



The Bedding Proposal: The Rakes of Cavendish Square

By Tracy Anne Warren

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *The Bedding Proposal*:

“A surprisingly ‘grown-up’ romance...Leo and Thalia are fully rounded-out characters, and it’s a tribute to Ms Warren’s writing that...the quiet dignity of [Thalia’s] character, her intense loneliness and her longing for affection and companionship – things to which everyone is entitled but which have been denied her--shine through on every page....An intense and compelling read--I read it in a couple of sessions--and one I can definitely recommend to anyone who is looking for an historical romance with depth ...*The Bedding Proposal* is a very strong start to Ms Warren’s new series.” –*All About Romance* (Desert Isle Keeper)

“Lovely. Simply lovely. *The Bedding Proposal* swept me away and had me totally smitten....Oh these two. [Leo and Thalia are] everything I love in a hero and heroine. I could easily see being friends with either of them.... He’s sexy and thoughtful and rather forceful without being domineering.... She’s got a backbone of steel and tremendous character and determination. She lost everything when her husband divorced and ruined her name years earlier....But she never quit, built her life back up and was determined to take care of herself no matter what. I adored her and my heart broke for everything she’d been through. They were really wonderful together. He saw her and she really saw him. They just had that lovely connection where they... clicked....I love when authors do something a little different. And everything about *The Bedding Proposal* was exactly that and beautifully done.” –*Herding Cats & Burning Soup*

Praise for the novels of Tracy Anne Warren

“Truly satisfying romance.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Exceptionally entertaining.”—*Chicago Tribune*

“Warren’s emotionally wrought protagonists are beautifully portrayed.”—*Library Journal*

“Impeccably written.”—*Booklist*

“Deeply relatable characters and strong writing.”—*Publishers Weekly*

About the Author

Tracy Anne Warren is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of more than a dozen romance novels, including historical romances such as the Princess Bride trilogy (*The Princess and the Peer*; *Her Highness and the Highlander*) and contemporary romances such as *The Last Man on Earth* and *The Man Plan*. After working in the corporate world for a number of years, she quit her day job to pursue her first love: writing. She has won numerous industry awards, including Romance Writers of America’s RITA Award, the National Readers’ Choice Award, and the HOLT Medallion. She currently lives in Maryland with a small clowder of rescue cats.

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Praise for the Novels of Tracy Anne Warren

Also by Tracy Anne Warren

SIGNET SELECT

Chapter 1

London, England
October 1817

“This party is duller than a Sunday sermon,” Lord Leopold Byron complained, with a sigh.

From where he stood with his elbow crooked idly atop the fireplace mantelpiece, he surveyed the other guests. Not for the first time, he wondered why he’d bothered to accept this evening’s invitation; the only amusing activity was drinking, and he could have done that anywhere. At least the champagne was a palatable vintage. Taking consolation from the thought, he drank from the crystal flute balanced in his other hand.

At the opposite end of their host’s mantelpiece stood his twin brother, Lord Lawrence Byron. Given that they were identical, Leo supposed they must make a picture, particularly dressed as they both were in black silk evening breeches and black cutaway coats with crisp white shirts, waistcoats and cravats.

Lawrence looked at him and raised an eyebrow, its color two shades darker than his golden brown hair, which fell past his jaw; Leo also tended to wear his hair slightly long. “Just be glad you aren’t actually in church,” he said.

“If I were, at least I’d be able to catch up on my sleep. Rather handy, being able to doze off with my eyes open; fools the vicar every time. Tough to do standing up, though.”

“I can manage in a pinch, so long as there’s a convenient wall to lean against. Last time I tried it, though, I started snoring. Great-aunt Augusta caught me and boxed my ears.”

Leo chuckled in sympathy. “She may be pushing eighty, but the old gal can still pack a wallop.”

Lawrence nodded. “I’ll wager she could make even the great Tom Cribb shake in his boots.”

Both men grinned for a moment at the image of their formidable aunt taking on one of England’s fiercest boxers.

“You can’t expect London to be terribly exciting this time of year,” Lawrence said, “what with most of the *Ton* off at their country estates. I don’t know why you didn’t stay at Braebourne with everyone else for another few weeks.”

“What? And leave you rattling around Town all by yourself? I know you’ve taken it into your head to actually do something with your legal studies, but coming back to London early in order to set up your own practice? It’s beyond the pale, even for you.”

Lawrence gave him a wry half smile. “At least one of us values his education. I happen to like the law; I find it fascinating. And might I remind you that you also studied the law, same as me?”

“Just because I earned a degree in jurisprudence doesn’t mean I want to spend the rest of my life pitching my oars into legal waters. You know I studied the law only because I couldn’t stomach anything else. Now that the war’s over, the military holds little appeal. As for taking ecclesiastical orders—” He broke off on a dramatic shudder. “Not even Mama can see me in a vicar’s collar with a Bible tucked under my arm.”

Lawrence laughed. “*No one* could see you in a vicar’s collar with a Bible under your arm. The very idea is sacrilegious.”

“You’re right,” Leo said. “I prefer to live a gentleman’s life, as befits the son of a duke. And thanks to some sound financial advice, courtesy of our inestimable brother-in-law, Adam, and our brother Jack’s friend Pendragon, I can afford to do so, even if I am the fifth youngest of six sons.”

“Only by two minutes,” his twin reminded. “You know, I’ve always wondered if the nursemaid didn’t switch us in our cribs and I’m actually the elder.”

“Not likely, considering I’m the brains behind the majority of our greatest schemes.”

“The brains, are you? I’ll admit you’ve got a God-given flair for making mischief that few others can match, but I’ll thank you to remember who it is who always manages to talk our way out of the thicket when we land ass-first in trouble.”

“You do have a knack for turning a story on its head.” Leo drank more champagne. “Which leads me back to this career nonsense of yours. You invested successfully with Pendragon, same as me, so I know you don’t need the blunt. Why, then, do you want a job? You know as well as I do that gentlemen don’t engage in trade.”

“It’s not trade. The law is a perfectly honorable profession,” Lawrence said as he fiddled with his watch fob; it was a gesture Leo knew always indicated defensiveness on his twin’s part. “As for my reasons, it keeps me from being *bored*—unlike you.”

