

A Gift
For a Princess

Miranda
Neville

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A complimentary short story

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“I need to read that book. The Princess of Something,” Lavinia said. “The one Mr. Wynford was talking about last night.”

Susanna looked up from the tablecloth she was patching. “The Princesse de Clèves by Madame de La Fayette? I thought you *had* read it.”

Actually she thought no such thing. When Mr. Wynford pronounced the book the greatest novel in the French language, Lavinia had enthusiastically agreed, but Susanna could tell her cousin was lying. Susanna didn’t hold it against her, or not much. She herself had once been young, single and anxious to impress a gentleman.

Lavinia Harden was no longer a girl. At twenty-eight she was only a year Susanna's junior. But she had been single since Mr. Harden's accident involving a ceiling fresco and a wobbly ladder. She'd decided that Mr. Simon Wynford, rich, tall, and thirty-five, would make an ideal replacement for the up-and-coming, and now sadly departed, artist.

If Lavinia had exercised her wiles on anyone else, Susanna would have wished her well. Instead Susanna Burley, Lavinia's paid companion, was jealous. Mr. Wynford had never given the shabby poor relation a second glance, but how she wished he would.

And she *had* read *The Princesse de Clèves* and found Mr. Wynford's interpretation of the book masterly. She found everything about Mr. Wynford masterly.

"You'll go and find me a copy of this book, won't you?"

"Now? Today?" Susanna glanced out of the window where rain looked on the brink of turning to snow.

"He's coming to dinner tomorrow. I must have time to finish it. Please, dear cousin. I'll even send you to Hatchard's in the carriage."

"Thank you," Susanna said dryly.

“It’s no trouble. I have some errands I’d like the coachman to perform in the vicinity. He can drop you at the book shop, and if they don’t have it you can walk to the Strand and take a hackney home. Think how convenient that will be!”

Cousin Lavinia had a talent for getting her own way, while giving the impression she was doing someone else an enormous favor. Susanna kept her mouth shut and, as was her daily habit, counted the ways she should be grateful. Lavinia had given her a home when Susanna was left an impoverished widow. She paid her a salary. And she wasn’t cruel, merely self-ish.

Once Lavinia remarried, Susanna would be on her own again and she was, on the whole, glad of that fact. She couldn’t imagine anything worse than living in the same house as Mr. Wynford. Unless she were married to him herself, of course.

That wasn’t going to happen. If he thought of her at all, it was as Lavinia Harden’s dull companion.



Hatchard’s didn’t have the book, neither did a smaller establishment in the Haymarket. Susanna aimed her umbrella into the wind and forged on. But before heading downhill to the Strand, she recalled a bookseller in St. Martin’s Lane which was closer.

Five minutes later she escaped the sleet and shook the water from her pelisse onto the bare wooden floor of J.C. Merton, Purveyor of Fine and Rare Books.

A young woman, dressed in black with a linen cap, came forward to greet her.

"I'm looking for La Princesse de Clèves, preferably in an English translation," Susanna said.

"I may have a copy. I did once, but my husband might have sold it."

"Could we ask him?"

"I'm sorry, madam, but he died earlier this year."

Condolences were interrupted by footsteps from the back of the shop and a large male figure hove into view.

"Mrs. Burley! What a pleasant surprise to see you here." Mr. Wynford spoke as though he meant it. Always affable, he had beautiful manners.

Susanna, as had become her embarrassing habit since she'd realized she had a hopeless *tendre* for the gentleman, blushed. She opened her mouth and nothing came out. She managed a quick untidy curtsy.

"Why are you looking for the Princess?" he asked. "Couldn't you borrow Mrs. Harden's copy?"

Much as she would have liked to reveal the truth of the matter, Susanna went along with his assumption. Indeed, given the pathetic state of inarticulacy

to which Mr. Wynford reduced her, there wasn't much alternative. "Er. Your remarks about the book..." The words emerged from a half-strangled throat. "Very interesting. Cousin Lavinia couldn't find it."

