every day this season, and you never commented on them before."

She heaved a sigh. "London wearies me," she said, sounding like every fashionable woman who ever was. "I want to breathe country air."

"Didn't you live in Shoreditch for most of your life?" his mother put in. "Isn't that in London? Or is it your humble home that you miss?" Her sharp, staccato voice ran over Dorcas like nails on glass.

Dorcas tried not to be frosty. "You've been reading the gossip sheets, ma'am. Our house wasn't so humble." So much for not sounding irritated.

"Since you landed in the middle of the fashionable world two years ago, you've done nothing but create gossip. Even if you don't listen to it, everybody else does." The duchess opened her fan with a practiced flick, the snap punctuating her words.

"I can't help what they think." Recalling some of the insults slung their way, Dorcas clamped her lips together.

Blackridge raised his thick black brows. "Most of it is coming from the Illingworths, particularly the daughter. She is not endearing herself to others." Without waiting for her answer, he continued, "The lady is forgetting that she is seen as increasingly vindictive and waspish. One certainly doesn't want to marry someone who will do that over the breakfast table."

Goodness, how refreshingly straightforward. But he could afford to be. He was a duke. Dorcas, as the younger sister of an earl, and a newcomer, had to watch what she said. A pity she did not always take her own advice.

His mother, however, protested. "Really, Blackridge! You have no tact at all!"

He snorted. "I have no truck with obfuscation. Society's pretty words cover some appalling prejudices. If we allow them to continue, we do ourselves no favors. None at all."

"You were great friends once," the duchess pointed out.

"Yes, we were. Once. She has changed. Not for the better, I'm afraid."

Dorcas had to say something. Fumbling for her fan, she flicked it open with none of the finesse of the duchess, and plied it vigorously. Not for effect. "Let her do her worst. We have prospered despite her best efforts."

A slow smile curled Blackridge's lips. "Indeed, you have. Not satisfied with marrying one of his sisters to a duke, Carbrooke has snagged one for the family chaperone. I was never so glad as when I heard that. Not just for your Aunt Matilda, but for Trensom. Harry deserved a happy ending. He was a widower too long."

"I have to admit that the Illingworths were always encroaching," the duchess put in, her cut-glass tones derisory. "They set store by vulgar aspiration. People with true greatness do not boast of it."

"Just what I've been saying," Lady Comyn put in. "You are a woman after my own heart, duchess."

The two women set to discussing the Illingworths, and their various transgressions. Strange how a year or two could make a difference to one's perception of a person. When they had first landed in society, the Dersinghams feared for their success, since the

Illingworths seemed all-powerful. Not so much, as matters had turned out. But Lady Elizabeth had done herself no favors when she had declared she would marry a duke.

Dorcas closed the fan. It wasn't helping to cool her down. She had never enjoyed society gossip, but the reminder of the unhappiness Lady Elizabeth had willfully caused distressed her still. "My sister and my sister-in-law's aunt found the men who would make them happy. That they are dukes is beside the point."

"Not as far as society is concerned." He got to his feet and held out his hand to her. "Do you care for a walk around the gardens? I daren't ask you to dance, since all your attention is on the flowers and I'd rather have it directed elsewhere."

At him, he meant.

Was this it? When he would ask her to marry him? His mother wasn't here by accident, apparently.

As she obtained Annie's permission to tour the well-lit paths, Dorcas had her doubts. She wasn't particularly beautiful, or witty, or wealthy. Moderate described her best. Except for her passion for gardens and rare plants. Moderate height, moderate looks, moderate intelligence...but she was good at doubting herself, she had to admit that.

She laid her hand on the deep, silky velvet of his red evening coat, and let him take her away from the bustling center of Ranelagh Gardens. They went into the fresh night air. "The Rotunda is nothing more than a place for people to display themselves and gossip about everyone else. I can't see the point."

"Neither can I," Blackridge said. "But it's one of society's rituals. It's why I don't come to London unless I have to."

"Oh?" Despite Lady Elizabeth's insinuations, Dorcas was bred well enough not to ask intrusive questions. But she'd had two London seasons now, and Blackridge had been there both times. And at the Duke of Trensom's house for Christmas. "You live in Scotland, so I suppose it's a long journey."