Leo rolled his eyes. “God, save me. Next you’ll be telling me I should join you in chambers and hang my shingle up next to yours. Or worse, take up a cause and run for Parliament. I can see it now: the Right Honourable Lord Leopold, standing on behalf of Gloucester.” He shook his head, smiling at the absurdity of the idea.

But his twin didn’t return his grin. “Might be good for you. You’re five-and-twenty now. You could do with some purposeful direction.”

“The only direction I need is to be pointed toward a fresh glass of wine,” Leo said, tossing back the last of his champagne. “That and a proper bit of entertainment.”

“A woman, you mean? Maybe you shouldn’t have broken things off so soon with that pretty little opera dancer you were seeing over the summer. She was a prime bit o’ muslin.”

Leo scowled. “Oh, she was pretty enough and most definitely limber, but after a couple of weeks, the attraction began to wear thin. Outside the bedroom, we had absolutely nothing in common. Her favorite topics were clothes and jewels and the latest amorous intrigues going on backstage at Covent Garden. It got so that I had begun making excuses not to visit her.”

He paused and briefly drummed his fingers against the mantelpiece. “I knew enough was enough when she started hinting that she wanted to quit dancing so I could take her on a tour of the Continent. As if I’d

consign myself to spending weeks alone in her company. I'd rather be clapped in irons and paraded naked through the streets than endure such tedium."

Lawrence chuckled. "I hadn't realized the situation was quite so dire."

"That's because you were too busy with your own flirtations." Slowly, Leo turned his empty glass between his fingers. "No, if I wanted to set up another mistress, she'd have to be someone unique, someone incomparable, who other men would go to great lengths to possess. Someone like—"

And suddenly, from across the room, a woman caught his eye.

Her hair was as dark as a winter night, upswept in a simple yet refined twist that showcased the delicate, creamy white column of her throat. Around her neck hung a plain gold chain with a cameo that nestled between her breasts like a cherished lover. Despite the surprisingly modest décolletage of her silk evening gown, the cut served only to enhance the lush curves of her shapely figure, while the brilliant emerald hue of the material cast no illusions regarding her sensuality and allure.

He knew who she must be, of course. He'd heard talk that she might make an appearance tonight—none other than the infamous Lady Thalia Lennox.

Ever since the firestorm of scandal that had erupted around her nearly six years earlier, she'd become both disgraced and notorious. Even he, who had been no more than a green youth reveling in one of his first years about Town, had been aware of the uproar at the time.

The gossip had ignited first over her much-publicized affair, then exploded during the divorce proceedings that followed. Divorces were virtually unheard of among the *Ton*, and extremely difficult to obtain due to the necessity of three separate trials and an Act of Parliament. Nevertheless, her cuckolded husband, Lord Kemp, had sued against her and been granted a termination of their marriage.

And while a taint of scandal continued to trail Lord Kemp even to this day, the proceedings had turned Lady Thalia into a social outcast. Once a darling of the *Ton*, she now dwelled along the fringes of genteel respectability, invited out only by those who either were dishonored themselves or simply didn't care what anyone thought of them—or so said the gossips who continued to relay stories of her alleged exploits.

This evening's supper party was hosted by a marquess who was separated from his wife, lived openly with his mistress and most definitely didn't give a fig about other people's opinions.

Frankly, his host was one of the reasons Leo had attended tonight's revel, as Leo had assumed the party would be wilder and more amusing than it had turned out to be thus far. But now that he knew Thalia Lennox was among the guests, his expectations for a lively evening were reinvigorated.

"You were saying? Someone like who?" Lawrence asked, picking up on the sentence Leo had never finished.

"Her." Leo set his glass aside.

Lawrence's gaze moved across the room. "Good Lord, surely you aren't thinking what I think you're thinking?"

"And what would that be?" he said, not taking his eyes off Thalia, who was conversing with an elderly roué who couldn't seem to lift his gaze higher than her admittedly magnificent breasts.

“We were discussing women, and, if I’m not mistaken, that’s the scandalous Lady K. over there. You must be out of your mind to even consider making a play for her.”

“Why? She’s stunning. One of the most enchanting women I’ve ever beheld. And I believe she goes by her maiden name of Lennox these days.”

“However she’s called, she uses men like toys and discards them once they’re broken, to say nothing of the fact that she’s several years your senior.”

Leo couldn’t repress a slowly forming grin as he turned to his twin. “Just look at her. She can’t be that much older, even if she has been married and divorced. As for her using me like a toy, I look forward to being played with. Anywhere. Anytime.”

Lawrence shook his head. “I’ll be the first to admit she’s attractive, and I can see why you’d be tempted, but do yourself a favor and find another opera dancer. Or better yet, go visit one of the bawdy houses. You can slake your thirsts there without causing any lasting damage.”

“Ah, but where is the challenge in that?” Leo said. “I want a woman who can’t be had simply for the price of a coin. A spirited female with some good solid kick to her.”

“The only kick you’re going to get is in your posterior when she boots you out of her way. My guess is she won’t look at you twice.”

Leo raised a brow. “Oh, she will. Care to wager on it?”

Lawrence narrowed his eyes. “All right. Ten quid.”

“Make it twenty. Ten’s hardly worth the effort.”

“Twenty it is.”

They shook, sealing the bet.

Lawrence stepped back and crossed his arms. “Go on. Amaze me, Don Juan.”

Leo brushed the sleeves of his coat and tugged its hem to a precise angle. “Take the carriage home if you get tired of waiting. I’m sure I’ll be otherwise occupied tonight.”

With that, he set off in search of his quarry.

* * *

I should never have come here tonight, Lady Thalia Lennox thought as she forced herself not to flinch beneath the leering stare of Lord Teaksbury. She didn’t believe he had met her eyes once since they had begun conversing.

Old lecher. How dare he stare at my breasts as if I’m some doxy selling her wares? Then again, after nearly six years of enduring such crude behavior from men of her acquaintance, one would think she would be well used to it by now.

As for the ladies of the *Ton*, they generally looked through her, as if she were some transparent ghost who had drifted into their midst. Or worse, they pointedly turned their backs. She had grown inured to their snubs

as well—for the most part, at least.