He glanced out at the weather, then back at her as though she were mad, which she was. Also the color of a tomato and incapable of constructing a sensible sentence. "I hope Mrs. Merton will be able to accommodate you."

"I'll look," said the shopkeeper, and left Susanna alone with him.

"This seems like a nice shop." She had recovered her voice, if not her wits.

"Mrs. Merton has some unusual books. I've just found a volume which will assist me in my studies of sumptuary laws."

"Oh?" Susanna asked.

His face lit up. "It's a new interest of mine. I stumbled on it by mistake while I was reading ancient laws. The Locrian Code from Greece forbids a woman to walk abroad accompanied by more than one maid-servant, unless she is drunk. How could I resist a line of inquiry that uncovers that kind of information?"

"The woman or the maid?" Susanna asked. "Which is drunk?" *Stupid question*, she thought.

“Excellent question, Mrs. Burley. I’ll look into the matter and let you know.” And he smiled at her.

When she first met Simon Wynford, Susanna had decided he wasn’t a handsome man, though his features were pleasant and regular, his attire and grooming neat and gentlemanlike. His hair was brown, his eyes an ordinary blue, his jaw was square and his nose a little large for his face. In only two ways did he stand out. By any standards he was a large man, over six feet with a barrel of a chest. And he had the most delightful smile. He had gifted her with the full force of it one day and in her heart it was suddenly July instead of December.

Since then, his slightest attention made her dizzy. Not only did she adore the man, she also found him desperately attractive. To put it bluntly, she wanted to go to bed with him.

“Tell me more,” she said, as she had so often before when they found themselves in the same part of the room at one of Lavinia’s soirees. Lavinia fancied herself as the hostess of an intellectual salon, and it was part of Susanna’s job to make sure that none of her cousin’s guests felt neglected.

Simon Wynford started talking about how certain styles of dress, materials and colors were forbidden to some classes in parts of Europe. Absorbed by the subject matter, she managed to get her lust

under control, recover a measure of equanimity, and make the occasional apposite comment. Caught up in his topic, he forgot his company, else he would surely not have spoken to her of the forms of dress required for courtesans.

“In some places it started as a full costume and was reduced over time to trimmings. For example, in Marseilles prostitutes had to wear bands of yellow and blue cloth attached to the sleeve or hem. I happened to notice you had those colored ribbons on a gown you wore last week.”

“Well thank you. I’m flattered to know my choice of mode has such a distinguished antecedent.”

“Oh Lord! I do beg your pardon,” he said. “I intended no insult.”

“And none taken. The pursuit of scholarship trumps all petty notions of propriety.”

“My feelings exactly,” he said with a twinkle in his eye. “I always had the impression, Mrs. Burley, that you are a woman of unusual sense.”

It was a shame he didn’t see her as a woman of unusual allure. No one save the late Lieutenant Burley ever had. She wasn’t ugly but ordinary, her reddish-tinged hair, flat features and too-wide mouth no competition for her cousin’s raven-haired beauty. Susanna had seen Mr. Wynford stare at Lavinia. She felt thoroughly depressed.

He paid for his purchase. "I shall see you tomorrow at Mrs. Harden's, Mrs. Burley."

"I believe not, Mr. Wynford. I am spending the day with a childhood friend who is visiting town." She was both glad and sorry she'd miss the chance to see him again so soon.

"I don't have the book, I am afraid," the shopkeeper, Mrs. Merton said, as the door closed behind him and the now swirling snow.

Then it opened again and Mr. Wynford's rugged features reappeared. "Is Mrs. Harden's carriage collecting you? I'd take you myself, but I'm on foot and have an engagement nearby."

"Thank you. I shall go by hackney."

"I'll procure you one." And before she could argue he'd left again.

While she waited with Mrs. Merton, Susanna raised a question that intrigued her.

"How did you come to be a bookseller?" she asked. "As a woman without means I am always looking for a respectable way to make a living."

"I opened the shop with my husband. Are you also a widow?"

"My husband was an infantry officer. He died two years ago as a result of wounds suffered at Waterloo. I live with my cousin as companion." She glanced

at shelves packed with fascinating old volumes. "Your occupation seems more satisfying."