He lifted a massive shoulder in a half-shrug. "It's not so bad by ship. And if you have a decent coach, even road travel is tolerable." He paused and they walked further. The light from the flambeaux overhead flickered, sending warm light flickering over them. His skin took on the warmth, and then passed into shadow as the torches became more widely set apart.

She glanced ahead. A few people were also strolling around, their elegant poses making her smile.

"Does something amuse you?"

Oh, she hadn't realized. What had he said? She'd let her mind float. She'd better tell him what she was thinking. "It's just that everyone is so respectable here, close to the Rotunda."

He glanced up with a smile. "Too much light for them."

He'd picked up her meaning at once. Few people did that. "Yes. Further along, the lights are fewer, and not so bright. Do you think the owners of this place do it on purpose?"

"Of course they do," he said. "They encourage it and set their spies on likely looking people. If something scandalous happens here, the gossip-rags get to hear about it in the morning."

Even Grub Street hacks had to make a living but, preferably, not at her expense. "I didn't know that. We used to come before Gerald inherited the earldom, but nobody noticed us then."

He laughed, a sharp bark that sank into a nearby hedge. “I find that hard to accept. How many lovely triplets are living in London?”

“Ah.” That distinction had dogged the sisters all their lives. “As you might have noticed, we’re not identical. We don’t read one another’s minds, and we don’t have to be together to be happy.”

Not entirely true. She missed her sisters, as if part of her were missing.

They turned, and walked back the way they’d come. “I thought you were restless this season. Your sister, the Duchess of Glenbreck, came to town, though. Are you sorry you didn’t go to Rome with the Trensoms?”

Now it was her turn to laugh. Matilda and her duke were ridiculously in love. “Not at all. Delphi would have gone to Rome on her own if Gerald hadn’t put his foot down. Matilda and Harry didn’t marry for convenience, you know.”

He used his spare hand to rub his nose, not quite hiding his smile. “Forgive me, but that was evident last Christmas. They didn’t even try to hide their—devotion, once they had become formally engaged.”

That was true. They had shamelessly shared one bedroom—his. Since they were among friends, everyone pretended not to notice. “I can’t imagine being so in love—with a person, that is.”

He took her along the path skimming the central area. They could still hear the music, and the light was still bright. Other people strolled along these wide, smooth paths. Perfectly respectable. He was a friend of her sister’s husband, a very close friend. He wouldn’t try anything nefarious. Although, truth be told, she’d rather like it if he did.

Blackridge was outrageously attractive, a dark Hades to his friend Kilsyth’s Apollo. Dorcas preferred the dark, hidden beauty to the obvious, bright one. He was taller than most people, broad-shouldered, a man to depend on. Although she couldn’t say she loved him, Dorcas wouldn’t have encouraged his attentions if she hadn’t felt some attraction to him.

He guided her deeper into the gardens. They walked in silence for five minutes, until they reached a deserted glade. The music and chatter from the Rotunda had faded, though if she concentrated, Dorcas could still hear them.

Without words, he drew her closer. He knew how to be gentle, despite his huge hands, with their long, capable fingers. He slowly urged her closer. Her wide hooped skirt touched his waistcoat, but instead of pulling her close, threatening to damage the cane hoops, he leaned down, and touched his lips to hers.

The tenderness undid her. Raising her chin and going on tiptoe made her lose her balance, so she reached up and put her hands on his shoulders. He groaned low in his throat, hardly audible, but she felt it because they were touching. Grasping her upper arms, he steadied her, giving her tacit permission to let go, to let him take her weight.

He pressed his lips more firmly against hers. She opened her mouth.

Slipping his tongue past her lips swamped her with sensation, gave her an impression of nearly unbearable intimacy. Cautious, gentle, as if she would jerk back any minute, he explored her mouth, grazed past her teeth to touch her tongue with the tip of his.

Dorcas melted into him, enjoyed him. Her body tingled all over. This was why such contact was banned. It was too intimate, threatening to overwhelm her senses. Illicit thoughts she barely understood crowded into her mind, pushing out everything else.

He finished the kiss as gently as he'd begun it but the interval in the middle was passionate and needy. She wanted more. Drawing away, he gazed down at her face before releasing her. He did it slowly, in stages, giving her time to regain her balance, though not her senses. She blinked rapidly, swallowed, tried to collect her thoughts.