Still, she had hoped tonight might prove different, since her host, the Marquess of Elmore, had known his own share of personal pain and tended to acquire friends of a more liberal and tolerant persuasion. But even here, people saw her not for the person she was, but for who they assumed her to be.

Ordinarily, she tossed aside invitations such as the one for tonight's supper party—not that she received all that many invitations these days. But she supposed the real reason she had come tonight was a simple enough one.

She was lonely.

Her two friends, Jane Frost and Mathilda Cathcart—the only ones out of all her acquaintance who had stuck by her after the divorce—were in the countryside. They had each invited her to join them at their separate estates, but she knew her attendance at the usual autumn house parties put each woman in an awkward and difficult position. Plus, neither of their husbands approved of their continued association with her, their friendship limited to occasional quiet meals when they were in Town, and the back-and-forth exchange of letters.

No, she was quite alone and quite lonely.

Ironic, she mused, considering the constant parade of lovers she supposedly entertained—at least according to the gossip mavens and scandal pages that still liked to prattle on about her. Given their reports of her behavior, one would imagine her town house door scarcely ever closed for all the men going in and out—or perhaps it was only her bedroom door that was always in need of oil for the hinges?

She felt her fingers tighten against the glass of lemonade in her hand, wondering why she was dwelling on such unpleasantness tonight. Better to put thoughts like those aside, since they did nothing but leave the bitter taste of regret in her mouth.

A hot bath and a good book—that's what I need this evening, she decided. That, and to tell the old reprobate still leering at her to take his eyes and his person somewhere else.

If only she hadn't given in to the temptation to wear emerald green tonight, perhaps she wouldn't have ended up being ogled by a loathsome toad like Teaksbury. But she'd always loved this dress, which had been languishing in the back of her wardrobe for ages. And honestly she was tired of being condemned no matter what she wore or how she behaved. *In for a penny, in for a pound*, she'd thought when she made the selection. Now, however, she wished she'd stuck to her usual somber dark blue or black, no matter how dreary those shades might seem.

Ah well, I shall be leaving shortly, so what does it really matter?

"Why, that's absolutely fascinating," Thalia said with false politeness as she cut Teaksbury off midsentence. "You'll have to excuse me now, Lord Teaksbury. After all, I wouldn't want to be accused of monopolizing your company tonight."

Teaksbury opened his mouth—no doubt to assure her that he didn't mind in the least. But she had already set down her glass, turned on a flourish of emerald skirts and started toward the door.

She had made it about a quarter of the length of the room when a tall figure stepped suddenly into her path, blocking her exit. She gazed up, then up again, into a boldly masculine face and a pair of green-gold eyes

that literally stole her breath. The man sent her a dashing, straight-toothed smile, candlelight glinting off the burnished golden brown of his casually brushed hair in a way that only increased his appeal.

Saints above, she thought as her heart knocked hard inside her chest, her pulse leaping as it hadn't leapt in years—if it ever had at all.

Schooling her features so they revealed none of her inner turmoil, she gave him a polite nod. "Pardon me, sir." She waited, expecting him to step aside.

Instead, he executed an elegant bow. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Lord Leopold Byron. My intimates, however, call me Leo."

Arrogant, isn't he? Well, she'd met arrogant men before, many times.

She gave him a long, cool stare. "Do they? How nice for them. Now I must insist you step aside. We haven't been properly introduced. As you ought to know, a gentleman never speaks directly to a lady with whom he is not acquainted. Pity one of your intimates isn't here to do the honors. Good evening."

She took a step to the right.

He matched her move, impeding her path once again. "Shall I go find our host, then?" he asked pleasantly. "I'm sure Elmore would be happy to affect an introduction. Frankly, though, it seems like a great lot of bother, particularly since we are conversing already."

Reaching toward the tray of a passing servant, he picked up two glasses. "Champagne?" he offered. Smiling that devastating smile again, he held out one of the crystal flutes with its golden draught effervescing inside.

Audacious as well as arrogant. That and handsome in a sinful way no man had a right to be.

Call me Leo, indeed.

She didn't know whether to be annoyed or amused, particularly since she was sure part of his strategy in waylaying her was to provoke a strong reaction. Still, she found herself accepting one of the proffered glasses, if for no other reason than to give herself time to steady her nerves.

"Since I doubt you'll volunteer your name, not without Elmore's aid at least," Lord Leo continued, "I suppose I must try guessing on my own. Lady Thalia Lennox, is it not?"

The wine suddenly turned sour on her tongue.

Of course, she realized, she ought to have known that he was only playing games and knew her by reputation. Everyone in the *Ton* did, it seemed—even if they wouldn't associate with her any longer. "Then you have me at even more of a disadvantage than I realized."

"Not at all, since we have only just met and need time to learn about one another."

"I am sure you've heard all you need to know about me. Divorce trials will do that for a woman. Now, if you'll—"

"If you're concerned I mind a sheen of scandal, I don't. I've weathered a few of them myself over the years, so such matters make no difference to me."

He'd been embroiled in scandals, had he? Vaguely she remembered mention of various members of the Byron family involved in deeds that had shocked Society at one time or another. But none of their acts had made any of the Byrons outcasts. And being that Lord Leo was a man, the *Ton* was, of course, more apt to forgive, no matter how serious the trespasses might have been.

As for his "over the years" remark, he didn't look old enough to have weathered all that many scandals. In fact, just how old was he? Certainly not her own one-and-thirty, even if he had the confidence of a man in his prime.

Regardless of scandals and age, she had no interest in setting up flirtation with a stranger. "It has been . . . interesting meeting you, Lord Leopold, but I really must be going."

"Why? It is early yet. Surely you can remain a while longer?"

"Truly, I cannot," she said.

He gave her a shrewd look, as if he saw right through her excuses. "Afraid you might enjoy yourself? Or are you worried I'm going to stare down your dress like Teaksbury?"

Her mouth dropped open before she could recall herself.

"It was rather hard to miss that crass display of his," Lord Leo remarked. "The man's a boor. It's a wonder he wasn't actually drooling. Not that I can entirely blame him, given your irresistible feminine charms. Still, were I to feast my eyes upon you, I promise it would leave you in no doubt of my sincere admiration."