"I have never wanted to do anything else," Mrs. Merton replied. "Books have always been my passion. I wish," she continued with a sigh, "that I could say I was making a good living. But since my husband's death business has been slow. I find that men rarely accept that a woman can equal them in knowledge."

"It probably doesn't help that you are young and beautiful," Susanna said. Mrs. Merton was little more than a year or two into her twenties and exceptionally pretty. "With my looks I might have more luck being taken seriously."

"Judging by the attention Mr. Wynford paid you, I wouldn't underestimate your powers of attraction."

Susanna's heart thudded with pleasure, but only for a second or two. "You are quite wrong. He regards me as a woman of unusual sense. Besides, he's very likely about to marry my cousin."

Lavinia was displeased when Susanna came straight home from St. Martin's Lane, empty-handed. "Mr. Wynford gave the address to the driver," Susanna explained innocently. "I couldn't very well

explain the urgency of my mission to him. He thought me quite mad to be out in such weather anyway.

Her employer eyed her with a suspicious frown, then let the matter drop. She had a new scheme to hatch.

"I'll give Wynford something else to talk about," she said. "Since you will be out with your friends, he may take advantage of finding me alone."

"I thought the Taverners were invited too."

"I shall put them off. Mr. Wynford and I will dine tête-à-tête." She smiled angelically. "When you return you will be able to wish me happy."



Simon wasn't entirely sure why he sent his excuses. He'd met William Harden's widow when he came to buy one of the late artist's paintings. He'd been quite taken with the beautiful Lavinia, even to the point of considering marriage. Of good enough birth to satisfy his own relations, she was accustomed to artistic and intellectual circles, which suited his scholarly pursuits. He didn't want a wife who'd expect him to accompany her to *ton* events. It was time he settled down, and she was certainly attractive enough for him to think about forsaking all others.

But as weeks passed he liked her less rather than more. Without putting his finger on why, he detected a certain insincerity in her manner. And he

didn't like her behavior toward her cousin and companion. In Simon's opinion, how someone treated her dependents said a great deal about character.

Poor Mrs. Burley! She'd been an agreeable conversationalist when he first started calling at Portland Place. He'd enjoyed her informed responses, dry wit, and a quirky way of looking at things. *Which woman is drunk? The mistress or the maid?* He chuckled when he thought of it. But lately, though he made a point of seeking her out at Mrs. Harden's "at home" evenings, she hardly said a word to him. He strongly suspected Lavinia had warned her off. He couldn't abide jealous women.

Whatever the truth of the matter, it was time to withdraw. Lavinia had assured him this evening's dinner was informal, so he felt only a twinge of guilt about claiming a slight indisposition.

And since he didn't seem likely to enter the state of matrimony anytime soon, he took himself off to the King's Theatre. A masquerade ball was just the place to find himself entertainment and relief of a less permanent nature.

Revelers filled the Round Room, most of them drunk and few of them respectable, or not on this occasion anyway. The approach of Christmas perhaps added a level of festive hilarity and enhanced the atmosphere of sexual adventure that pervaded such

events. Simon thrust aside some stray reflections on winter solstice customs in different cultures, and concentrated on scouting a likely partner for a celebration of his own.



Susanna found the masquerade fascinating. She'd never seen the demi-monde in action at close quarters and decided it was a great deal more fun than her corner of the polite world.

Since she was too old and too plain to contemplate a change in career to that of courtesan, she checked that her mask was securely fastened. It wouldn't do for anyone to recognize her in this company. Lavinia might pretend to be careless of conventions — and she'd give her right arm to attract Lord Byron to her drawing room — but Susanna doubted she'd tolerate scandalous behavior in the companion paid to lend her countenance.

Her old school friend Sally, always up for a lark, had convinced her indulgent husband to buy them all tickets for the masquerade. Sally and her husband were dancing, leaving Susanna with Sally's brother. Tom did his best not to look disgusted with the arrangement while his eyes strayed to the abundance of willing feminine flesh cavorting around them.

