

Dressed to Kiss

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Prologue

London

January 1820

Felicity Dawkins had fashion in her blood.

She had been born above her modiste mother's shop, Madame Follette's, and raised among the bolts of silk and lace, picking buttons off the floor and fetching thread for the seamstresses as soon as she could toddle along and name her colors. By the time she was six, she had her own tiny pincushion to tie to her wrist and a small pair of scissors, so she could learn to make little dresses for her doll from scraps of cloth. When she reached ten, she was responsible for mending her own clothing and that of her younger brother Henry, and when she turned thirteen, she began making their clothes as well. Their father had died soon after Henry was born, and both children were expected to help in the shop, from necessity as well as to keep them out of trouble.

Her mother, Sophie-Louise, made her an apprentice at fifteen, and taught her not only how to cut and stitch a gown that fit properly, but also how to coordinate colors and embellishments for a harmonious and tasteful finished ensemble. At eighteen she became a seamstress and began taking on clients of her own, learning how to steer every client gently but surely toward a style, color, and fit that would flatter her, regardless of what the client came in wanting.

And Felicity loved it. The neat little shop in Vine Street was her world, filled with gorgeous fabrics and opportunities to create something beautiful each and every day. It was difficult work, to be sure; bending over a dress for hours at a time made her back ache and her eyes burn, as the candles burned low. But it was all worth it when the customer returned and put on the gown for the first time. Felicity lived for the moment her client's eyes would widen in delight as she saw herself in the mirror, and turn from side to side, exclaiming at the line of the skirt and the fit of the bodice.

Unfortunately, at some point those moments started becoming more infrequent. She wasn't sure when; the end of the war, perhaps, when Paris and its styles were accessible again, rendering London's dressmakers a shade less vital. Or perhaps it was the changing shape of women's gowns, away from light and elegant frocks toward gowns of heavier fabrics with more elaborate decoration. Madame Follette's excelled at the Classical silhouette, crafted of fabrics so fine they were almost sheer. Thick silks didn't drape the same way, and Sophie-Louise clucked her tongue at the puffs and ruching that seemed to sprout like mushrooms on bodices and hemlines.

"No gown needs six rows of ruffles and a tall lace collar," she vehemently declared, tossing aside the magazines filled with fashion plates of beruffled skirts and lace collars that hid the wearer's ears. "It looks ridiculous. I won't have it!"

Felicity might have agreed with her mother on some of these points of fashion, but she did not hold with Sophie-Louise's disregard for the financial impact of this decision. Women who had patronized Madame Follette's for years stopped placing their usual orders after Sophie-Louise scoffed at the trimmings they wanted. Even worse, younger women, new brides and heiresses making their debuts and country ladies finally able to come to London for a Season, did not choose Madame Follette's. To her dismay, Felicity began to see the difference between the gowns from her shop and those from rival shops. While Follette's still excelled all others in the quality of work and fit, now their gowns began to look ... plain. Simple. Old-fashioned, even.

This sparked deep alarm in Felicity's breast. Follette's was everything to her, not merely her home and employment, but her heart and soul. She tried to persuade her mother to adapt to the changing styles, but Sophie-Louise was having none of it. "Not as long as I am at Follette's," she vowed.

But eventually facts must be faced: Follette's income had fallen to dangerous levels. Henry, who kept the shop's books, confided to her that they would have to ask for credit from the silk warehouses as well as from the lace makers—and there was no good prospect that they would be able to pay everyone back once they lost their top dressmaker, who decamped to another modiste's shop after a fierce argument with Sophie-Louise about embellishing sleeves with puffs at a customer's request.

Henry didn't say it aloud, but Felicity could read the books well enough. They were in debt, and their income was declining. If things went on this way much longer, they would be in danger of losing Follette's, and Felicity refused to contemplate that. She told her brother they must convince their mother of the danger she was courting. After her children, Sophie-Louise loved nothing more than her shop, and Felicity prayed they could overcome her stubborn refusal to change.

To her relief, Henry agreed with her. "I've been worried about this for a little while," he admitted, and agreed to come to dinner that night for the delicate conversation.

"Mama, we are worried about Follette's," Felicity began after the meal. "We have lost five customers this year"—she held up the letters they had sent in response to her queries about orders for the upcoming Season—"and gained only one."

"Faugh." Sophie-Louise made a face. "Witless fools chasing after styles that make them look ridiculous."

At this point, Felicity would make any outrageous gown a client wanted, provided it was paid for in ready coin. "That may be, but we need customers. It's well and good for you to frown on the current mode, but that is what people want now."

Sophie-Louise waved her hands irritably. "I won't have my name associated with it. We will get by with our current customers until this madness for fringe passes. Fringe! Puffs! Rubbish. It cannot last more than a year or two, and then everyone will come back."

Felicity and Henry exchanged a glance. "We aren't getting by that well, Mama," said Henry.

Immediately their mother's face softened. In her eyes Henry could do no wrong, which was why Felicity needed him to do this with her. Sophie-Louise would overrule and ignore her daughter's arguments, but she listened to her son.

"Don't worry, Henri," she told him soothingly. "I know what I am doing. Almost thirty years I have been a dressmaker. The styles will change."

"And that is why we must change with them," Felicity pointed out. "Please, Mama. I am worried, even if you are not."

Her mother frowned at her. "Worried? Do not be silly, Felicity. I built this shop from nothing—my designs and styles created the reputation of Follette's, and I will not allow it to be transformed into a pale imitation of Madame de Louvier's." She sniffed at the mention of a rival modiste. "She is not even French! And has no taste or restraint at all. I do not understand why she is still in business."

Felicity understood. Madame de Louvier embraced the style of the moment; whatever her customers wanted, she gave them. Her designs were not inspired or clever, and were often copied straight from the fashion plates of La Belle Assemblée without regard for the individual charms of the woman ordering the gown, but she delivered gowns in the latest styles. And for that, customers were leaving Follette's and going to her.

She turned a stern look upon her brother. He didn't like to get in the middle of arguments between the two of them, but this time he had no choice. Henry nodded. "Mama, we are surviving on credit."

"Everyone lives on credit from time to time. We have accounts at all the suppliers for this reason. When the commissions come in, we will be fine."

"No, Mama, we won't." Henry didn't blink as she looked at him in surprise. "We have been using credit for a while now. The commissions are not coming in at the rate we need. We are in danger of losing Follette's." He glanced at his sister. "Felicity is right. We need to change."

Sophie-Louise subsided, her expression troubled for the first time. Felicity tried not to feel annoyed that it took Henry's word to persuade their mother that she was right. "I don't like it."

"These are our options," Henry went on. "We could sell this building and take cheaper premises elsewhere—"

"No!"

A faint grin touched his face, and Felicity bit back her own smile. Neither of them wanted to sell Follette's, either. "Very well. We could retrench—cut back on our stock, dismiss Mrs. Cartwright and perhaps Sally."

Privately Felicity wanted this option to be aired and then rejected, for the most part. Mrs. Cartwright had to go, no matter what. She had been at Follette's for many years and was a competent seamstress, but she had no imagination for design. Imagination was what Follette's lacked. Felicity needed another seamstress like Selina Fontaine, whom Sophie-Louise had hired only a few years previously, a young woman with a fresh modern vision of fashion. Sally, the fifteen-year-old apprentice, was a harder decision. If they dismissed Sally, Felicity had a sinking feeling she herself would end up sweeping the floors and stoking the fires. They could reduce the fabrics they kept in stock, but that would hurt their productivity, as they would have to visit the warehouses more frequently and pay higher prices for each order.