Slowly, his gaze dipped down, moving gradually over her body in a way that felt almost like a caress.

When he met her eyes again, his own were alight with unrepentant desire. "You are the most exquisite woman I have ever beheld. Even a god would find himself tempted by you."

A hot flush burst over her skin, shocking her with its force. Only barely did she resist the urge to reach up and cover her hot cheeks with her hands. The sensation was truly singular considering she hadn't blushed since her girlhood and her first London Season.

Experienced women did *not* blush.

Yet this outrageous lord with his heart-stopping smile and velvety voice roused emotions in her that she hadn't realized she still possessed.

"Now," he said, "why don't we go somewhere more private so we can get even better acquainted? I have my coach just outside. And please, I insist you call me Leo. As I said before, all my intimates do."

All his bedmates, he meant, his meaning clear.

Without even knowing what she intended, she flung the contents of her glass up into his face, champagne splashing everywhere.

He blinked wine out of his eyes, a stunned expression on his wet face.

"You and I shall *never* be intimates. Good night, *Lord Leopold*."

Spinning around, she marched toward the door.

As she did, she caught sight of a man standing across the room—a man she would have sworn was Leopold. Byron had she not known he was still dripping somewhere behind her. Her step wobbled slightly as her mind worked to figure out the unexpected anomaly.

Twins? Good God, are there two of him?

And his brother was laughing, making no effort at all to contain his mirth.

Well, let him laugh. Impudent beast, just like his sibling.

As for the rest of the guests whose stares pierced her from all directions, she was used to such scrutiny.

The entire incident would be in tomorrow's papers, of course.

But what do I care? Tossing champagne into a man's face was nothing, not compared with what she'd been through already. For when you've known the worst, the rest was naught but a trifle.

* * *

Leo withdrew a white silk handkerchief from his waistcoat pocket and dried his face as he watched Thalia Lennox disappear from view with a final flourish of her green skirts.

Lawrence appeared at his side moments later, his grin so wide it was a wonder it didn't split his cheeks.

"Well, that went swimmingly," Lawrence said, with a hearty chuckle. "Had her eating right out of the palm of your hand, at least until she decided to give you a champagne bath!" He laughed again. "You owe me twenty quid. Pay up."

"I will when we get home." Leo wiped briefly at his sodden cravat before giving up.

"What on earth did you say to her anyway? I knew she'd rebuff you, but not with quite so much enthusiasm."

Somewhat begrudgingly, Leo provided him with a brief recounting.

Lawrence erupted into fresh gales of laughter, so loud the outburst drew every eye.

"Oh, do shut up, won't you?" Leo told his brother with a grumble. "I think there might be one scullery maid in the kitchen who hasn't heard you."

Rubbing moisture from the corners of his eyes, Lawrence did his best to silence his mirth, though his lips continued to twitch. "My condolences for your loss." He laid a consoling hand on Leo's shoulder. "You know what your trouble is?"

Leo sent him a baleful look. "I'm certain you shall be happy to illuminate me."

"You're too used to being fawned over by women. When was the last time one of them turned you down? You were what? Fifteen?"

"Thirteen," Leo countered, unable to repress a grin. "Remember that gorgeous little chambermaid at Braebourne? She never did let me steal more than a kiss."

Lawrence's eyes twinkled with clear recollection. "She let me steal two."

Leo shot him a fresh glare.

"Never say you weren't warned," Lawrence continued. "I told you the ex-Lady K. would knock you down and kick you into a convenient corner. From now on, stick to more accessible, and appreciative, females."

Leo considered his twin's remark. "I do not believe I shall."

"What! But surely you've had enough?"

"No," he said, his gut tightening with the knowledge that he wanted Thalia Lennox, now more than ever. She'd said they would never be intimate, but he'd learned long ago the mistake of saying never, since fate had an interesting way of turning matters on their head.

"She may have eluded me tonight, but our paths will cross again. And when they do . . ."

"You're deluded, that's what you are," Lawrence said.

Leo grinned. "No, just determined. Now, how about making our excuses to our host and finding some company with a bit more fire in their blood? Fancy a game of cards or dice? I know a prime hell we haven't tried."

Lawrence's eyes brightened. "By all means, lead on, brother mine."

Slapping a hand across his twin's shoulder, Leo led the way.

Chapter 2

Four mornings later, Thalia sat at the writing desk in her small study and added a last few lines to the letter she was penning to her friend Jane Frost. Satisfied after a quick final perusal, she laid her quill aside. She then sanded the ink dry and folded the missive into a neat square before sealing it with hot wax from the nearby candle, which she blew out the moment the task was complete.

Once, she would have thought nothing of letting the taper burn down to a nub, but the past few years had taught her the expense of items such as candles and the wisdom of frugal living.

Actually, despite her straitened circumstances, she counted herself lucky that she was able to live in a decent part of London. Were it not for the small unencumbered legacy that had been left to her by her maternal grandmother, which included the furnished London town house and enough money to maintain it, she would have had nothing. But to her everlasting gratitude, the bequest had somehow miraculously escaped inclusion in her marriage settlement.

Gordon had seen to it that she hadn't received so much as a farthing from him in their divorce, and had kicked her out of his family's massive ancestral residence in Grosvenor Square with nothing but the clothes on her back that dreadful June day so many years ago.

Her lady's maid, Parker, had taken pity and, with the help of a footman who'd had a soft spot for Parker, had spirited out a couple of trunks of Thalia's clothes a few days later. Even so, she hadn't gotten so much as an additional handkerchief after that, not even the jewels that had been hers prior to her marriage.

Under the law, everything she'd owned belonged to Gordon, down to the last hairpin and thimble. Sadly, that had included a string of hundred-year-old pearls that had been passed down to her from her great-grandmother. She'd pleaded with him for their return, but he'd laughed and said he'd sold them, along with all the other "unwanted baggage" she'd left in the house. He hadn't wanted her possessions, but spiteful to the end, he'd made sure she didn't get any of them back.

The luxurious emerald green dress she'd worn to Elmore's party the other evening had been one of the gowns packed inside that long-ago trunk of clothes from her maid. The dress had been involved in a sea of trouble then and it had caused her nothing but trouble again.

Call me Leo.