"Would you like to dance again?" he asked, with all the enthusiasm of a man who'd known one at the age of twelve.

"No thanks, Tom. I'm overheated. Why don't you go and find yourself a partner?"

"I can't leave you alone."

"Don't worry. No one's going to make an improper advance at *me*. And if they do I have a hat pin. Sally will be back soon. I'll wait here."

"You always were a prince of a girl," he said, and took off in pursuit of a nymph with dashing exposed ankles.

Wonderful. *A prince of a girl*. For once it would be nice to be a princess. She watched a gentleman in a highwayman costume flirt with a Greek goddess whose toe nails were painted gold. For a few minutes Susanna wished with all her heart that she were that goddess. She imagined Mr. Wynford dressed as a gentleman of the road.

"All alone, my beauty?"

One look at the man who addressed her explained why he wasted his time with her. Everything about him, from protruding eyes and crooked yellow teeth to the outrageous codpiece that adorned his Elizabethan costume, told Susanna that this was not a man who enjoyed much success with women.

"I'm waiting for my escort," she said repressively. "He's a pugilist by trade."

"That's what they all tell me."

Apparently her excuse wasn't an original one. "Perhaps they are all speaking the truth. There are a number of very powerful looking gentlemen here."

"Thank you, my dear," said the dolt, "I'll take that as a compliment, and an invitation."

Before she perceived his intention, he pushed her against the wall, pinioned her wrists and kissed her. Mr. Codpiece might not have the build of a boxer, but he turned out to be stronger than he looked. She tried desperately to keep her lips closed against the damp invasion while struggling to free her hands. The hatpin, alas, remained in her reticule.

Suddenly she was free.

"I'm sorry. No harm intended," her late attacker sputtered, so far as he was able when dangling by the collar in the grasp of a large unmasked man wearing ordinary evening dress. One whose physique wouldn't disgrace either a pugilist or a highwayman, although he happened to be a mere gentleman scholar.

Susanna pinched herself. Yes, she was awake, and her dreams had come true. She'd been rescued by Mr. Wynford.

Simon had been watching the lady in the blue domino and half mask for some time. Something about her appealed to him. Her age, for a start. He had no taste for very young women, preferring a measure of maturity and experience. She looked sensible and agreeable, not prone to histrionics. And though he thought she might not be pretty, she had a full sensual mouth that promised all sorts of pleasure. The only thing he wasn't sure of was her virtue, or rather lack thereof. She didn't carry herself like a professional lady of the night. She might be a bored wife looking for diversion, or, slightly better, a widow. He hoped she was a courtesan. An affair with a respectable woman would be a new departure for him and might lead to complications.

He was contemplating his method of approach when the jackass in the codpiece made his move, giving Simon the perfect excuse to intervene.

"Go," he said and had no need to repeat himself, an advantage of his size. The idiot went.

"Are you well, madam?" he asked.

"Thank you, sir, for coming to my rescue. The fellow took me by surprise before I could draw my weapon." She smiled and the curve of her lips lived up to its promise. Then he gave a crack of laughter as she pulled a vicious looking pin from her reticule.

"Please put that away. It frightens me."

"I'm all astonishment, sir," she said, her velvet voice dropping a tone. "I had thought my rescuer quite fearless."

"I shall prove my courage and risk all."

Bending slowly, and with no attempt to otherwise touch her, he brushed those full ruby lips with his own. When he drew back her mouth formed a soft oval of surprise. Dark eyes glimmering through the slits of her mask met his for a second, then looked away. The pin fell to the floor. He swooped to retrieve it and proffered it with a theatrical bow.

"Put it away, madam. You won't need it with me. A simple 'no' will always suffice."

"I know," she murmured.

He wondered if he was acquainted with her. Something about her seemed familiar, but he couldn't think of any lady he knew well who would attend such an event.

"Will you honor me with a dance?"

"Thank you, sir." She placed her hand in his.

He regretted the intervention of her glove between his skin and hers. Turning the hand palm upward, he set his bare fingers to the buttons. "May I?"