But the one thing they could not do was move to cheaper premises. While Vine Street had grown a little shabby, it was still very near Piccadilly and Jermyn Street, and only a few minutes' walk from Bond Street. If they relocated, it would have to be farther away from, not closer to, those fashionable shopping areas, where rents far outstripped what they could afford. Moving would announce to all the world that they were no longer a leading source of fashionable garments, but just an ordinary dressmaker. They would have to lower prices, which would compromise the quality they could offer, and then they really would be ordinary. Felicity would stoke the fires and sew every dress herself before she agreed on this path to ruin.

Sophie-Louise puffed up angrily, as hoped. "Dismiss Mrs. Cartwright! She has been with me since you were a child, Henri! How can you suggest such a thing?"

"Because we do not have the income to keep her," he bluntly replied.

"And Sally sends part of her earnings home to help her family," Sophie-Louise raged on, her accent growing stronger with each word, as it did when she was upset. "How can you be so heartless?"

"They would both lose their positions if we go out of business, Mama." Henry's sharp retort got his mother's attention. She fell back, blinking. Henry was rarely sharp with her, and indeed, his tone was considerably milder when he went on. "There is another option, but it will require some sacrifice from you, Mama... Are you willing to consider it?"

"For Follette's? Oui, I would consider anything to save it," declared his mother. "But we will not move premises!"

Henry cast a fleeting glance at Felicity, who nodded once. She all but held her breath as her brother explained. The idea was both their work, but Felicity knew it would be better received coming from Henry.

"You must step down, Mama."

Sophie-Louise's mouth dropped open in shock.

"Not forever, but for a few months—perhaps a year or two. Allow Felicity to run the shop," Henry plowed on. "She wants to bring Follette's back to prominence, but you and she are getting in each other's way."

"It is my shop!" cried Sophie-Louise. "Mine!"

"And it's failing," said Henry gently. "Felicity isn't trying to take it from you, nor am I. But Mama—we've lost so many customers. We are not gaining new ones. We must do something dramatic or we will slowly sink into impossible debt and end up losing everything."

"But why must I go?" his mother wailed. "I am the heart of Follette's!"

"For your own sake." Henry reached forward to take her clenched hand. "Follette's must change, Mama, and I know it will pain you to see it happen. Take a holiday to the seashore. You've spent your life working, you've earned a reprieve."

Sophie-Louise looked at Felicity with reproach. "You want to banish me from my own life's passion."

"No, Mama, not at all. Henry is right: You deserve a holiday."

"A year-long holiday," her mother said sourly.

Felicity ducked her head. "It will take awhile to turn things around."

Sophie-Louise looked between the two of them. "You are both against me. How can I win?" She sighed. "Very well, I will go. But I will be keeping an eye on each of you," she added as the siblings exchanged a glance of intense relief.

"Of course, Mama." Henry got to his feet and kissed her cheek. "No one expected otherwise."

Felicity walked him down the stairs, through Follette's main salon. They were fortunate to have a street-level shop, unlike many modistes. She and her mother shared the rooms above the shop, but Henry had taken his own lodgings years ago. "Thank you," she told her brother. "I wish she

would listen to me and not require your persuasion.”

He buttoned his coat and grinned. “Follette’s is my concern, too. You shouldn’t have to do it all.”

“No, I—I want to do it all.” She took a deep breath. “I have ideas, Henry. I can save Follette’s, I know it. We only need an opportunity to prove ourselves again, refreshed and revitalized, and we’ll be one of the top modistes in London.”

“We have to make our opportunities,” he pointed out. “Time is of the essence.”

She sighed. “I know. But we’ll find something.” Somehow, she silently added.

“That’s why I supported your plan to take over. I know you can do it; haven’t I seen your determination up close every day of my life?” He put on his hat and gave her a grin in farewell. “I’ve got Mama out of your way, so step to it.”

She laughed. Henry opened the door, letting in a blast of cold wind, and strode out into the January night. Felicity closed the door with a shiver and shot the bolt.

Her gaze traveled over the dark and silent shop. I will save this, she thought fiercely. Follette’s was hers. Henry kept a keen eye on the books and was proud of Follette’s, but he didn’t love it the way she did. He had no interest in fashion, and he didn’t want to run the shop.

And now that Mama had agreed, Felicity’s mind raced. She had to dismiss Mrs. Cartwright and hire someone who could bring more flair to their work. She had to scrutinize the latest styles for elements that could be adapted and polished into Follette’s own unique signature elements. She needed to refurbish, as economically as possible, the premises to reflect their new modernity. And most of all, she needed a significant event that would showcase her work and put Follette’s name on the lips of every woman in London. Perhaps the Russian czar would visit again and spawn a frenzy of balls. Perhaps a handful of heiresses would make their debuts.

Ten days later, old King George died. The church bells tolled, the state funeral plans were in all the papers, and Felicity wrote one word on a piece of paper and pinned it to her wall for inspiration:

Coronation.

Chapter One

A bright reflection blinded Selina Fontaine while she placed some fashion plates back in the window of Madame Follette’s dressmaking shop. Shading her eyes with her hand, she looked to see what sent that beam of light in her direction.

A large coach had stopped in front of the shop. Its door, ten feet from the window, bore a gold and red escutcheon. The afternoon sun’s rays set that heraldic carving ablaze and the glare ricocheted off the glass in the coach’s carriage lamps.

She did not wait to see if the coach had passengers. She strode through Follette’s street-front shop, to the door that led to the dressmaking chambers behind it. Once there she entered a fitting room where her patron, Lady Giles Woodville, waited.

“I am sure these will be perfect,” Lady Giles said, sweeping her hand over the fashion plates she had chosen for her new wardrobe that were spread out on the table in front of her. “The dress for the coronation is very fine, and unobjectionable. Lady Clarice was kind to recommend you.”

Selina quickly stacked the plates. "If you come in the next few days, I will take measurements and we can discuss materials."

"I thought we would do that now."

"I believe your coach has arrived already. The hour is later than we thought." It had taken this pretty child three hours to choose the plates. Selina had fought her every step of the way to make sure she did not pick the flamboyant designs that appealed to her. She might address her patroness as Lady Giles, but in her mind she dealt with a schoolgirl named Edeline, much as Lady Giles's governess had, not so long ago.

Lady Giles, young, fair, pretty, and spoiled, wavered between amusement and annoyance that a dressmaker dared interfere with her fun. She chose amusement. "The carriage can wait, Mrs. Fontaine. Bring me the materials you recommend for the dinner dress and the court dress."

"It is not the same carriage that brought you. That was why I thought—"

"It can still wait." Lady Giles looked less amused.

Selina went behind a curtain to the alcove where they kept samples of fabrics and trims from the best shops. Many patrons preferred to visit the drapers and warehouses themselves, but some appreciated this convenience.

She chose quickly. All the while she tried to calm herself. Just because the state coach had come for sweet Edeline did not mean anything. It had probably been out and about in town for other purposes, and simply stopped by to collect some pretty baggage before going home.

Not for the first time she doubted the wisdom of accepting this commission, however. She had done so against all of her better judgment. She had only agreed to it because the shop needed both the work and the prestige. The owner, Sophie-Louise, had given her sanctuary and employment when she badly needed it. Loyalty dictated she take any work that would help Sophie-Louise's daughter Felicity in her current quest to enhance the shop's finances.

Nor did she have a good reason for not accepting. None she could share with Felicity, at least.

She dug through some samples of trims and plucked out several that could embellish the fabric. Muffled voices came to her, as if a hum of quiet chatter had erupted among the women looking to buy ribbons and lace in the street-front shop. Hopefully that meant another potential patron had sought them out, the sort of woman of the haute ton who would cause others to nudge and whisper.