"Thank you," he said gravely, as if she'd granted him a great favor. But he had done the same to her. Should she thank him in return? Was that too gauche?

He saved her confusion by speaking again.

"Lady Dorcas." He sounded uncertain. Here it came, the proposal she was expecting. "Dorcas..."

"Yes?" She tried not to sound too eager. She glanced down, then up at his face.

His next words came in a rush. "My lady—Dorcas, I have enjoyed your company a great deal this season. I know you are missing your sisters, but perhaps I may suggest a solution, another way to—"



"THERE YOU ARE!"

Grant closed his eyes and tightened his lips. Just as he'd screwed up his courage to do the deed, along came her brother.

He couldn't quite force a smile, but he greeted Lord Carbrooke civilly enough. "Yes, indeed. Here we are."

"Annie wanted to know if you are ready to leave. She is anxious to get home to see if the baby is all right."

"Oh, yes." Dorcas showed a little too much enthusiasm for Grant's liking. Had she guessed what he was about to ask? A moment ago, the stars were wheeling above them, there was a scent of roses in the air, and the time was right. Their kiss had sealed the time and place. Something to remember. Women enjoyed that. And he had to admit, so had he.

"Besides," Carbrooke said, "Lady Elizabeth Askew has turned up. With the Duke of Beauchamp by her side. Your mother invited them to join us in our booth."

"I beg your pardon?" Grant couldn't quite work out what Carbrooke meant. "Did the old duke die, then? Is this his heir?"

Carbrooke laughed. "Oh no, the old duke is very much alive. He's joking with Annie, making suggestions I pray she doesn't understand, but I fear she does."

"An intelligent woman, your wife. But the Duke of Beauchamp? Is her ladyship so desperate to marry a duke?"

"Her mother is with them, lending her countenance," Carbrooke said gloomily. "But I am beyond their reach and, in any case, she wouldn't be satisfied with a mere earl these days."

Grant was seized with a strong suspicion of certainty. "I am not. Beyond her reach, that is." Not yet, though if Carbrooke had arrived five minutes later, he would have been.

"She seemed delighted to join us. Even behaved graciously to Annie. She usually ignores her."

"Because I'm there. Don't mistake me, it's not me she covets, but the title I hold."

They walked back in the direction of the Rotunda. Grant matched his pace to Dorcas', while her brother took her other side. "The pity is that before ambition took hold, she would have made anyone a worthy wife, but she let her bitterness get the better of her. She stormed

through balls like a wild beast stalking its prey. So, naturally, the prey avoided her. Matters could have become very messy if she'd caught one of us."

"She nearly caught me," Carbrooke said glumly. "But she was different then. More helpful, kinder." He grimaced. "I don't know. Losing me, or rather my title, then seeing Glenbreck slip through her fingers did something to her, I think."

Grant agreed. Lady Elizabeth had been lovely, accomplished and gracious. They had been close enough to call one another friends when she'd been betrothed to the old earl's son. Too cold for his taste, but she would have snagged her duke before too long, had she not been so eager. And making someone feel like prey rather than a person she was interested in did her no favors at all.

Totally unlike the Dersingham triplets who, without realizing it, had taken London by storm. His preference had always been for Dorcas. She was more down-to-earth than her sisters and, to his eyes, prettier. Literally, since she enjoyed gardening. Less likely to expect romance all the time.

He found Dorcas a woman he'd like to know further, to enjoy more. And it was time he took a wife. Past time, but he'd never met anyone he liked half so much as her.

Did she have the romantic ambitions of her siblings? Despite the sweet kiss they'd shared, Grant wasn't looking for romance in marriage. A satisfactory relationship, in and out of bed, to be sure, a partner, a friend. His early life had been too turbulent for him to wish for strong emotions to invade him at this point. He had enough to do with his various businesses.

Dorcas had the potential to become all that. He'd worked himself up to this, invited the family to join him tonight specifically, so he could get Dorcas' permission to talk to her brother about drawing up a marriage contract. And now that very brother had ruined his careful plans. And thrown him in the way of the worst social predator in London.

Belatedly, Gerald appeared to notice that he had interrupted something. The man could certainly be obtuse at times. "Oh, I'm sorry I interrupted you, but I wanted to warn—that is, tell you that you have more guests."