At her nod he worked the fastenings, revealing a slender wrist. He inserted a forefinger to trace the faint lines of veins. Her skin was pale and delicate. He

stripped off both her gloves, made from a sensible cotton material, and tucked them in the pocket of his coat. Then he took her hands in his and kissed them in turn. Her fingers tentatively returned his clasp.

“Shall we introduce ourselves?” he asked

He watched in fascination as her full mouth pouted thoughtfully, then widened into a smile. “You may call me ...Princess.”

“So formal. I had in mind something a little more intimate.”

“Tonight I want to be royalty.”

“And what shall you call me? Shall I be Your Highness’s fool?”

“Never a fool but rather my champion, my knight. Like a character from an old tale of romance.”

Simon nodded, though the habits of those heroes were rather more elevated than what he had in mind for tonight. His princess was quite enchanting. If she was a lady looking for a little adventure, he decided to relinquish his scruples and accommodate her. At least she’d be safe with him. He felt a chill, thinking about some of the men she might have met in this place. One half of his mind wanted to berate her for her foolishness; the other half was ready to drag her into a dark corner.

She was a good dancer, a little uncertain at first but she soon fell into the steps of the waltz and followed his lead as they swept around the room. No need to keep six inches of space between their bodies. At a masquerade ball direct contact was not only acceptable but *de rigueur*. Through her light silken domino he detected small, high breasts, a slim waist and rounded hips.

The crowd grew denser, the music slower, he pulled her closer, his fear of complications long forgotten. "Shall we get out of here?" he whispered, breathing into her ear, venturing to nibble at the lobe.

"Where?"

"My rooms are not far away."

She stiffened in his arms and he feared he'd misread her. "I cannot. I came here with friends. I must find them again when I leave."

"Then let us at least get away from the crush for a while. Upstairs. I know a place we can be quite alone."

She hesitated for a moment. He held his breath. "All right," she said.



She wouldn't think about tomorrow. Or yesterday. Only about this moment and the fact that she was, perhaps, about to make love with Simon Wyn-

ford. That was surely what his invitation meant, wasn't it? At the very least she was going to kiss him, properly this time. The quick touch of his lips earlier had whet her appetite.

The music and laughter receded as he led her up dimly lit staircases and dark corridors into a small room. Once he closed the door she could see nothing, yet she had a sense of open space at her back.

"Where are we?" she asked, taking greater care to alter her voice now they'd escaped the noise of the ball.

"In a box in the upper tier of the theater."

"How did you know the way?"

"I rent it for the season."

"So in a way you *have* brought me to your rooms."

His brief laugh reverberated in the auditorium, followed by a noise of flapping wings. "We've awoken some bats," he said.

"Heavens," she squawked. "Bats? In a theater?"

"Don't worry, Princess. I doubt they'll come near us, but if they do, don't forget I'm your champion, ready to fight them off." She felt his arm encircle her waist.

"Do you have some influence over the bat population of London? Their appearance seems highly convenient."

“It’s quite improper for a lady to suspect her champion of ulterior motives.”

She couldn’t help it, even if she awakened a thousand bats. She let out a full-throated laugh, one which Mr. Wynford would certainly not recognize because she hadn’t laughed like that in years. “It’s quite improper,” she said once her mirth subsided, “for a lady to be alone in the dark with only flying creatures as chaperones.”

At that moment she felt perfectly happy and she made up her mind. She was going to do it.

She’d had her doubts. First, the fact that her cousin and employer wanted to marry him. Since he was not, as expected, dining with Lavinia tonight, their feelings were probably not mutual. And if they were, Lavinia was better off without a man who would swive with a chance met female at a masquerade. Under other circumstances she’d disapprove of such behavior herself, but tonight she seemed to have suspended her better judgment and all common sense. She settled into his arm and pressed her body against the length of his. She was ready to be swept off her feet.

Several long moments past and her feet remained firmly on the floor. In the dark she was intensely aware of his large presence, the scent of soap and starch. Her open palm found his chest and

felt him warm and firm, even through his embroidered silk waistcoat.