Steps sounded in the chamber behind her curtain, the one where Lady Giles waited.

Not delicate steps. Boot steps. A man had entered.

"Oh, I did not expect you to come here," Lady Giles exclaimed.

"I was on my way back from Whitehall and directed the coach here to bring you home."

Selina's hand froze, deep in a box of colored silk cords.

"I am not really done yet," Lady Giles said.

"I assume not, if you left me waiting."

Selina's pulsed raced. Desperation wanted to give way to panic. She had only heard that voice once before, but she would never forget its terse, superior, arrogant tone. She definitely should have found a way to reject this commission.

She peeked through the curtain, hoping she was wrong.

She was not.

The Most High, Noble and Potent Prince, His Grace Randall, Duke of Barrowmore, the man who had ruined her life and her dreams in one short day, the man she would not mind strangling with the length of silken cord that she held, stood ten feet away.

"Are these the fashions you chose?" Rand reached for a stack of plates on the table where Edeline sat in her chair.

"Thus far. I hope you like them. Mrs. Fontaine advised me on each one, and I accepted her judgment as you told me to, even though I find most of them far too plain."

He sat across from her, and flipped through the plates. It was a hell of a thing that he was doing this, instead of his sister Charlotte, or better yet, his brother Giles. Only the former was in the country pampering her husband who had managed to slice himself while practicing with a sword, and the latter had taken himself to hell knew where to escape his debts. So, in addition to his considerably more important duties, he found himself acting as arbiter of the wardrobe of his brother's young wife.

Edeline was lovely, sweet, gentle, and usually demure. Who would have guessed that she had no taste? Certainly not he, until he chanced upon her displaying a new dress to a friend the day after she received it. The modiste who made that dress should be executed.

The rest of the new wardrobe looked just as bad. Embellishments too distracting, necklines too low, colors too bright—It turned out sweet Edeline had never been let loose at a dressmaker's before. Any refinement in her clothing up until now had been the result of her mother's careful decisions. Unfortunately, this spring Edeline had demanded sartorial independence and her mother had given it, since her attention now centered on the next daughter to be married off.

The entire enterprise had been a very expensive disaster. The bills would start arriving soon, not that Giles was in town to pay them. Not that Giles could afford to pay them, no matter where he was. Giles was another irritation and distraction that Rand did not appreciate.

Regarding Edeline's wardrobe, apparently a firm hand was needed. Fate had decreed it would have to be his.

"That is the coronation dress," Edeline said, pointing to a plate he uncovered.

"Not in this color, I hope."

"I have not decided yet. Mrs. Fontaine has gone to get some material—Where is she? Mrs. Fontaine?"

A movement stirred the air behind him. A human presence warmed his shoulder.

Edeline looked over his head. "Ah, there you are, Mrs. Fontaine. Are those the fabrics you recommend? Put them here, so the duke can see them."

A hand reached around and set a stack of cloth on the table in front of him. He looked at it, then at the plate, then back again. "So this would be for the dress proper, and this for the overdress?"

"Yes," a woman's voice said.

A very small part of him stood at attention. It had been a nice voice, deep and smooth. Mature and sensual. Its timbre momentarily distracted him.

The hand placed another stack in front of him. She had nice hands too. Elegant, with thin, long fingers. Young. "These are for the carriage ensemble, and these"—yet another stack appeared—"for the dinner dress."

"There are more plates here," he said.

"Materials of this quality can overwhelm the senses. I prefer to ask my patrons to choose a few at a time."

That made sense. Already the colors and textures created confusion. So did that voice. It kept sending rivulets of curiosity into the stream of his consciousness.

Some men possessed an expertise in fashion. He did not. He could only claim to know when a woman's garments did not reflect her status and enhance her beauty. Nothing shown to him thus far fell into that category. It appeared Mrs. Fontaine knew what she was about.

Thank God he would not have to make time for this in the future.

"Are you happy with Mrs. Fontaine's choices?" His tone dared Edeline to object. He had warned her that if she purchased anything else at all inappropriate he would send her to the country for the duration of the Season and the summer.

"They are perfect."

"Then let us go." He stood and offered his hand.

Edeline accompanied him to the door. "I will come tomorrow to be measured, Mrs. Fontaine."

"Very good. I will see you then."

That voice nudged at Rand again. Something about it...

He turned to see the woman, in order to issue the command that would place the whole of this wardrobe into her capable hands.

One glance at her dark hair and blue eyes and her distracting, well-endowed bodice had his mind racing, searching for a thought that kept slipping away.

Suddenly an old memory flashed, and brought clarity with its light. He peered hard at the dressmaker. Hell yes, it was she. He was certain of it.

Mrs. Fontaine was really Selina Duval, the seductress who had almost got Giles to the altar four years ago.

She watched recognition slash through him like a bolt from on high. One moment he appeared aloof and barely attentive. The next moment his hot gaze scorched her from head to toe.

Selina stood her ground. She raised her chin. She looked right back at him. She pretended to have no awareness of his transformation, or of what had caused it.

The duke's change in demeanor amused Lady Giles. "I hope you are not going to threaten Mrs. Fontaine with being drawn and quartered if I end up with something you do not like."

His expression smoothed. "I never threaten women. Mrs. Fontaine knows what is expected."

Lady Giles slid her arm through his. "Then, until tomorrow, Mrs. Fontaine."

She guided her escort through the doorway. The duke looked back, over his shoulder. One raised eyebrow over one dark eye communicated that he was not finished with a certain dressmaker.

Selina pulled out the chair the duke had used, and sank into it. She gazed around the little workroom where she had found sanctuary the last few years. She had built an independent life here by exploiting her one skill and talent. She did not relish the prospect of trying to start over in another town.

"Did the consultation with Lady Giles go well?"

Felicity had stuck her head through the doorway. Since Sophie-Louise moved to the country last year, Felicity really managed Madame Follette's now. Of middling height, and with blond hair and blue eyes, Felicity was a lovely young woman. Selina also considered her a friend. Not only the long hours together in the shop had bound her to Felicity. Four years ago, when she sought employment, it had been Felicity who convinced Sophie-Louise to take her on.

"It went well, but perhaps not well enough."

Felicity came over and flipped through Selina's plates. "Did the duke approve of these?"

"I think so, but—We may not have this commission after all. He did not say so outright, but I have the feeling he was not impressed."

Felicity's face drew long with disappointment. "I so hope you are wrong. We could use this commission badly."

"I know. I am sorry. I hope I am wrong, too."

"We will know soon enough. I overheard Lady Giles speak of tomorrow. If she comes, then it is secured."

Selina doubted that, but she hoped the duke would allow bygones to be bygones. Between the current Season and the coronation in a few months, modistes all over London had more business than they could handle. A few had even tried to steal some of Felicity's seamstresses.

That meant this year represented a rare opportunity for the shop to resolve the financial precariousness that haunted it. Enough notable designs on ladies of high visibility, like Lady Giles, and Madame Follette's shop would join the list of dress designers the best and wealthiest women patronized all the time. A truly dazzling dress might even get mentioned in the ladies' journals and gossip sheets.

Upon learning one of Selina's patrons, Lady Clarice, had recommended them to Lady Giles for an extensive wardrobe, everyone employed at the shop had held their collective breath, praying. When Lady Giles wrote to request an appointment with Selina, the whole world took on brighter, happier hues. When Selina read in the gossip sheets that Lord Giles Woodville, younger brother of the Duke of Barrowmore, had departed from town, that had allayed her misgivings enough to believe she could do this without ever crossing his path.

Now her path had crossed the duke's instead. Rather than be the salvation of the business, she might damage it. The anonymity that she had found here would probably be destroyed, too. The shop might have its name in those gossip sheets, but in all the wrong ways.

