

Love at Last

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Chapter One

Margaret Houghton stretched out on the fine linen sheets and smiled to herself as she reached for the ostrich feather and gently stoked her naked breasts and the tops of her thighs. She'd done this so often that the feather was beginning to wilt, but never mind. Since ostrich plumes had become fashionable for evening wear, a replacement would be easy to find. But it wouldn't be quite the same. Micah had bought this one and used it on her body many a time.

But poor Micah was dead and gone and, as he so often told her, her woman's needs must be satisfied, in his absence she was happy to pleasure herself. She brushed the fronds of the feather across her shoulders, over her body, and stroked her legs down to her toes and up between her thighs, images and thoughts in her mind, stirring her desire. As the feather came away damp from between her legs, she put it aside and reached for her most secret possession: an exquisitely carved ivory dildo that had come all the way from India.

The shaft was polished smooth, but the handle was intricately decorated with the image of an entwined couple. Just handling it brought back lovely memories. Memories that only served to increase her arousal.

Breathing slowly in an effort to spin out her pleasure, Margaret gently stroked her pussy, parting her vulva with the tip of the dildo. She took her time, savoring every ripple and flutter of pleasure. Her arousal peaked. Micah had always been able to string this out, to keep her panting with need and begging for release. On her own, she always came fast, in a wild rush of sensation and flooding happiness, as she leaped over the edge and collapsed on the bed, a rather sweaty but thoroughly pleased woman. A

fleeting moment of sadness passed, as she was alone and had no loving arms to cradle her, but she was content.

As a married woman, she had known joy beyond her wildest youthful imaginings. As a widow, she had glorious memories of their shared lovemaking and, for now, sweet, solo joy.

She slipped the dildo out and let it rest between her legs as she closed her eyes and savored the aftermath of her climax.

She was limp and relaxed as she pulled the sheet and blanket up to her chest and heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

It was her nephew, Robert, home a little earlier than she'd expected. But he was home and safe. Having two young people in her charge was a worry at times.

As he reached the landing, he called out "good night," and she replied, as did Isabel, his sister.

Oh dear, she'd been sure Isabel was asleep, but no doubt she was reading in bed, injuring her eyes in the poor light of a single candle.

Instead of turning right to his own room, he passed Margaret's door and walked down to his sister's room. Perhaps now the child would realize how late it was and snuff out her candle once her brother left.

But he did not leave.

It was too bad of him.

Minutes earlier, she'd been basking in the aftermath of sexual joy, and now she had to get out of bed to chide two thoughtless children.

Such was the life of an aunt.

They were talking quietly, true, but why had Robert not just wished his sister "good night" and taken himself off to his own room?

It was high time they were both in bed.

Margaret did not knock on Isabel's door, knowing full well that surprise was an excellent tactic, if they were planning mischief.

As she opened the door, two scared faces turned to her. Something was up. Isabel was in bed, her face pale in the light of Richard's candle. He was still in evening clothes, but disheveled.

"What has happened?" Margaret asked, before either of them could deny anything was amiss.

"Do not trouble yourself, Aunt, it's of no matter," Richard replied. His shaking voice and anxious eyes suggested a clear lack of veracity in *that* statement.

"Richard was just telling me about his evening," Isabel said. Obviously trying, but unsuccessfully, to give an impression of calm and nonchalance.

She had been right to suspect something. "I see." Margaret closed the door behind her before crossing the room to stand beside her niece's bed.

Richard rose to his feet as she approached, and Margaret took the candle before his shaking hand let it fall. "So, what happened this evening that necessitated disturbing your sister?" Richard appeared to have been drinking. Inevitable for a young man let loose in London, she supposed.

"Nothing of import, Aunt," he replied. "I came to tell Isabel I saw Beau Brummell."

"How fascinating for you and how considerate of you to share your scintillating experience." Harsh, yes. She should be grateful the lad was such a poor liar. "And did anything else of importance or significant interest occur that you might have imparted to Isabel during your tête-à-tête?"

He shrugged. "Just gossip, Aunt."

"Indeed." She sat on the end of Isabel's bed and indicated Richard should assume his seat in the chair he'd drawn up to the bed. "Please share, since I am also awake."

“‘Tis nothing, Aunt, truly!” His haste in reply and fervent denial were more than enough to convince Margaret of the total opposite.

“What a shame. I was quite ready for a delicious gossip. What happened, my dear?” she asked, turning to her niece. “Surely it was something of great importance.”

Isabel had never been able to dissemble. “Richard is to fight a duel, Auntie.”

It was indeed fortunate that Margaret had placed her candle on the nightstand or she’d be rescuing her niece from burning bedclothes.

“A duel?” she repeated, giving her nephew every iota of her attention. “Is this true?”

“A matter between men, Aunt. Nothing you might concern yourself with.”

If her chest weren’t tight with anxiety, she’d have laughed. As it was, she took a deep breath. “A duel? I see.” She could also see his wounded body lying on the damp, October grass. “And when is this event happening?”

“That is a matter for our seconds. Aunt, you need not bother yourself with this.”

She begged to differ. “It will be between all of us, if you are carried home on a gate.” Hard words, perhaps, but how could the little idiot have put himself in this predicament?

“Aunt, as I said...”