Dorcas turned her attention to Grant, leaning on his arm. "The new baby has a sniffle. Indeed, we should get back to him."

Grant forbore to remind Dorcas that it wasn't her baby. But the child was precious, he understood that. He was the son and heir to the earldom. Little Viscount Kempton would ensure the descent of the title, but until Lady Carbrooke fell pregnant again, he was the one and only.

Dorcas could hardly stay if Lord and Lady Carbrooke left, so he had to rethink his plans. Tomorrow, perhaps. A formal proposal in the drawing room. That would mean another kiss, which he wasn't at all averse to. Perhaps tomorrow her gown would be draped over a smaller hoop, or even none at all, and he could get even closer to her. His desire grew again, proving his point for him.

Giving in to the inevitable, Grant let Dorcas put her hand through his arm, and they strolled back to their box in the main arena with her brother. "Perhaps I may call on you tomorrow, my lady," he said. He should see her brother first, but damn that. He wanted Dorcas, not Carbrooke. And Carbrooke wouldn't object to Grant's suit, he was sure of it.

"Oh." A pretty flush rose to her cheeks. Grant enjoyed seeing it, imagined kissing it. "Yes, yes, of course."

He left the party early, escorting his mother, who complained of a headache, back to their London house, but when they arrived, he was satisfied with this evening's work.

The footman folded up the steps and closed the door before raising his hand to give the driver the signal to leave.

Although the carriage barely jerked as it set off, his mother moaned and put her hand to her forehead.

"We'll have you in bed soon, Mama," he assured her.

"I really don't know why you need me in town," she complained. "Your poor brother is left to his own devices, and you know he cannot bear to be alone for long."

Yes, he knew. "You don't have to stay," he pointed out. "Go to Greenwich in the morning. I can send word if I need you again."

She opened her eyes, but kept her hand pressing her left temple. Grant doubted she had a headache. That was her usual excuse for leaving anywhere early.

"You are not seriously planning to marry that girl."

"I am," he assured her. "What is more, I plan to ask her tomorrow."

"At least you haven't done it yet," she muttered, wincing when the carriage went smoothly around a corner. "The Dersinghams are not suitable people. They live in London all year round, for one thing. They have no idea how to go on in the country, and to ask one of them to become your duchess! What are you thinking of, Blackridge? You cannot be thinking clearly, that is for sure. They lived in Shoreditch. How do you know they aren't nonconformists? That area is a hotbed of apostates."

"Even the king likes Quakers," Grant pointed out, trying to be reasonable. "In any case, the Dersinghams are not Quakers. They preferred town, that is all. Each of the triplets has an interest that was best pursued in London. Except Dorcas," he added, trying to be fair.

She rolled her head, finding a soft resting place on the padded rest. "She is only lately become an earl's sister," his mother continued. For a woman with a bad headache, she was talking a lot. "She's too old, and she doesn't have the finesse required for a duke's wife. Do consider, my dear, before you rush into a rash marriage you are bound to regret."

Would he regret his decision? No matter, because he had no intention of backing out.

"Dorcas is intelligent, funny and elegant. Everything a duke could want. Her brother assures me all the girls had the best education, so she will know how to handle herself."

"And she's too old. She must be twenty-seven if she's a day," his mother continued.

"Women older than that have come through childbirth well."

"She might never become enceinte."

Grant smiled. "I don't care. I have a brother, and after him, a cousin. The title and estate are safe."

"Is that all that matters to you?" Her indignation and the way she glared at him didn't bode well for her headache. "The estate?"

"It's all you've ever taught me to care for," he said grimly.

He would marry Dorcas whatever his mother said. If the duchess chose not to set foot inside the estate, that was all to the good, since he couldn't see her deferring to a new duchess. And his brother could stay where he wished. David would never lack while Grant was alive. More than that he wouldn't say.



Chapter Two

TRYING NOT TO feel nervous wasn't working, so halfway through the following day, Dorcas gave up waiting for Blackridge and went into the garden. Unfortunately, she was wearing new, fashionable clothing, the cherry red gown with flowers printed in shades of cream and ivory. At least she wasn't wearing white. She found a clean, practical apron to go on top of the delicate, fashionable lace one and tied her hair up in a linen cap that she could whip off once the butler told her he had come.