Felicity gave Selina's hand a firm squeeze. "Don't look so glum. If the duke did not like your designs, he has no taste. If Lady Giles does not continue with us, we will manage as we always have, and make good of the other opportunities that are coming our way."

How like Felicity to set aside her own worries in order to soothe Selina's. She wished she could confide about why the duke would surely have second thoughts. To do so would be selfish, however. None of that was Felicity's problem. It would be cruel to give her more to lose sleep over.

If the worst happened, she would find a way to protect Felicity and the shop, even if it meant disappearing again.

Chapter Two

Rand finished his letter to Lord Liverpool. The prime minister had given him an unofficial mission to try and persuade Her Royal Highness, the Princess of Wales, to leave the realm before her husband's coronation. A handsome settlement of fifty thousand pounds a year was the carrot. Humiliation at being denied a place at the coronation was the stick.

Unfortunately, his meeting with the princess and her advisors today had failed to elicit even a thorough hearing of the rationale he had prepared. It had also ended any friendship he shared with Caroline. He was now just one more lord lined up against her, in her view.

His letter completed, and, he hoped, his involvement in the whole sorry business finished too, he left his chambers in Manard House. Sounds drifted down the stairwell, of Edeline laughing with a friend who had called.

That sound brought his thoughts soundly back to that damned wardrobe. And to his brother's absence from town. And to Mrs. Fontaine.

Another unfortunate business left to him to try and fix. Not one to shirk his duty, or to avoid the unpleasant aspects of it, he called for his horse.

Selina left the shop at six o'clock. Felicity accompanied her and the other employees to the door, in order to lock it behind them. Felicity lived above the shop, as had her mother Sophie-Louise before

retreating to the country.

Bidding the others good-bye, Selina began her walk east to Panton Street, where she lived in a modest three-room apartment in a building full of similar homes for women of decent breeding but minimal income.

After bending over tables and crouching next to skirts all day, she enjoyed a good walk in the evening. She liked observing the activity of the city, unless a demonstration unsettled its normal patterns. If rain did not threaten like it did today, she might even go far out of her way to stroll along Birdcage Walk so she could study the ensembles worn by ladies taking turns there.

Today the overcast skies discouraged that. So did her state of mind. She had not forgotten the episode with Lady Giles during the last few hours, but at least work had put that at the back of her mind. Now, with each step, she paced out the details of the duke's surprise arrival, and its ramifications.

None of it helped her humor. Her emotions kept swinging between anger and indignation and fear and desperation.

Suddenly another emotion joined those. Fear.

Someone was following her.

The clip-clop of horse hooves paced in time with her feet. The presence behind her diminished all others on the street.

She quickened her steps until she almost ran. She turned onto her home's lane. The horse behind her did not. Telling herself that the day's events had made her too nervous to be rational, she walked up the steps to her building, then upstairs to her apartment. She let herself in with her key, and turned to close the door behind her.

The duke stood there, right outside the doorway. She started with surprise at how his tall, stern, dark presence simply materialized, as if conjured up by her thoughts.

"I would have a word with you, Mrs. Fontaine."

"Not today, thank you." She closed the door on him.

One strong hand pressed against it, forcing it to remain ajar. "I must insist. It is a great inconvenience for me to make time for this, and I am sure you do not want our conversation to take place in that shop. Or do you?"

She wished she had the strength to push that door closed right in his arrogant, condescending nose. Since she did not, and since she definitely did not want this conversation to take place in the shop, she released the door and stepped back.

He strode into her home and closed the door behind him. He angled his head this way and that, taking in the few chambers that gave off from the tiny reception hall in which they stood. She could imagine his thoughts as he noticed the well-used furniture bought secondhand, and the simple drapes. The one extravagance, an Indian carpet in the sitting room, had arrived from her mother unexpectedly after she wrote to Mama and told her where she was living, and how.

He headed toward that carpet. "In here, I think."

So much for any pretense that he was a visitor she had received. She followed him.

She sat in the middle of her patterned sofa. Her position covered the place where one seam had begun to fray. She did not want him taking too much satisfaction in her reduced circumstances, or, worse, pitying her.

He stood in all his majestic dukeness. He set down his hat and riding crop on the one table. Face chiseled and severe, he gazed out the long window, then at the fireplace, and finally right at her.

"There is or was a Mr. Fontaine?" he asked.

"If I am Mrs. Fontaine, there must have been."

"There is no must to it. Many women become Mrs. This or That out of convenience, or to ease the consciences of their protectors."

"Since I live like this, I think it is safe to say I have no protector."

He glanced down at the Indian carpet, drawing conclusions regarding the past, perhaps. "Are you currently married? Do not bother lying. I can find out."

He probably could. Dukes could do all kinds of things most men could not. Money allowed that. Their titles opened doors. He even possessed a power over his family members, like Edeline. Like Giles. Still, she was tempted to force him to go through the effort.

"Mr. Fontaine passed away soon after I married him. That was soon after I had no choice except to leave Kent after your brother threw me over and broke our engagement."

"There was no engagement."

"There were assumptions. Expectations. His pursuit of me was public and involved my family and county friends. When that ended—"

"If you permitted more familiarity than was wise, it was understandable that people made assumptions. With Giles's reputation, you should have known better than to form a liaison with him. He has never been discreet regarding his mistresses."

Liaison? Mistresses? "How dare you intrude on my home to insult me. You do not even know me. Other than that one introduction, in which you made your scorn for me very clear, we have not even had a conversation before this one."

"We had no need for one before this. I did not need to know you to see what he was up to, because I understand my brother very well."

"We were in love. I am sure that is something you can never understand."

"Giles in love is a melody he has played long and well down through the years. He is the romantic lead in every play he has ever seen. I do believe you thought him in love with you. You just did not comprehend what a shallow kind of love Giles knows."

"He told me that you interfered. He explained that when he—" She could not finish, so close was she to tears. She hated being reminded of that humiliation. Oh, the words Giles spoke had been loving and sweet to the very end, but the result had been devastating. And the gossip—All

because of her foolish belief in one man's promises.

"Mrs. Fontaine, you had to know that Giles would never marry a woman of your birth and fortune. If ever he married, it would be a girl like Edeline, whose family connections and wealth were suitable to his station as my heir presumptive."

"No doubt you explained all of that when you told him to break with me."

He gave her a serious, contemplative look. Then he availed himself of the one upholstered chairs in the sitting room. She hoped he did not expect her to offer refreshments.

"Regarding my brother's wife and her wardrobe, I did not like learning the dressmaker is a woman with whom my brother had a liaison. It was an unpleasant surprise."

There it was again. Liaison. He assumed—well, what everyone assumed. She did not care what he thought. "Having you walk into the shop today was also an unpleasant surprise. It appears both our days were ruined."

"Hence my insistence on this conversation. Why ruin more days?"

"How very sensible. I wonder what role you have in all those plays where your brother is the romantic lead. Stern father? Villain?"

He almost smiled, as if he found that last role appealing.

"You had to have known who Lady Giles was, since she bears his full name. You cannot claim ignorance that she was Giles's young wife."

"It is a very large commission. Had I a choice, I might have spared my pride and refused it. We in trade live by a different set of rules than your sort do, and pride is not what governs our decisions, however."

"Perhaps you anticipated seeing him as the work progressed. I think you expected him to walk into that shop someday, not me, and perhaps play the romantic swain again. I am here to tell you that I will not have it. Giles has proven himself eternally indiscreet, but I will not have him taking up with a dressmaker so soon after his wedding."

"You are wrong in every way. I was aware he had left town. I only agreed to see her and do the wardrobe because I trusted I would not come into any contact with him, nor he with me."