"Princess," he said hoarsely. "We should speak a little."

"Yes?" she said.

No, she thought. She didn't want to speak. She wanted to do.

"I don't know how to put this tactfully, so I'll come out and say it. You are not a courtesan, are you?"

Naively, it had never occurred to her he might think so. Had he been about to offer her money? "I'm a respectable woman," she said, then laughed again. "Though I suppose I'm not really, or I wouldn't be here."

"I'll take you back to your friends if that is what you wish."

"Is that what you wish?" Of course it was. She might have guessed Mr. Wynford didn't really find her desirable. A moment's madness and he'd come to his senses.

"It's the last thing I want," he said, and even she couldn't mistake the fervor in his voice. "The only thing I want less is to do anything against your will."

"You won't," she whispered and reached up to find his head, drew it down, and kissed him.

It was a real kiss this time, deep and hot. She'd been dreaming of it for weeks and it didn't disappoint. She drowned in the heat and taste of his mouth, the rough silk of his lips working hers, the caress of his tongue finding sensitive spots she'd forgotten existed. Threading her fingers through his thick, springy hair, she cradled his scalp. She held on so he couldn't leave, but also because she needed to clasp something solid lest she dissolve into a liquid pool of bliss.

It would be all right, she realized. She was safe because he had her. Lord did he have her. He'd reached under her domino and explored her body. Even clothed in her all-too-decent best gown her waist, back, hips, and finally breasts tingled beneath the touch of big, skillful hands.

She hadn't noticed they were walking until her back hit the wall and she was able to lean against it and thrust her hips forward. Without thought she instinctively begged for him to take her, ached for relief.

"Please," she moaned into his mouth. "Yes," she encouraged as he lifted her gown and found her bare thigh above her garter. Partly by instinct, partly by his guidance, she bent and lifted her leg and curled it around him. The position exposed her through the slit in her cotton drawers and she ground her sex into

his groin. He was still fully dressed, a state of affairs he found as unsatisfactory as she did.

“Wait,” he said in a rusty croak and pulled away.

She heard a rustle but she’d lost physical contact with him and she missed him. “Where are you?”

His response was a tug at her garments. “Stand there,” he said, “and hold your gown up.”

From the location of his voice she inferred that he was seated in front of her. She raised the front of her skirt above her waist. One firm hand clasped her bottom while the other caressed her inner thighs then brushed over her nether curls. By the time his fingers found her damp, aching center she was crazed with desire, desperate to feel him, Simon, inside her.

“Please,” she whispered.

“I’m sitting on a bench,” he said softly. “Kneel.” He guided her with sure moves until she straddled him. His erect sex brushed against her thighs. “Grasp my shoulders.”

Blindly following his directions lent an erotic dimension to their congress Susanna had never experienced. With her husband she’d made love in the dark often enough, but in a bed and in a predictable position. Not knowing what would happen next wound her to such a state of arousal she almost sobbed. Yet for all the illusion of danger and adven-

ture, she felt complete trust that Simon would take care of her.

“Lower yourself on to me.” One hand was on her hip, the other he used to guide himself into her. She moaned with relief when finally, at long last, she felt him enter her, long, hot and hard. She clenched her muscles to hold him tight and never release him. She wanted this moment to last for ever. “And now,” he said, “we ride.”

His princess was as delicious as he’d guessed she would be, an enticing combination of boldness and reserve with an uncanny ability to read his desires. The slightest hint of what he wanted and she caught his meaning. In no time they established a rhythm, though a puff of surprise had told him this way of making love was unfamiliar. At that first fleeting kiss he’d known their mouths fit perfectly, and now it appeared everything else did too.

The passage of time receded and he knew only the clashing of tongues and breath and the matching wet heat below, until all sensation concentrated in one spot. When he felt her convulse around him and throw back her head in a subdued scream, he let himself go, accelerating his thrusts until he answered her cry.

They clung to each other, the inky silence pierced only by their breathing. He hugged her closer, fore-

heads touching, as his panting subsided. Jupiter, she enchanted him. He didn't want to let her go. She, alas, returned to reality.