The last thing she wanted to do was sit in the parlor sewing a fine seam waiting for her possible future husband. *Possible future husband!* She wasn't even entirely sure that was what he meant. He had given every intimation of it, and she could have sworn he meant to propose, but he had not actually said it. The kiss, though...that had kept her awake for hours last night.

Dorcas made herself busy, checking her list for preparations for the summer. Gerald had given her carte blanche in the gardens wherever they lived, and she'd been delighted when she'd seen the one here. Many families leased houses for the season, but Gerald had inherited this one. Leasehold, but the lease would run out when they were all dead. And she could have the garden as she wanted it.

A simple task was required. Dead heading the roses was perfect for her purposes. She found a trug and her clippers, and set about her work.

That occupation had given Dorcas much solace and contentment through the years, but it wasn't working now. She fumbled with her clippers and nearly dropped them on her foot. Setting them right, she took a few heads off the plants, then nearly dropped them again. Her muttered curse was met with a laugh as a large hand came around her and neatly caught the clippers by the handles.

She gasped and spun around, tangling her skirts around her legs. "I thought...I didn't hear..."

"No, you didn't." Blackridge was smiling, no clouds in his eyes. She'd never seen him so cheerful. His craggy face was clear of trouble, his eyes gleaming.

"Oh!" Reaching up, she pulled the strings of her apron, releasing the bow. Hastily, she dragged it over her head, snagging the tapes of her linen cap and pulling off the simple straw hat she'd forgotten about. Heat flooded her, and her breath shortened. The sight of him always did that to her, in a minor way.

When she'd lain awake in his Greenwich villa, moaning in pain because of the megrims, he'd come to her.

Usually she preferred to be alone, but somehow he'd provided a soothing presence. Very strange, since Dorcas couldn't even manage with her siblings in the same room.

She'd thought she'd imagined it. Perhaps she had. But the sight of her then had not deterred him from becoming her friend, and perhaps more. If that hadn't put him off, nothing would. Blackridge put his hands on her upper arms, steadying her. "Let me help." He tightened his hold when she would have pulled out of them. "Don't wriggle."

To her chagrin, she had to stand still while he untangled her. Apron strings, cap strings, and hat ribbon had become seriously twisted around each other. And she had to undergo his touch, skin to skin as he unwound this and that, and finally pulled everything free.

She'd bent her head by then, so perhaps he had not seen the flush on her cheeks or the way she clenched her fists as she was forced to play the child to his nursemaid.

"I'm sorry," she said for the umpteenth time.

"I know you are," he murmured. "You already said that."

In other words, don't say it again. But she didn't know what else to say. Once she was clear of strings and linen, she had to look up. He handed her her hat, but instead of letting her put it on herself, he tied the ribbons on the right side, just under her ear. By then she'd regained some of her sangfroid, which was probably why he'd done it.

"Thank you," she said. "I'm aware I must look like a scarecrow in August, but without your help I would have looked a lot worse."

He tilted his head, smiled. "Why August?"

"Because that's just before harvest, and the crows are diving all over the cornfield."

His smile broadened. "How would you know that? You live in London the year round, do you not?"

"I read." Not as much as Delphi, but still...she did pick up a book occasionally.

"Of course." He stroked one finger under her chin. "So soft. You know, since I kissed you last night, I've been longing to do it again. May I?"

Well, it was good of him to ask. "I've been thinking about it a lot, too."

So he kissed her. And it felt as good as it had in Ranelagh Gardens, with the essence of night-scented flowers around them. Today, with the sweet, heady perfume of roses, it was still as wonderful.

He licked his way into her mouth with finesse. She was hardly aware that he was holding her closer, or that they were standing in view of several windows, though thankfully, not in direct sight. That in and of itself declared his intentions. She relaxed, melted against him and slipped her hands under his coat. The heat of his body warmed her even more than the sun.

When he finished the kiss, she sighed with pleasure, and took her time opening her eyes.

"I take it that's a yes?"

"To what?" She regained her senses. "You haven't asked me anything yet."

He blinked. "Ah yes, I was too eager to get to the kissing part. I should have asked first. My apologies." But he mitigated his apology by kissing her forehead, and the tip of her nose.