A memory of Byron's velvety voice rang inside her head once again, warm and silky as a caress.

She shivered, her eyelids sliding a fraction of an inch lower. He really had been arrestingly handsome and surprisingly charming—at least until he'd made his outrageous proposition to her.

But why was she thinking of Lord Leopold anyway? It's not as if she would be seeing him again. Time to move along, just as she always did.

She gave herself a hard shake.

He was nothing but an impudent rogue bent on sowing a fresh crop of wild oats. Well, he would just have to sow them with someone else, since in spite of her reputation, she didn't dally with men.

Rising from her chair, she brushed a quick hand over the skirt of her day dress, then crossed the room to give the bellpull a tug.

Ten minutes passed before a discreet knock sounded at the door. A stoop-shouldered old manservant in black livery entered. His hair was as wispy and white as dandelion fluff, his body so thin as to be almost skeletal, even though Thalia knew he ate three hearty meals a day down in the servants' hall.

"You rang, milady," he said on a gruff croak that sometimes reminded her of a bullfrog.

"Yes, Fletcher," she said, "I have a letter to mail. Has the postboy been by yet?"

"Nay. He should be here soon enough, though. I'll see this is added to the others going out."

"Excellent." She smiled and held out the letter for him to take. "And would you inform Mrs. Grove that I shall be going out this afternoon and would like an early dinner on my return. I shall be attending an auction at Christie's. Please ask Boggs to ready the coach so that we may leave by eleven o'clock."

"Of course, milady." Fletcher executed a stiff bow. "I'll see to it immediately."

She knew "immediately" would be some while, but that was all right. Fletcher moved as quickly as his old bones could take him and she'd allowed plenty of time for her journey to the auction house on Pall Mall.

Once Fletcher left, she went to her desk and picked up the catalogue for that afternoon's sale. Within its pages was a listing of all the items for sale, together with descriptions and ink renderings of the most interesting lots.

She kept an eye on the London auction houses in hopes that she would stumble across some of her old

possessions. Of course she couldn't afford to buy back the truly expensive pieces such as her jewelry and silverware, but every once in a great while one of the less costly bits showed up.

So far, she'd managed to reclaim a flowered Sevres teapot and four matching cups and saucers whose provenance showed they had once "belonged" to Lord Kemp.

She'd also bid for and won a ladies' sewing basket with an embroidered motif of blue birds, lilacs and lily of the valley on its cushioned top. She'd recognized the basket instantly, since she had done the needlework herself—her tiny initials were still on the inside-right corner, exactly where she'd placed them.

And lastly, she'd bought a small oil painting depicting the village near her parents' country estate that had once adorned the wall of her childhood bedroom. She'd paid rather more for it than she'd wished, but the painting had been worth every farthing, since seeing it brought a smile to her face each and every morning when she woke.

Now there was another possible item to recover.

She'd found it in the current Christie's catalogue and, from the description, strongly suspected the keepsake was one of her "lost" belongings. A porcelain Meissen trinket box made in the last century, it had a pair of hand-painted black-and-white kittens in a basket on its top—just like the one her father had given her as a gift for her fifteenth birthday. She'd been crushed to lose the piece, so she was cautiously excited that it might be hers once again.

Assuming the bidding didn't go too high.

At a previous auction, there had been a pair of silver and ivory hair combs that she had desperately wanted back. But the auction price had started high and quickly escalated far beyond the bounds of her meager budget. If the porcelain box proved to be the one her father had given her, she prayed that today's audience would be packed full of dog lovers who had no interest whatsoever in the precious little cat trinket box.

Brimming with nervous excitement, she went to make ready for her departure.

* * *

Two hours later, Leo Byron walked slowly along the rows of numbered auction items that had been set out for prospective bidders to peruse prior to the official commencement of the sale. He held a copy of the Christie's auction catalogue rolled up in his hand, his selections having already been made before he'd ever set foot past the door.

In spite of that, he always made a point to personally view any items he was thinking about purchasing, rather than taking anyone else's word for their condition or authenticity. Not that he doubted Christie's integrity, since it was quite justifiably regarded as the premier auction house for arts and antiquities. But to his way of thinking, a man needed to judge matters for himself. That way if he made a mistake, he had no one but himself to blame.

He'd come today specifically to bid on a fifth-century B.C. Athenian red-figured water jar depicting a scene from the Trojan Wars. Signed by a known maker, it was a beautiful example of the period and would make an excellent addition to his collection. There was a small Grecian marble sculpture of dancing nymphs that he rather liked as well and planned to acquire if the price was right.

After inspecting the jar and the sculpture, he moved on, surveying the other items being displayed. He found

a Sevres vase with crimson roses painted on a cobalt blue ground that he thought his older sister, Mallory, would enjoy. It was a mid-eighteenth-century estate piece, so not yet an antique, but he decided it would make a fine present nonetheless.

He also came across a porcelain trinket box with cats upon its top that immediately put him in mind of his other sister, eighteen-year-old Esme. She was a devoted animal lover, so the small box, with its sweet little black-and-white kittens, was certain to charm her. A mere trifle—he doubted the bidding would be anything but lukewarm at best, making it an easy purchase.

He was heading toward the adjoining room where the auctioneer's lectern and rows of chairs had been arranged for the sale when a white feather from a woman's bonnet caught his eye. He looked more closely and felt a thrill warm his blood.

It was Lady Thalia Lennox in the flesh.

And what fine flesh it was, although he couldn't see nearly enough of it, clothed as she was in a rather ordinary day dress of blue worsted. The dress didn't become her half so well as the emerald green evening gown she'd worn the night they'd first met. Even so, there was no concealing her beauty, her skin creamy white, her lips like petals, her hair as dark and lustrous as an ermine's pelt.

He imagined what that hair might look like spread in loose waves over a plump white pillow, her caramel eyes sparkling while her rose-colored mouth curved in sensual anticipation as he lowered himself to join her between the sheets.

He'd thought of her frequently over the past few days, wondering when he might have another chance to see her. Providence, it seemed, had decided to smile upon him. And luckily, there was no champagne anywhere in sight, so he didn't need to worry about another dousing—a first even for him.