Skepticism etched his face while he regarded her a long time.

She looked right back. She hoped she appeared proud, composed, and strong even though inside she was nervous, and silently crying for mercy. She did not want to run away from her current life the way she had abandoned her old one.

"Those fashion plates—Were they yours?"

She examined the unexpected question from every angle, but could see no danger in answering. "They are. However, I assure you that while the dresses are distinctive, they are not outré. They fit with the current fashions nicely, only not predictably."

His gaze meandered down her body, slowly. She grew self-conscious. His eyes narrowed ever so

slightly and his mouth firmed. He appeared hard, but not angry, and, if she were honest with herself, not unappealing.

She had seen him thus once before, on the day Giles introduced her to him. Barrowmore had arrived in Kent unexpectedly, and found them together in the garden. Giles had been kissing her, and her bonnet was off and her hair disheveled. Barrowmore had missed none of that, she was sure.

He subjected her to the same intense gaze that day. Then, after the briefest of acknowledgments, he had turned to Giles and proclaimed they would meet privately in one hour in the house's library. Giles then escorted her home, and with every step the suspicion grew in her heart that the duke had found her lacking, and the summer idyll was over.

Now, she suffered the same scathing examination. Only she was no longer a girl desperate for his acceptance. Today that gaze contained layers not perceived the first time.

If she did not know better, she would say the duke was entertaining improper thoughts about her right now. In a day of insults, that should be the worst one. Except, if she set aside who he was and what he had done to her life, she had to admit that such inclinations transformed him. Rare would be the woman who did not react as she did. She fought the stirring his close attention evoked.

"Do you wear your own designs?"

She gazed down on the deep blue wool covering her body from neck to feet. Cut and fitted like a pelisse, with a row of closely-spaced buttons down to her hips, it kept her warm in the shop and on her walks home in the cool evenings. Most significantly, the good quality fabric felt magnificent to her hand and on her body.

"I do. Obviously I design differently for myself than for a lady like Lady Giles. Much more simply. However, it is important for dressmakers to look like they know about lines and proportions and fit even when it comes to their own work clothes."

"Like a horse." He smiled as soon as he said it, a small chagrined turning up of his lips. "That is how horses are judged. Lines, proportions..."

She barely heard. That smile made him a different man. Warm. Charming. It gave those handsome angles and ridges something to do besides chisel the air. She had never seen a smile transform a face like that. If she did not hate him, she might be bedazzled. As it was, for the first time she could believe he and Giles were brothers.

"Much like a horse. Except my dresses have no teeth and do not bite."

"In a manner of speaking, that is not true." He glanced askance at her bodice. Then he gathered his ducal presence around him, much as a man might wrap his cloak more securely. "I will not have Edeline hurt by talk about Giles and his paramours. That will come soon enough, hopefully when she is older and more worldly. You are not to say one word to her about that time."

"Are you saying we will continue with the wardrobe?" She wanted to gush with gratitude that he only demanded this, and had not informed her that Edeline would henceforth not be visiting the shop.

"Against my better judgment, I will allow it. The notion of spending another minute on gowns and frippery disheartens me enough that—Do the wardrobe, but never even allude to your liaison with

my brother.”

“I would never tell her about that, although there was not a liaison as such. I fully understand your condition, however, and will honor it.”

He looked skeptical still. “Should my brother return to London, you are not to see him. I will endeavor to keep him from accompanying his wife to that shop. I can’t imagine he ever would. I want your word, however, that you will avoid such a meeting even if it means you run out the back door.”

“I will tell everyone there to be alert and give me warning, unlike what they did today with you.”

He stood. “See that you do. Should you disappoint me, should I learn that you scheme to renew your relationship with my brother, I will make sure no decent woman ever enters that shop again. Do we have a right understanding?”

She had almost begun to barely like him. Now he threatened her future, and that of everyone in the shop.

“No, we do not. If you have reason to take some revenge, take it on me alone. At least inform me of your intentions, so I can leave Madame Follette’s, and perhaps spare the others there.”

He thought about that, then nodded. “Fair enough. I will take my leave now. As for the wardrobe, send the bills to me directly. If you send them to Giles, it will be years before you see a shilling.”

Chapter Three

“In my letter to Liverpool, I blamed myself, but also the princess’s advisors.” Rand sat in White’s, drinking whisky with Havenstock. He had sought out the sanctuary of this gentlemen’s club after his disconcerting meeting with Mrs. Fontaine. He and Havenstock not only had much in common, but what they shared was shared with very few others. Of the same age, they were both dukes. The many ways that set them apart from other men had created a bond long ago.

Havenstock could always be found at the club at this hour. The alternative was to be at home, with his sisters. He had been graced with four of them, all of whom seemed determined to remain unmarried. Havenstock often waxed eloquent about the peaceful life he would have once he ushered them into marital bliss, and kept on the lookout for likely men on whom to foist them.

Rand had only been spared because they were the oldest of friends. And because five years ago, when Havenstock broached the notion of a match with his oldest sister Clarice, he had firmly declined.

“Having survived the infamous ‘trial’ last year, the princess probably believes her popularity will win this contest with her husband in the end,” Havenstock said. “Since none of them, not the princess and not the advisors, have ever seen the new king’s temper on the subject, they have no idea how far-fetched their assumption is.”

“That is the truth of it,” Rand said. “It gives me an idea. I will write to Liverpool again and suggest that those advisors be given an audience with the king. Perhaps when he glares and bellows at them, they will understand the situation in its fullest.”

Havenstock eyed the glass in Rand’s hand. “Is that the result of your consternation with the matter? You rarely drink whisky at this hour.”

"That was only one annoying meeting. My day was full of them."

"Do tell."

"Easy for you to make light of my plight."

"I meant it. Do tell. I love hearing about others' miserable days."

Rand stretched out his legs and took a good swig of whisky. "Two bailiffs found the family solicitor and issued dire warnings about my brother's debts. I was called forthwith, and had to threaten warnings of my own. Fortunately, they saw the sense of my reasoning."

"Meaning you paid them off."

"Damn it, yes. Only in part, but—" But what? It was an old story. Giles ran up debts, and Rand paid them. It had only gotten this bad once before. He had tried to draw a line then, only to have his brother outflank him in a most clever way.

Giles was good at being a charming scoundrel, he had to give him that.

"That alone justifies imbibing," Havenstock said. "What else put that frown on your face today?"

They now broached a topic Rand did not choose to discuss. He still did not even know what he thought of it. However, that visit with Mrs. Fontaine had left him badly out of sorts.

He forced himself to think of her by that assumed name lest he accidentally address her by her given name at the wrong moment.

"I saw to that business with Edeline's wardrobe. I have a hell of a life, don't I? Talking to royalty in the morning, and fussing with a girl's clothing in the afternoon." He sipped. "There is something unmanly about that latter duty. I wish I had sisters like you do who could manage all of that."

"You do have a sister."

"Lot of good she does me, up there in Scotland. How the hell does a Scot wound himself with a sword? I thought they were born brandishing them like experts. Thank Clarice for me regarding her recommendation of that dressmaker. It appears that will work out, and I am finally done with this."

Havenstock's eyes gleamed with humor. "Did you go there yourself, to make sure all was in order?"

"Briefly."

"Then you must have met this Mrs. Fontaine whom my sister likes so much."

"Briefly."

"What did you think of her?"

Rand shrugged, perhaps too emphatically. "She is a dressmaker and she seems capable. She is much what is expected."