"I should go," she said. "My friends will be worried."

Perversely he wanted to find these people and rebuke them for not taking care of her better. "Are you sure? I'd like to take you home and do this again, in a bed. With fewer clothes. A lot fewer clothes." He gave a lingering kiss.

"I would too." He could feel her smile against his lips.

"And I want to see you."

She climbed off his lap in a hurry. "No," she said. "It's better not."

He heard her readjust her garments. She didn't want him to know her identity, but he had to try. "When can I see you again? Will you give me an address? Where can I reach you?"

"Nowhere. Let's not spoil a beautiful night by letting the real world intrude."

"Would that be terrible?"

"Yes," she said, and sounded sad. "I believe it would. Please, say no more. I trust you as a gentleman to escort me downstairs and leave me without making any further attempt to discover who I am."

When she put it like that, appealing to his honor, what could he do? It occurred to him she must be married, and that fact made him want to howl with rage. He set about arranging his own clothing, thinking furiously. Every cell in his body rejected the idea that their affair was over.

"Are you ready, Princess?" he asked, and opened the door. After the treacle black of the box, the light of the single lamp on the staircase made him blink. She stumbled and landed on the top step, the skirts of her domino wide open and her gown hitched to her knees, exposing white stockings.

He helped her up and gave her another kiss. "Careful, Princess," he said, smiling broadly. "You really do need someone to look after you."



Annoyed as she was by spending an entire evening alone, Lavinia had by no means abandoned her plans for Mr. Wynford.

"I shall ask him to our dinner on Christmas Eve. Half a dozen are already expected and even with two days notice I shall invite others. I want you to go to Nutley's in the Strand and pick up some more invitation cards.

For once Susanna was happy to be sent on a long, unnecessary quest on a cold day. It wasn't actually raining and it would get her out of the house,

away from Lavinia's speculations on the timing of Mr. Wynford's proposal. Besides, she had an errand of her own in the neighborhood. On the way home she returned to the little book shop in St. Martin's Lane.

Mrs. Merton greeted her eagerly. "What can I do for you? Are you looking for a Christmas gift, perhaps?"

"Actually I have a proposition for you. I wondered if you would be interested in acquiring a partner for your business. I have a little money and perhaps we could share living expenses."

Mrs. Merton looked doubtful. "I'm barely making enough to keep myself. I don't see how the shop could support two of us."

"I have some ideas about how we might bring in new customers."

They talked for over an hour and Mrs. Merton, who Susanna learned was named Juliana, promised to give the matter some thought.

When she reached home and heard Lavinia's news, she was even more certain that she'd made the right move.

"Mr. Wynford called while you were out," her cousin crowed. "He has agreed to come on Christmas Eve."

Apparently his attentions to Lavinia were far from over, although he'd made love to another woman

the previous night. Her disappointment in his character relieved her heartache by an iota. Grief at losing him was nudged aside by self-disgust that she had succumbed to his blandishments, and her own infatuated lust. The encounter at the masquerade had seemed magical at the time. In retrospect it felt merely sordid.

Susanna resolved to leave Lavinia's employ as soon as possible. She wasn't at all sure how she was going to get through dinner with Wynford at the table.



Susanna had to keep reminding herself that he had no idea who she was, what they had shared. As far as Mr. Wynford was concerned, she was Lavinia's drab cousin and nothing more. When she could no longer avoid him among the dozen or so guests in the drawing room, she abjured herself to calm. He probably only wanted to offer his polite wishes for the season.

As he smiled down at her she was torn between affection and antipathy. The former hadn't disappeared, despite her knowledge of what he was. Though she was equally to blame for what happened, in her case it was an anomaly. For all she knew Wynford made a habit of having his way with strange women in dark boxes.

"Mrs. Burley," he said, his smile tentative. "I would like to speak to you in private."

"I don't think so, Mr. Wynford. Lavinia needs me. And I'm sure you have nothing to say that can't be said here." The alarmed excuses had emerged before it occurred to her to wonder why he wanted to see her alone. Could he possibly *know*?