Smiling to himself, he started toward her, aware she hadn't seen him yet. She appeared lost in her own inspection of the goods up for auction, perusing the items as he had already done himself.

She also appeared to be alone. Or had she come with a lover and the man was off finding them seats while she amused herself here for a final few minutes before the sale began?

Either way, he didn't plan to squander the chance to speak with her. After all, who knew where it might lead?

* * *

Thalia walked slowly along, studying the auction items. She'd already located the kitten trinket box and had known immediately that it was the one that used to be hers. She hugged the knowledge to herself, hoping that when she left the auction today, the box would once more be safely in her possession. She had just the right spot for it too, inside her grandmother's glass-fronted rosewood cabinet that she kept in her upstairs sitting room.

Of course there were other antiques and collectibles that she would have loved to bid on as well, including a splendid landscape painting of the Dover cliffs with a seascape so realistic she could almost smell salt in the air. But the opening price was far too dear and she stalwartly refused to give in to the temptation to spend more than she could afford. A painting here, a bejeweled pin, a vase or a silk fan there, and she soon wouldn't have the money to pay the tea seller for her favorite Ceylon black or for a new supply of paper and ink from the stationer. The little keepsake was more than indulgence enough.

She was admiring a set of ornate silver chargers that she would once have thought nothing of buying when she sensed someone watching her. She turned her head and looked straight into a pair of vivid green eyes rimmed in gold.

Beautiful, unforgettable eyes.

Lord Leopold Byron sauntered toward her, a faint smile on his attractive mouth.

She cursed inwardly. It was too late to pretend that she hadn't seen him and walk away. Drawing a breath, she prepared herself for the encounter.

"Lady Thalia." He stopped and made her an elegant bow. "How do you do?"

"Lord Leopold," she said, her words calm and cool.

His smile didn't waver in the slightest over her lack of enthusiasm. "What happy luck to find you here."

"Really?" She arched a brow. "I was thinking just the opposite."

Rather than take exception, he casually ran the catalogue through his free hand as his smile widened. "The auction looks to be a fine one. Mr. Christie should be pleased by the turnout."

Lord Leopold was right. The salesroom was filled with patrons with more wandering in all the time. It threatened to be what was known in the vernacular as a sad crush.

"A great number of bidders generally makes for a lively time," she observed, "although I might wish for fewer folk so the prices don't go impossibly high."

"Yes, big crowds tend to be bad for a bidder's pocketbook. And on what have you come to bid today, Lady Thalia?"

The question was innocuous enough, but the warm cadence of his voice moved through her with a strange power, as if they were sharing a secret. Something private, even intimate. And as she had already told him, there was never going to be anything intimate between the two of them.

"That is for me to know, Lord Leopold, and me alone. Now, if you'll excuse me."

She turned to move away.

"Are you headed in the direction of the main salesroom?" he asked. "If so, allow me to escort you."

Her brows creased. "Thank you, but no. There are still a few minutes left before the bidding begins and I have not yet looked at all the goods up for sale. Please do go on without me."

But he made no effort to move.

"As a gentleman," he said, "it would be remiss of me to leave you on your own. Unless you are here with a friend? Is someone joining you?"

He gave her an expectant look, clearly interested in her answer.

Her frown deepened and she wondered whether she should lie. But as soon as she took a seat, he would

know the truth, so what was the point?

“No, I am attending the sale unaccompanied, except for my maid, of course,” she said. “But I am quite familiar with the interior of this auction house and have no need of escort. Pray absolve yourself of any sense of obligation.”

She turned then and walked on, hoping he would take the none-too-subtle hint and be on his way.

But of course he did not, strolling along a few steps behind her.

She stopped and pretended an interest in a black-lacquered Chinese vase that had to be one of the most hideous pieces she’d ever seen.

He stopped too.

Steadfastly, she refused to look at him, an exasperated breath escaping her lips.

“Ugly, isn’t it?”

She nearly looked around, but caught herself at the last second.

“That vase is absolutely monstrous,” he continued, when she didn’t respond. “Makes you wonder what Christie was thinking not just chucking it straight into the nearest rubbish bin.”

Her lips twitched, but she forced herself not to smile.

“Maybe he’s hoping some of the bidders will be blind. That way the winner won’t mind purchasing something so repellent it would give a sewer rat the shudders.”

“It’s dreadful but not *that* dreadful,” she said, unable to silence the remark.

Lord Leopold met her gaze and raised a single golden brow.

A laugh escaped her mouth. “You’re right, it is atrocious. But useful. A bouquet of roses would brighten it considerably.”

“It would probably make the petals wilt.”

Before she could stop herself, she laughed again.

He smiled, his teeth white and straight, his eyes twinkling in a way that made him even handsomer than he already was. “I presume it’s safe to say neither of us will be bidding on that particular piece?”

She nodded. “Yes, quite safe.”

“The auction will be starting soon. Again, may I escort you to the salesroom so we can find seats?” He offered his arm.

“My maid is saving one for me.”

“Then shall I escort you to your maid?”

She hesitated, wondering how she had found herself in the position where refusing him would seem churlish.

But letting him show her to her seat didn't mean she had to continue their association. Quite the contrary, since they would part soon enough.

"If you wish, Lord Leopold."

"I do."

She laid her hand on his coat sleeve, the walnut brown superfine wool smooth and soft beneath her fingertips, his arm firm with muscle.

Slowly, they began to walk.

"Lady Thalia, I hope you will allow me to apologize for my behavior on the occasion of our last meeting."

"Our *first* meeting, you mean."

"Exactly." He gave her another one of his winning smiles. "My only excuse, if there is one, is that I was bewitched by your beauty and quite lost my head. There was also the goodly amount of spirits I'd consumed prior to our conversation. It may have loosened my tongue a bit more than it ought."

She sent him a wry glance from under her bonnet. "Alcohol is often a convenient excuse for untoward behavior."

He winced visibly. "Ouch. I deserve that, I suppose. Although you also have room to make an apology, as I recollect."

"Me?" Her gait slowed, her gaze meeting his. "For what do I have to apologize?"

"A certain glass of champagne perhaps."

"Oh. That."

He chuckled. "Yes. That."

They strolled on.