"I assure you, she is not what is expected. If she were fifty, tending toward stoutness, and dripped French throughout her speech, that is to be expected. Not that woman." He leaned over. "Do not pretend you did not notice she is lovely, still young, has a fine form, and carries herself with the airs of a gentlewoman."

She had those airs because she was born to them. As for lovely, hell yes, she was lovely. And well formed. Good lines and proportions. If she were a filly, she would fetch a king's ransom.

Which was exactly what he had paid for her.

She did not know about that. He had realized it as soon as he entered that apartment. Giles had never told her about that part.

Of course he hadn't.

Rand had not gone to her home to collect on that ridiculous trade, which was not the same as not thinking about it once there. That bargain had been nothing more than an excuse to make Giles give up something valuable in return for once more being bailed out of debt. The goal had been a moral lesson.

The details had been Giles's idea, too, not Rand's. I have nothing you would want that you cannot buy yourself. Except Selina. I saw how you looked at her. Pay them all off, and she is yours.

No, he had not gone to collect, but he assumed she knew. That he had not collected lent him a principled position and the upper hand. However, since she remained ignorant of Giles's trade, that left him with nothing except—well, damned little.

"I saw her once. I brought the carriage to get Clarice and Mrs. Fontaine walked her out," Havenstock said. "She wore this dark scarlet dress, as simple as could be. Not an inch of skin showed, it buttoned clear up to her chin, yet I defy any man to see her and not start picturing what is under that fabric. Surely you know what I mean, even if you only saw her briefly."

"I have no idea at all what you mean." Only he did.

Mrs. Fontaine—Selina Duval—had been favored by nature. Her dress followed excellent lines and proportions, especially on the top. The dress had been dark blue today, not scarlet, in a hue much like her eyes, and its simplicity alone seemed to beg for speculation on just why it fit quite the way it did. Which naturally led to the picturing Havenstock now referred to. High, full breasts atop a soft, lithe body...

"You should get married yourself, rather than try to marry off your sisters, if you dream about a dressmaker, Havenstock."

"I thought she would make a fine mistress. She is beautiful, refined, and luscious. I considered it seriously."

Sorry, boy, she is taken. Bought and paid for.

Where the hell had that thought come from?

"But you did not make the offer?"

"Clarice suspected, and gave me hell. Her threats grew vicious. I was shocked."

Rand wasn't. Clarice had excellent taste, and an artistic eye that made her a celebrated lady of fashion. It was why Rand had taken her recommendation of this time-worn, past-its-better-days shop so seriously.

She was, however, sure to make some man's life miserable. Strong-willed did not begin to describe her.

"Just as well," he said. "Such a mistress is bound to be very expensive. After all, she knows all about luxuries, and how to get the most out of a man."

"True. Still—" Havenstock sighed.

"If it helps at all, I have reason to think the woman does not seek any protector, and would be insulted by such an overture."

"You do? What makes you think so?"

Rand stood. "Just a feeling. I am going to the card room. Care to join me?"

Chapter Four

Selina entered the shop at nine o'clock. No patrons would come this early, but there were always things to do. Today she wanted to review the plates for Edeline's wardrobe and make some notes on recommended fabrics, should the lady arrive for her measurements and want to make a few more choices.

Felicity pulled her aside as soon as the door closed. With a hiss and a gesture, she urged Selina into the shop's little office.

"She is here. Lady Giles," Felicity reported. "They arrived fifteen minutes ago."

"They?"

"Barrowmore is with her. Try to find out how much he is up for. We don't want Lady Giles choosing the most expensive of everything, only to have the duke balking at the bills."

How odd that the duke had come with Edeline. Perhaps he had rethought everything and had decided to withdraw the patronage. Selina could think of no other reason for his presence.

She walked to the back chamber, took a deep breath, and entered. The duke sat there paging through fashion plates. Not the ones Edeline had chosen. He perused others Selina had drawn and colored over the last year. He had helped himself to a big stack from a shelf.

Edeline sat across from him at the table, looking bored and tired. She kept wiping her eyes, as if sleep threatened to seal them shut.

"My apologies," Selina said after she curtsied. "I did not expect you this early, Your Grace. Lady Giles."

"He made me come." A big, noisy yawn accompanied the accusation. "He has important things to do, he says. He can't be arranging his whole day around my wardrobe, he says. He doesn't care when it is fashionable to shop, he says. I said he did not have to come at all, and I could have slept in."

The duke did not even look up from his perusal of those plates. "You have an artist's hand, Mrs. Fontaine. Did you have lessons?"

"There are no such lessons to take, although like most young women I was taught the basics of drawing and watercolor painting. I copied French plates and learned on my own. I am honored, however, if you think them well done."

"Very well done." He looked up. "What must Lady Giles decide today?"

"Perhaps, before she leaves, the carriage ensemble and—"

"Ooo, I want sable trim on it." Lady Giles, suddenly awake, clapped her hands.

"The ensemble is intended for summer, my lady. Fur is not advised in summer."

"It is only trim."

"Why don't we discuss it after you are measured? Excuse me for a minute only."

Selina slipped out and found Delyth, one of the seamstresses. "You come do the measurements, and I will take the opportunity to talk to His Grace about the account."

Together they returned to the chamber. "Miss Owen will take your measurements. Your Grace, perhaps you would join me in the reception salon."

"Of course." No sooner had he left than Delyth began unfastening Lady Giles's dress.

Selina led the duke to a small chamber used as a reception salon for the dressmaking patrons. Behind the storefront shop like the fitting and consultation rooms, it provided privacy for the ladies who would not want to mingle with the less elevated visitors who might arrive to buy muslin.

The duke sat when she did. The furniture was very feminine and small-boned. He overwhelmed his chair. Selina watched him deal with the discomfort of his perch.

"It is well you came today," she said. "It gives me an opportunity to learn your intentions regarding this commission."

"I would think my intentions were clear."

"I refer to the cost."

He flushed a bit. Talking about money with a woman embarrassed him. How charming.

"Of course. If I do not set an amount, she will know no restraint."

"I will endeavor to guide her to sensible choices that will not ruin you. I will try to come in under whatever you set. I do not expect you to believe that, since it does not benefit me, but I promise you that is how it will be."

"And if it is not enough?"

"There may need to be other meetings, if she insists on something that goes over the amount you now dictate."

He thought about that. "I dare not leave her to her whims, Mrs. Fontaine. Not because of the cost, nor of my need to rely on your honesty. The truth is, I think you will have an easier time of it if she insists on an extravagance you do not like, and she knows you must get my approval. If it means I must sometimes come here and talk to you about it, I will do it."

"Oh, you will not talk about the bills with me. We leave that to Miss Dawkins, who manages the shop. She will convey to me any decisions you make, however."

"Miss Dawkins? I see." He did not appear to like having Felicity involved. "How long will it take to measure her?"

"A half an hour, at least."

He pulled out his pocket watch. "Twenty more minutes. I think I will take a turn outside. Will you join me?"

"My work—" She gestured broadly at the whole shop. "My other patrons—"

"You implied we came too early, so you should have no others for hours." He stood and offered his hand to help her rise. "Walk with me. I want to ask you something."

They left the shop and strolled east down the street, away from the dust and construction that had become a daily trial while Regent Street was constructed. They strolled past other shops with other windows. Some did have the kind of patrons who arrived early. One coffee shop had filled with tradesmen prior to their opening their own businesses. The pages from the day's newspapers covered the windows, and a little crowd had gathered to read them.

"The day is fair, is it not?" he asked.

"Most fair. Was that the question you had?"

"No. I want to know how Selina Duval became Mrs. Fontaine. I am curious to know what you are doing here."

She stiffened. Her mouth formed a firm line. "I think you know the answer."

"I am not sure I do."