"Before we return to the best part of this meeting, I'd better take care of the formalities. Lady Dorcas, would you do me the great honor of marrying me? In short, can you take me for better or worse?"

"If there's more better than worse."

Now that she was in his arms, everything seemed possible. Her nerves disappeared, which was definitely a good thing.

"When?"

"I'll get the special license tomorrow. Actually, couldn't we leave contracts and agreements to your brother and my man of business? I'll tell him to agree to anything."

Her head rested comfortably on the place below his shoulder. She hadn't met a man as tall as Blackridge before, but she was discovering there were advantages. "We have to do the

contracts and such. Would you have wanted me if I were just the sister of the third heir to the earldom and living in Shoreditch?"

"Undoubtedly, if we'd ever met."

She liked that he hadn't hesitated to give his reply. "We used to attend society functions once or twice a year. The old earl used to tell us that we needed to know how to 'go on', as he'd put it."

"I cannot understand why you three women weren't remarked upon before. Triplets are hardly usual."

"Ah, but we're not identical, and we took care to develop our own styles. We merely called ourselves sisters, and since our fortune was, as one lady said, 'adequate', there was no reason to take notice of us."

"I'd say there were plenty of reasons," he murmured. His lips were against her temple. Each word was like a kiss.

She wanted to ask a question, but she dared not, in case this lovely idyll was spoiled. But she thought it.

She'd seen love, the way Damaris and her husband looked at each other when they thought nobody was watching, the way they would hold hands at the opera. Their utter devotion to each other. Dorcas wanted that for herself. But what if it wasn't there?

Did he love her?



Chapter Three

AFTER A DELICIOUS interval in the shadow of a convenient hedge, they went inside to tell her family. Lord and Lady Carbrooke were waiting but pretending they were not. So were the servants. Some had evidently seen at least one of the kisses he'd claimed from Dorcas before he moved her to a less obvious place in the garden.

But he'd wanted that first kiss to be seen, a seal on their forthcoming union. As much a declaration as the no doubt weighty contract they would have to sign. The gossip would be all around London by dinnertime.

Sitting in the drawing room, sipping tea when brandy was what he really wanted, Grant congratulated himself on a job well done. Despite his mother's animadversions, he had chosen his bride, and he would wed. The restless feeling that had attacked him for most of the season had gone.

Grant liked his life set out neatly. He felt much better when vagaries were changed to certainties, and that was certainly the case now.

However, that sense of satisfaction didn't completely explain the warm sensation invading his groin, and the stirrings of desire. While he expected to be attracted to his future bride, the intensity of his emotion shocked him.

He had always remained in control of his body but, this time, twice now, he'd been tempted to take his encounters with Dorcas further than he should.

He'd have time to control himself, he consoled himself, even while his erection raged for fulfillment.

Now for the paperwork and the tedious negotiations. They would not take long, because he wanted Dorcas in his bed. Tomorrow.

"Tomorrow," he said. "We may meet to discuss the contract."

Carbrooke heaved a sigh. "I'll send word to my lawyer. We should be ready." He glanced at Dorcas. Grant liked that he referred to his sisters. Dorcas was a grown woman. She would know what she wanted.

"Glasshouses," she said firmly.

Grant frowned. "I beg your pardon?"

"I want glasshouses to cultivate my plants." Turning in her seat, she addressed him directly.

"As long as I have that, and free rein to a section of the garden, then I'll be happy."

He blinked. "I know you are interested in horticulture, but...do you not want other things? A widow's portion, generous pin money?"

"A widow's portion?" she echoed as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing. Her lovely eyes widened. "Sir, we're not yet married. Why should I wish for your death?"

He spread his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Oh, I don't know. Perhaps you'll want me dead in a year or so. Unfortunately, I can't oblige you, but it is usual to make provisions for widowhood, you know."

"And my death, too?" Her voice quietened.

"Indeed, though personally I'm expecting neither clause to come into force for some time."

“Good.” She stared down at her hands, which were clasped in her lap. A curl, dislodged from its neat, modest style, fell forward. Grant had to concentrate on not touching it, winding it around his finger and enjoying its soft silkiness. He would give everything for that.