"I have a present for you." He removed a package from an inner pocket and handed it to her. It was obviously a book.

With trembling fingers she unknotted the string and removed the plain wrapping. An English translation of *The Princesse de Clèves*. "Oh!" she said. "Thank you."

"I have a feeling you've read it. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"I guessed it was for Mrs. Harden that you sought the book, but I believe you need a copy of your own." Speechless, she stared down at the leather bound volume. His voice dropped. "You wanted to be a princess."

Her head jerked up and she saw warmth in his gaze, and knowledge. "How?" she breathed.

"When you fell I recognized your gown. The yellow and blue ribbons."

Her eyes fell to the trim around the hem of her best dress. "Marseilles prostitutes," she said with a nod. Was that how he regarded her?

"Will you come with me to another room now?"

Lavinia was busy with other guests, but Susanna knew she'd be keeping an eye on Mr. Wynford. She led him down to the small sitting room on the ground floor and lit a couple of candles.

"Mr. Wynford," she began, taking a deep breath.

"Susanna, I think you should call me Simon."

"No. I think we should forget the whole matter, pretend it never happened."

"I'm afraid I can't." Oh God! Did he want to repeat their tryst? There was definitely a glint in his eye. She wasn't at all sure she owned the fortitude to refuse.

"Susanna," her name in his deep voice was like a caress. "Will you do me the honor of being my wife?"

Her legs gave way and she perched on the edge of a hard little settee, staring at her lap. Two ribbons, one yellow, one blue, flowed from her waist. She examined them with dedicated concentration, noting a slight fraying on one side of the yellow.

"No," she said after a long pause, and it was the hardest speech she ever made. "Thank you, but no. It wouldn't be right. Are we to spend our lives together because of a foolish accident? If I hadn't tripped you

wouldn't have known. Most certainly you wouldn't have made such an offer."

"You think not?" he said.

Still not daring to look she shook her head. He crouched beside her, disentangled the ribbons from her fingers and enveloped her hands in his grasp. His were warm and a little rough. "As we left the box I was already planning how I would find you again. When I realized who you were I felt nothing but joy that my masked lover was a lady I knew and esteemed."

At last she raised her head and looked into eyes of no ordinary blue and a smile so tender it set her heart madly thumping. "You may be right that I wouldn't have offered for you, Susanna Burley, but only because I was a fool. I didn't know that I loved you, and have for weeks."

She tried to speak but nothing came out.

With one finger he traced the edge of her upper lip. "I was blind. Until I saw you masked I hadn't realized you have the most beautiful mouth I'd ever seen."

She managed a fragile smile.

"I can't wait to kiss you," he continued. "I've been thinking of little else for the past two days. But first I'd like to ask one question. I wasn't in disguise that night. Why did you let me make love to you?"

Her mouth was dry and she had to force the words out. "Because I wanted to." She paused, and continued in a whisper. "Because I wanted you, just for one night. Because I love you."

"I'm afraid you're going to have to endure me every night for the rest of our lives because, after that, a simple 'no' will not suffice."

Her heart expanded with joy. "Yes," she said. "Yes, I will marry you."



Although Susanna had fully recovered her powers of speech, they spent the next fifteen minutes not speaking at all, until interrupted by Lavinia. Fortunately they were both still fully dressed. Lavinia's first instinct was to eject her treacherous cousin from the house, but she changed her mind when she considered the probable reaction of her other guests.

This was a good thing since Simon discovered that it was impossible to obtain a special marriage license on Christmas Day because the Archbishop of Canterbury's office was closed. One day of the year, Susanna remarked, that she'd expect clergymen to be working. Susanna became Mrs. Simon Wynford a week later and they lived happily ever after.

Lavinia caught the eye of another customer for her husband's paintings, a banker. After their marriage she became a popular hostess in City circles

and entertained numerous professional men, none of whom expected her to read the books they discussed.

Juliana Merton's book business continued to struggle, until one day a marquis with flashing blue eyes and a shocking reputation walked into the shop...



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