She kept her gaze straight ahead. "As I told you when you broke into my home—"

"Come now, I did not break into—"

"When you broke into my home, the gossip after Giles left was unbearable. All that attention he had showered on me. All those gifts. If not to win my hand, then for what? The answer did not flatter me. I thought to brave it out, but my mother was humiliated, and my father felt it sorely. Mama ceased leaving the house. Papa came close to calling a man out. So I left. I married the first man who asked, just to get away. When he passed I came to London and applied at that dress shop." She glared at him. "Is that enough? Because it is more than I think you deserve."

He guessed it was mostly true, but not entirely. He still did not believe there had been a Mr. Fontaine for a few months. He could not explain why he felt sure about that. Perhaps it was the

little catch in her voice whenever she referred to it. Not a choke of sentiment, it sounded like a hesitation prior to forcing out a lie.

He paced on, weighing the choice in front of him. She had fond memories of Giles. She believed they had shared a great but thwarted love, done in by the villainous brother. Giles had left her with that dramatic story. Only much of it was simply not true.

Would she hate him all the more if he told her all of it? Undoubtedly.

"You do not know our village," she said. "That manor house up on the hill has been there for centuries, owned by the dukes of Barrowmore, but never used by them. Still, we were proud to be in its shadow. It made us better than other common villages. When your brother chose to live there that summer, how excited everyone was. That he included the local gentlemen and their families in his society was even better. I do not know what inspired him to visit, but for all of us, and especially me, it became a magical summer."

Giles's inspiration had been to find an obscure property where he could lie low and avoid his creditors. Just like now he was at some other such dot in the family holdings, for the same purpose.

He would berate Giles most severely for how carelessly he had used this poor woman. Ruined her, for all intents and purposes. Not that Giles would care. That summer had ended with clear and open credit for him, hadn't it?

She did not need to know the truth. It would serve no purpose. Let her remember a magical summer at least.

"We should be getting back," he said.

They retraced their footsteps to the shop door. He decided he wanted her to know one part of the story was not true.

"Mrs. Fontaine, I feel obligated to correct one memory of that time that my brother left with you. I did not order him to throw you over."

"Are you saying he lied to me?"

"Giles chose to avoid responsibility. Shall we leave it at that?"

Her brow knit. "It was long ago. I confess I have forgotten his exact words. Perhaps I misunderstood."

"More likely you believed what he said. He can be very persuasive, so the blame is not with you at all."

"If I now believe you instead, I must accept that I was a fool. A very stupid one."

"Not a fool. A woman in love, being spared more pain than necessary." He did not want her feeling a fool, or stupid, or anything like that.

She opened the door, still frowning.

Abruptly she turned and faced him. "Perhaps all that gossip and all those assumptions were not

idle talk, but can be traced back to him.”

“I would like to believe he did not do that.”

“It is a good thing you made me promise never to see him. Because if ever I do, I cannot guarantee I would not make him pay for this.”

He imagined her pointing a pistol at Giles. She would never do that, nor would he want her to, but the expression of abject contrition that Giles wore in the fantasy amused him to a disgraceful degree.

“I much prefer you angry to sad, Mrs. Fontaine. It suits you better.”

She gave him a peculiar look, then turned back to the shop. “Tell the coachman that Lady Giles will be finished here in two hours.”

“Certainly. Oh, and I have one more thing to say before we part. What would you say to carte blanche? If you promise not to ruin me, I will consider it.”

She froze with her hand on the door’s latch. After a good ten count, she turned to him with wide-eyed surprise. Only then did he realize that he had not prefaced his offer with reference to Edeline and her wardrobe. Mrs. Fontaine thought he had just propositioned her.

He was about to rush in with an explanation, but the way she regarded him caused him to pause. She did not appear insulted or angry. Rather she looked to be weighing her answer.

He waited, curious to see which way it would go, while fantasies of plucking open those buttons snaked into his head.

Enlightenment dawned in her eyes. She flushed deeply. “You were referring to Edeline’s wardrobe, of course.”

“If that is what you prefer.”

She fumbled with the latch and muttered a little curse when the door stuck. “Of course it is.” The door opened, and Mrs. Fontaine rushed inside.

Selina pressed her back against the door for support and closed her eyes. She was an idiot. A total fool. Of course the duke referred to Edeline’s wardrobe.

If she could be excused for misunderstanding, which she could not, it was only because respectable patrons did not use that phrase. It was employed by the courtesans of London when their protectors had promised no restraint on what was spent on clothing and other luxuries. Not many women received carte blanche, but the shop had served a few who did.

Felicity came out of the office, navigated past some women at the counter, and sidled close to Selina. “Do you have an amount?”

Selina doubted she could manage little Edeline if there truly were carte blanche. Better to have the duke approving expenditures that got too high. “Three hundred. After that we need to consult with His Grace.”

Three hundred was a handsome sum for a wardrobe, even one with unseasonal sable trim, which Selina was determined Edeline would not get.

“Well done, Selina. Should we need to consult, as you say, I will let you take care of that. He seems to like you.”

“What makes you say that?” Selina snapped.

Felicity backed up, laughing. “An account of three hundred makes me say it.”

Selina went to the fitting room, to finish her meeting with Lady Giles. Perhaps the duke did like her. She had misunderstood his comment about *carte blanche*, to her eternal humiliation, but he had not been nearly so condescending today, and he truly seemed to trust her judgment with Edeline.

It was more than that, however. When she misunderstood, while she misunderstood, he had not corrected her. He had seen it, she knew he had, and he had not offered further explanation.

It might have begun as a mistake, but a duke had indeed propositioned her today.

Chapter Five

A week later Selina sent a letter to Lady Giles, informing her that the coronation dress and the evening dress were ready for a fitting. A response came the same day. The lady had taken ill with a cold. Would Mrs. Fontaine be so good as to bring the dresses to her and do the fitting at Manard House?

Royalty conducted wardrobe business in their homes. A few very important ladies did as well. Most women, however, even those married to sons of dukes, went to the dressmakers rather than have the dressmakers come to them.

There were reasons for that. One was social. Visiting dressmakers and other shops gave ladies an excuse to be out and about in town. To see and be seen. Other reasons were very practical, as Selina noted while she prepared to fulfill this request. The dresses had to be wrapped carefully. A large box of embellishments must be taken as well, along with the pins, threads, and other sewing equipment. She hired a hackney cab, loaded all of this into it, and gave the driver the address.

Manard House proved as grand as one would expect of a duke's London home. At the corner of Stanhope Street and Park Lane, its restrained, buff façade rose five levels. A walled garden surrounded it, like a little park. If Lady Giles lived here, it meant her husband had not provided her with her own house, but instead chose to live with his older brother. Just as well, if he was going to leave town for long periods of time.

The hackney driver brought her to a rear gate where a servant took command of her packages and allowed her into the garden. The servant then escorted her into the house through a side door, where a footman took over. Eventually, she found herself and her baggage in a chamber on the third level of the house. There a thin, severe, dark-haired lady's maid took her in hand and brought her to a dressing room where Edeline waited.

Her hair down and her body ensconced in an undressing gown frothy with lace, Edeline greeted Selina with a firm blow on her nose. “Ah, there you are, Mrs. Fontaine. I knew you would not let me down. We must make progress on these dresses, but I could not go out with this red nose. I look a fright.”

Selina unwrapped the coronation dress and laid it over a chair. Edeline jumped up and came to admire it. "It is lovely. So much was done in one week."

"Our seamstresses devoted themselves to it for many long hours."

Edeline turned to the maid. "Isn't it lovely, Françoise?"

Françoise gave a noncommittal nod. She came over, turned back the fabric, and assessed the stitching of a seam. Another nod, and she retreated.