He forced himself to look away, to pay attention to Carbrooke, who was talking about God knew what. “So Thursday at ten?” the earl concluded. “I’ll give you the direction of my man of business.”

Grant nodded. “That would be perfect.” The sooner the better.

Belatedly, he recalled another appointment. “My pardon, it will have to be a shade later than I would like. I have to go to the Pool to check my ship. I told the pilot I would be there at nine.” The Pool of London lay close to the Tower, rife with ships offloading and reloading. He could get a cab after he was done.

“Oh!” Pink mantled Dorcas’ cheeks. She held up a hand to stop them. Her brother paused, too, and they both waited for her to explain herself. The pink flush was positively red now. “Is there a way I can go with you, sir? I’m expecting an important shipment, too. I received word that it arrived two days ago, but I have not yet received delivery. I really must go before it dies.”

She was almost trembling with excitement. What could have roused that in her? Her eyes sparkled, and she sat forward, head high.

He’d love to be the cause of that trembling, excited response. “Masters unload the cargo methodically, then the customs officers must check the lists. The whole process can take some time. Can you not wait until it is delivered?”

She shook her head vigorously, dislodging a curl from its pins. “It’s very precious. I need to see to it myself.”

Grant thought of the smells, the shouts, the rough dockers who loaded and unloaded the goods, the chaos that was part of the length of the Thames devoted to the business of the sea.

The atmosphere was always combustible there. Female passengers disembarking immediately took a ferry to somewhere more salubrious, or they were met by coaches. The only women who actually frequented the riverside were the lowest of whores; the kind who would take a man wherever was convenient, even if it was the middle of the pier against a hoist or anchor.

Lady Dorcas couldn’t possibly know that, or she would never have asked to go.

“I’m sure your brother will agree with me when I say that ladies do not linger at the quayside at the Pool of London.”

Whatever “it” was. She still hadn’t given him a clue, and it wouldn’t be polite to ask. But from her eagerness, it wouldn’t be exotic perfumes or delicate fabrics. Something to do with her garden, most likely. Seeds, or fertilizer perhaps, since there was a trade in both. They would be safe.

“I want to ensure it for myself.”

“No,” said Carbrooke firmly. “It’s out of the question.”

“Why not?”

Carbrooke sighed and exchanged an exasperated this-is-what-I-have-to-put-up-with look with Grant.

“Because the Pool of London is no place for a lady. And before you remind me that we used to live near Smithfield, I’d remind you that our house was large for the area. Even there, we had an army of servants to keep us safe.”

“I could take an army of servants with me,” she said with a winsome smile.

This woman had twisted her brother around her little finger. As a child, she must have been irresistible.

“No,” her brother repeated. “Your packages will arrive at the house in good time. How can you even think of going?”

Dorcas didn’t pout, but she sighed and breathed heavily down her nose. “We have more servants than we know what to do with. And I’m the specialist, I should be able to keep my plants safe. They need delicate handling, and the sooner those hands are mine, the better.”

He was right. The cargo was plants.

Dorcas primmed her lips and stuck her chin in the air. “I will say no more. Not here, not now, but I am disappointed in you, Gerald. I had thought you better than that. Why, you let Damaris go all the way to Greenwich with Glenbreck!”

Grant remembered it well. Sitting by her sickbed, conversing quietly, changing the cool cloths on her forehead had served to bring the two closer.

“Greenwich is far more respectable than the Pool,” her brother explained patiently, “and we had Matilda with us then, to chaperone you all.”

Dorcas didn’t give up. “And Delphi has gone to Rome! All I want is a small trip that can’t be more than ten miles from Mayfair. Less from Bunhill Row.”

She sucked in another deep breath, her bosom swelling. Most invitingly.

Grant pulled himself around to the matter at hand. “I agree with Carbrooke. The Pool is no place for a lady. But if you have a commission for me, I’ll gladly fulfill it for you.”

She regarded him, her bottom lip pulled between her teeth. He could almost see the cogs whirring in her brain. She was planning to persuade him to take her, he was sure of it.

Her mouth tightening, she shook her head. “No, but thank you for your concern.” She smiled brightly. “My items will arrive in due course, won’t they?”

End of this sample Kindle book.
Enjoyed the sample?

[Buy Now](#)

or

[See details for this book in the Kindle Store](#)