"I've quite forgiven you," he continued in an even tone, "even if you did ruin a perfectly good cravat. My valet had to discard the one that you doused. Apparently wine stains don't come out."

A faint smile played across her lips. "A great loss, I am sure. Pray send me a reckoning and I shall have a replacement cravat sent round to your address."

"I would much rather you agree that we may start over. Act as if we had met only today." He stopped and turned toward her, taking her hand inside his own. "Allow me to introduce myself. Lord Leopold Byron at your service, ma'am. And you are?"

"Someone who didn't wish to be introduced the first time."

His beguiling smile widened. "Your name, fair lady?"

"You know who I am."

He waited, clearly expectant.

“Lady Thalia Lennox. There, are you satisfied?”

“Not yet, but I hope to be in the very near future.”

She sent him a warning look. “Careful, Lord Leopold, or I may find myself in need of another glass of champagne.”

He laughed, then made her an elegant bow. “May I say what a pleasure it is to make your acquaintance, Lady Thalia.”

She shook her head. “You, Lord Leopold, are absurd.”

“Ah good, your barbs aren’t quite as sharp. We’re making progress.”

“I wouldn’t count on it.”

“Now that you’ve agreed to forgive me and begin again—”

“I haven’t agreed to anything,” she said, trying to conceal the fact that she did find him rather charming in spite of her better judgment. But she wasn’t interested in men. They were nothing but a great deal of trouble.

“Of course you did,” he insisted.

“No, I did not. And you presume a very great deal on so short an acquaintance.”

“Which is exactly why we need to take the time to get to know each other better. I suggest now.”

“I suggest never. The auction is about to start. We should be finding our seats.”

He held out his arm again for her to take.

Instead, she nodded toward the main salesroom and the rows of occupied chairs. “I see my maid waiting just there. Thank you, but I can manage to walk the last few yards on my own.”

“If I accompany you, we can sit together. I am sure another chair can be located for your maid.”

“Good-bye, Lord Leopold,” she called in an amused singsong before she set off into the fray of eager bidders.

Leo wanted to go after her, but he realized he’d pushed her enough for one day. Any more and she might bolt completely. It was curious, but for a woman of her experience and reputation, she was strangely reserved. It was as if she lived behind a carefully constructed wall, letting others see no more than glimpses of the real woman beyond.

He’d assumed she would be more openly flirtatious, more coyly inviting despite their inauspicious introduction at Elmore’s party last week. Rumor had it that she was wild and wanton, and that she had a string of lovers whose identities were the stuff of whisper and conjecture.

But there was no lover here today, he realized as he took a seat in one of the last unoccupied chairs. She really was here with her maid, doing nothing more than attending an auction, rather than engaging in some clandestine liaison.

Then again it wasn't her days that concerned him but rather her nights. Nights he planned to be spending with her in bed in the very near future. For now, he would have to content himself by watching her from afar—or at least from a few rows behind and to her left.

She sat in profile, her long, sable eyelashes brushing lightly over her cheeks when she blinked, her straight nose, refined cheekbones and delicately rounded chin cast in lovely angles beneath the brim of her chip-straw bonnet.

On what was she planning to bid? he wondered. Some pretty little objet d'art, he supposed.

Then one of Mr. Christie's senior auctioneers stepped up to the podium and, with the forthright echo of his gavel, began the sale.

* * *

Thalia sat in her chair, resisting the temptation to bid as item after item was offered up to the eager crowd. There were dishes, vases, candlesticks and oil lamps; desks and dressers, paintings and portmanteaus, boxes and baubles and far too much more to contemplate. There were even some ancient antiquities from a small but impressive grouping that drove the bidding to eye-popping heights.

Lord Leopold was among those select few gentlemen with the means to bid on even the priciest of items. And he was crafty, hanging back until it seemed the sale was all but concluded, then swooping in with a couple of last-minute bids that decisively squashed the hopes of the final competitors.

She'd recognized the rich, brandied cadence of his voice the instant he spoke, and looked over her shoulder to discover Lord Leopold seated a few rows behind. Until then, she'd refused to look, not wanting to encourage him by seeking him out in the crowd—even if she had been aware that he was seated somewhere nearby.

When he made his first surprise bid, everyone in the room looked, so she was only one of a multitude. Yet his eyes found hers immediately as if he had been waiting all this time for her to turn her gaze upon him.

And he didn't look away, his eyes locked with her own in spite of the fact that he was still engaged in the bidding. He smiled with open pleasure when the gavel descended and the auctioneer announced him the winner. It was an expression of victory, satisfaction and command, and it shot straight through to her marrow.

She faced forward again, her fingers knotted in her lap.

Luckily, her maid didn't notice her reaction, her own head bent over her sewing, since she had absolutely no interest in the auction proceedings themselves.

Lord Leopold bid again—on a marble sculpture this time—but she refused to look. Instead she listened to the action, his voice the only one she really heard as he won once again.

The auction moved on, more items coming and going as she waited for the kitten trinket box to make an appearance. Then finally, there it was. She sat up straighter in her chair, her attention riveted.

"Next we have item number one hundred and eight, Meissen, hand-painted porcelain box with cats," the auctioneer said in his clear voice. "The bidding will open at twenty pounds. Who will give me twenty? Twenty? Anyone twenty?"

No one spoke, Thalia among them, since she knew better than to take the auctioneer's opening bait.

"Five pounds, then, for this exceptional Meissen box with its sweet pair of moggies? Do I have five pounds?" the auctioneer said, quartering the bid.

A man in the second row raised the numbered card with his bidder number.

"And I have five, thank you, fine sir. Who will give me five and a half? Five and a half . . . Do I have five and a half?"

A man on the opposite side raised his hand.

And on it went at a frenzied pace. Still, Thalia held back, pulse hurrying beneath her breasts as she waited for the right moment to jump in.

"I have ten . . . and a ten . . . and ten—"

Thalia lifted her card. "Fifteen," she said in a carrying voice.

The auctioneer smiled. "Fifteen! Excellent, madam. Fifteen it is. Do we have fifteen and a half? Fifteen and a half . . ."

She held her breath, leaning forward onto the edge of her seat as she waited to see if the leap in price would be enough to scare off the other bidders. She hoped so, since she'd planned on bidding no more than twenty and would feel quite pleased if she could come away with it for less.