"If you put it on, I will do the fitting," Selina said. She then drew the maid aside. "Is there a pillow I might kneel on?"

"The pillows are all silk," Françoise said with disdain. "They are not for use on the floor by seamstresses."

Selina fitted the dress without a pillow. She stayed on her knees while she used pins to indicate where embellishments would go. Then she rested on her heels while Edeline changed into the evening dress. Another hour of fitting and finally she was done.

She put away her equipment and wrapped the dresses again. "When you are feeling better, you can come to the shop for the others. They are almost ready."

Edeline pouted. "I much prefer doing it here. You can bring the others like you did these, I am sure."

"Of course she can," Françoise said, in a tone that managed to indulge her mistress and scorn Selina at the same time.

Selina forced a smile. "I will write to you when we are ready."

The maid called for a footman to carry the dresses and box of equipment. Selina followed him down the staircase. He did not use the servants' stairs, but took her by way of the closer main set. At the bottom, a butler's scowl awaited them.

"What is this, Timothy?"

"The lady's dressmaker, sir."

"There are two sets of stairs in this house, Timothy. See that you remember who uses which ones in the future."

Red-faced, Timothy quickened his steps. They were almost out of the large reception hall when a figure appeared at a door at one end.

"Mrs. Fontaine?"

It was the duke. Timothy froze.

"Your Grace." Selina curtsied. She gestured to poor, young Timothy. "I confess my interest in the house made me insist we come down this way. Your footman was too polite to refuse."

"I should hope so." He gave the footman a nod of approval. Then he gestured to the burden the

young man carried. "What is that?"

Selina explained Lady Giles's need for a fitting despite her cold. "It is not normally done, because it takes me away for too long and I cannot see other patrons. However, I am sure Your Grace will not mind the small additional fee I will have to charge if this continues."

He gestured to the footman. "Take all of that to—wherever it is supposed to go." He turned to Selina. "I will show you the public rooms, since you are curious."

"I really should return to the shop."

"If Edeline's spoiled whims are going to force you here, you may as well enjoy yourself a little, too. We will start with the dining room."

There was nothing to do but follow him out of the massive reception hall, into the huge dining room at one end.

"My sister chose the decorations. She has good taste. Not like yours, but respectable enough," he said.

She had expected a room filled with golds and reds, ostentatious in its luxury. Instead the chamber appeared almost spare, with pale gray walls and the lightest yellow drapes. The subtle background gave the massive table and huge Persian carpet all the attention, but kept everything in balance so the eyes were not overwhelmed.

"More than respectable taste, and also unusual."

"She is nothing if not unusual. She married a Scottish earl. He talks a lot, and I can barely understand him. I just nod to whatever he tells me. It has worked thus far. Look here. This is my favorite part. In the summer we open these doors, and all but dine al fresco." He threw open two large sets of French windows at the end of the room. The ones on the left gave out to the end of a terrace, but the others opened onto a section of garden that had been planted right up to the threshold.

Fragrant early spring blooms perfumed the air. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. "It reminds me of home."

This view of Selina, her eyes closed and her expression one of sensual pleasure, intoxicated him. He imagined a similar expression when pleasures other than those of garden scents moved her.

Do not do it, his better half said. She is not for you and has endured enough from the men of your family.

Do not be a fool, his most masculine side responded. She is a mature woman. She is smart and worldly and capable of making her own decisions.

"Let us walk out there, unless it makes you sad," he suggested.

"Not sad so much. Only nostalgic."

If he had his way she would not even be nostalgic. There was too much melancholy in nostalgia.

This woman had been wronged. He could not shake the feeling that he was partly responsible. *

True love never goes out of style….

Once renowned for creating the most envied gowns in London, Madame Follette’s dressmaking shop has fallen far out of fashion. The approaching coronation of King George IV offers a chance to reclaim former glory by supplying stunning new wardrobes to the most glittering society in Regency England. In the face of long-held secrets, looming scandals, and the potential ruin of their shop, the dressmakers of Follette’s are undaunted, not even by the most unexpected complication of all: true love.

The Duke’s Dressmaker by Madeline Hunter

When the Duke of Barrowmore walks into the dress shop, Selina Fontaine assumes her secret identity will be compromised. Four years ago this man’s brother seduced her and abandoned her to scandal, and she holds the duke responsible. To her amazement the duke is more interested in pursuing her than exposing her, however—and that pursuit soon becomes seductively pleasurable.

The Colors of Love by Myretta Robens

Delyth Owen’s exuberant passion for her new job as a dressmaker at Madame Follette’s is matched only by her love of diverse, vibrant, and frequently unfortunate color combinations. Simon Merrithew, the pseudonymous author of a well-regarded fashion column, is horrified by the gown Delyth creates for a friend, and suspects her motives. He sets out to uncover her duplicity, but instead, he uncovers genuine joy and discovers the colors of love.

No Accounting for Love by Megan Frampton

Miss Katherine Grant is a lady’s companion, one whose number of dishonorable offers (six) greatly outweigh her honorable ones (zero). Now tasked with making certain her charge, Lady Euphemia, does not contract herself to someone inappropriate, she finds herself inexplicably drawn to Mr. Henry Dawkins, the inappropriate gentleman Lady Euphemia wants to charm, who keeps the books at Madame Follette's. But it seems that Henry only has eyes for Miss Katherine Grant.

A Fashionable Affair by Caroline Linden

Madame Follette’s is Felicity Dawkins’s birthright; her mother founded it, and now she runs it. She's fiercely committed to making it the most exclusive modiste in London. The Earl of Carmarthen also has big plans for the shop—he wants to buy it and tear it down, to make way for a grand new boulevard of shops. One way or another, he’s determined to persuade Felicity…not only to sell her shop, but to explore the passion that sparks between them every time they meet.

Dressed To KISS - Find KISS Dressed To Kill Part 1 Comic Book IDW and more at collectors.com. Mike Pence book says Trump's win posed problems for VP - ... Nightlife App. Browse events, sign up for guestlists, buy tickets, and book tables with a few taps on your phone. What is the dress code at Kiss Kiss? Dress to The Psychology of Cross-Dressing -The Book of Life - A new book about Vice President Pence says Donald Trump's Karen Pence had twice rebuffed her husband's celebratory kiss on election night the cost of altering that dress into one she liked better, according to the book. Ace Frehley on the KISS logo - Gene Simmons is best known as the frontman for KISS, the rock band He quickly learned English through comic books and television and with fansâ€™ called the "KISS Army"â€™ often imitating the group's dress and make-up. Actually, Dresses with Pockets Are Bad - Elle - Urban Outfitters Kiss (comics) - Wikiwand - Etsy Jacob Elordi Noah Has New Girlfriend In Kissing Booth 2 - ... Nightlife App. Browse events, sign up for guestlists, buy tickets, and book tables with a few taps on your phone. What is the dress code at Kiss Kiss? Dress to Woman kissed by sailor in famous VJ Day photo dies aged 92 - Dressed to Kiss [Myretta Robens, Madeline Hunter, Caroline Linden, Megan Lady Euphemia wants to charm, who keeps the books at Madame Follette's. The Party Edit - The Party Edit - Sheike - Dressed is an evocative, ingenious and daringly original exploration of the hidden links between what we wear and who we are. Kiss Me Deadly - elegant retro lingerie for femme fatales - Spell Kiss The Sky Campaign Spell SWAK Designs: Trendy Plus Size Fashion - Hazel decides to emulate the way Anna dresses in An Imperial Affliction. Hazel looks at him, thinking it's not an appropriate place to kiss but that even Anne and the relationship Hazel has developed with the book has nothing to do with

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