Two of the bidders had dropped out already. The last—another woman—sat with a frustrated expression, her round florid face turning even redder, red eyebrows scrunched together like a pair of badly knotted ribbons. She hesitated, clearly warring with herself over the price.

"Fifteen going once, going twice—"

"Sixteen."

The voice that rang out was new and distinctly male. To her shock, Thalia realized the man's identity without even having to look. And yet she couldn't stop herself from turning her head.

Lord Leopold looked straight at her.

"Sixteen from the gentleman in the back," the auctioneer cried. "Ladies, do we have seventeen?"

The redhead with the bad eyebrows frowned so hard it was a wonder her face didn't crack; then she shook her head.

She was out.

It was up to Thalia. She hesitated only a fraction of a second, then raised her bidder's number. "Seventeen."

"Eighteen," Lord Leopold said.

Thalia's jaw tightened. What was he doing bidding on her kitten trinket box? What possible use could he have for such a thing? Then it occurred to her. Was this his revenge for the other night? For her refusal of his

overtures and the champagne she'd tossed in his face?

So much for wanting to start over.

"Nineteen," she said, the word hard and precise.

He barely waited for the auctioneer to confirm her bid before he spoke. "Twenty-five."

A little ripple of reaction went through the crowd, all eyes affixed to her and Lord Leopold.

Silently, she cursed.

Twenty-five? More than she wanted to pay. More than she could afford, if truth be known, since twenty pounds had been her top bid from the start. Yet it galled her, the idea of giving in to him, of letting him take something that belonged to her by rights and that had been stolen from her once already.

"Twenty-five going once, going twice—"

Was she really going to let him have her box?

"Thirty," she said, throwing aside the last of her common sense.

Renewed murmurs echoed. Then all was silent as everyone settled down, waiting for the next bid. Even the auctioneer paused for an extra moment before diving back into the action.

"Do we have more than thirty, my lord?" Christie's man asked. "Thirty-one? Will you go to thirty-one?"

And Lord Leopold's eyes met Thalia's once more, his own fierce and enigmatic as if the two of them were engaged in a battle that went far beyond the present moment.

She shivered, reading the barely concealed desire in his eyes. He wanted her; of that she had no doubt. And she sensed that he always got what he wanted, whether it be a porcelain trinket box or a woman who had taken his fancy.

"Fifty," he said in a deep, smooth voice.

Her shoulders sank.

It was over. She couldn't possibly pay more than that and he knew it. Fifty pounds was more than her cook's yearly salary, more than the cost of the coal she used to heat the house and the kitchen from autumn to spring, more than her allotment for food and sundries combined.

"Fifty once, fifty twice . . ." The gavel came down. "Sold."

She looked down at her hands, clenched tight in her lap. Fury and disappointment warred within her, knowing her father's lost gift was lost yet again.

And all because of Lord Leopold Byron.

She didn't know yet what game he thought he was playing, but he was in for a sad awakening and his own rude disappointment. She knew all about being a man's pawn and it was something she'd sworn never to be again.

Rising to her feet, she signaled to her maid. It was time to leave.

She didn't look at him, careful to keep her gaze directed straight ahead as she walked out of the salesroom, head held high.

To her relief, he didn't follow. But she knew her reprieve was only temporary. It was simply a matter of waiting for his next volley in this battle of wills they had begun.

Chapter 3

“Would you look at that?” Lord Lawrence Byron said two afternoons later.

He and Leo were finishing a late nuncheon in the study. Lawrence was ensconced in his favorite armchair near a sunlit window, Leo seated at a nearby table.

They had moved into their new bachelor quarters in Cavendish Square a few months earlier. The town house was far larger and much better appointed than their previous lodgings. It also gave them enough privacy that neither felt inconvenienced by the other's routine—although being twins, and close in a way only brothers could be, they never really minded each other's company.

“Look at what?” Leo asked absently as he ate the last few bites of an excellent beef pie.

“At the trio of Pocket Venuses who just came out of the house next door at”—Lawrence cast a glance toward the clock on the mantelpiece—“two o'clock in the afternoon.”

Leo wiped his mouth on a napkin, then leaned over to look out the window at the females in question.

The trio of women—two blondes and a redhead—were giggling and talking as they climbed into a waiting coach in a colorful flurry of skirts. “They're pretty, to be sure, but why the interest? Beyond the obvious, of course,” Leo said.

“Because I happen to have seen them arrive last night and they have only now emerged.”

“Spent the night, did they? All three?” He wagged his eyebrows and laughed. “You're just cranky because Northcote didn't invite you to the party.”

“What party? Far as I could tell, they were the only guests.”

Leo whistled. “You've got to hand it to him. He certainly knows how to enjoy himself.”

“You and I know how to enjoy ourselves. Northcote is . . . well . . . the man is a complete reprobate.”

Leo laughed again. “Complete, hmm? What does that make us? Partial reprobates?”

“Very funny,” Lawrence said.

Leo smirked. “I don't have to worry, do I? You aren't in danger of turning Methodist on me or anything?”

Lawrence gave a derisive snort. “Hardly.”

“Then what's with spying on Northcote? If you aren't careful, old Lady Higgleston will be complaining that

you're trying to steal her thunder as the biggest pair of prying eyes in the neighborhood."

"Nobody could have a bigger pair of prying eyes than Lady Higgleston. Her front curtains twitch more than an aged beggar with the palsy. You know she has to have seen those playthings of Northcote's come trotting down his front steps just now. She'll probably be up all night writing the details to every Tom, Dick and Harry in a two-hundred-mile radius."

"I doubt the old girl knows any Toms, Dicks or Harrys, considering her general opinion of men." Leo grinned and leaned back in his chair. "It's really rather decent of Northcote to pull the limelight off us. Maybe we should send him a present. Box of French letters, do you think?"

He and Lawrence exchanged looks, then started laughing.

"You never did answer my question about spying on him," Leo said once he'd regained control of his voice.

"No, because I wasn't *spying*. Well, not the way you're implying. I was in here working on a case last night when his light-o'-loves arrived. It was rather difficult not to notice them."

"Oh, I'm sure. You just casually happened to note the time and everything, did you?"

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