She cut him off, having little interest in being told, once again, that this was not her business. When, in her current status *in loco parentis*, it most certainly was.

“You have distressed Isabel.” Not the least untrue. His sister appeared at the point of tears. “Please leave us, and I will see you presently in your room.”

“Aunt...” Robert began again, but, meeting Margaret’s eyes, he appeared to have second thoughts. Nodding rather curtly in her direction, he kissed his sister good night, telling her not to worry, he had it all under control and fixed and shipshape.

Reining in the urge to box his ears, Margaret closed the door behind him and crossed back to where poor Isabel was sniffing back sobs.

"Will Robert die?" she asked, her voice catching as she tried to blink away tears.

"No!" Margaret put her arms around her. "He most definitely will not! At least not from this ridiculous duel. He will apologize, and that will be the end of it."

"But he said it was a matter of honor."

"It's also a matter of breaking the law."

"Will the Bow Street runners apprehend him and put him in gaol? Please, Aunt, don't let that happen."

This was far too much at this hour of the night, but poor Isabel's distress was impossible to brush aside. Margaret put her arms around her niece and kissed her. "Calm, yourself. Richard will, most certainly, not go to gaol, because he will not fight. Trust me, my dear, all will be well."

As Margaret closed the door behind her, she heartily wished she could reassure herself as easily. Despite what she might say to Isabel, the situation was dire. How tiresome, thoughtless, and stupid of the lad to put himself in this situation. And now it would be her task to extricate him from the results of his impetuous actions.

Why, oh why, and how, in the name of sanity, had it all happened? He had better explain immediately and without prevarication.

* * * *

Robert's room was cold, the fire having died down whilst he was out. Not that Margaret really noticed. "Hot and bothered" was too mild to describe her disposition right now. She forestalled any possible protests or evasion. "Well, Robert, please, in as few words as possible, kindly explain how this came about."

They obviously did not share the same definition of "a few words." Margaret listened with increasing irritation, annoyance, and finally anger. This was utterly beyond the pale. Beyond several pales in fact.

"So," she said when he finally finished, willing herself not to throw him over her knee and spank him as she had when he was a small boy. "You played cards for far

higher stakes than your allowance permits, then had the utter stupidity to accuse one of the players of cheating, and, to cap it off, threw wine on him." Where had the child left his senses?

"You make me sound foolish," he muttered, his scowl reminding her of a much younger Robert. "And the spill was an accident."

"Really? I'm sure your adversary appreciated that detail." Acerbic, yes, but she was fast becoming devoid of all patience.

"I tried to tell him, but he cut me off and called me a young idiot and asked me if I wanted to name my seconds."

Saints and angels give her patience! Could he not have seen that as a final opportunity to apologize? "And did you name them?" Perhaps they might possess a modicum of common sense.

"That, Aunt, is not your concern. This is a matter between men."

Or cotton-brained boys. "On the contrary, Richard, it is very much my concern, since I will be called on to pay your debts, and definitely your sister's affair, since she will have fewer dresses this season because of this unplanned expense, and if you were to be wounded or arrested, your mother would be distressed beyond measure." How could the stupid boy not think it would not affect all of them? "So, whom did you name as seconds?"

"Tommy Wallace."

A lad six months younger than Robert and no wiser, unless a miracle had occurred in the past couple of weeks. "And?"

"Tommy was there and said he'd stand for me. He'll find another second. He said he would."

She needed more than patience to comprehend this nonsense. "He need not trouble himself, Robert. I will be your other second." Unconventional, but was the idea any more foolish than a pair of boys thinking they could see this through to the bitter

end? "I'll call on him in the morning. I promised his mother to lend her a new lace pattern. I can fulfill both commissions on one call."

"Aghast" was a choice word to describe Robert's demeanor, but he soon found his voice. "Impossible, Aunt! That is not how one does these things!"

Margaret brushed that aside. "Robert, I will visit the Wallaces tomorrow, and that is that. You will remain here, in the house, until dinnertime. If you leave, or try to, or make any attempt to send out a note or a message, I will put you on the first public conveyance headed north, and you will spend the rest of the season with your mother. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Aunt, but it's not right."

"And your actions this evening were measured, well thought out, and carefully considered? Do not try me any further, Robert. You may leave your room for meals – no point in letting your foolishness cause more work for the servants – and whilst you stay home, please prepare a precise accounting of all your debts to date. We need to consider the financial repercussions arising from your actions."

Margaret was most pleased with her self-control in not slamming the door as she left.

Outside, in the hallway, she set her candle on a nearby table and pulled her wrapper closer against the chill. Had she been a total featherhead to think she could take two spoiled children and let them loose in the metropolis? Maybe, but she'd promised Angela she'd keep them safe, and by all the stars in the sky, she would keep her word.

It was only as she climbed back into her own bed, that it dawned on her that she had not asked Robert the name of his challenger. Drat! She was not leaving her warm bed to find out. She'd get that information from Tommy Wallace in the morning.

Chapter Two

Margaret might well have been relieved if she had been privy to a conversation just a short distance away:

“Got yourself in a proper twist haven’t you, John?”

John Francis, Viscount Belkenham, gave his old friend a look that would have withered a lesser man. “It’s a bloody mess, Archie. So much for our best intentions. We failed to expose Potter as a cheat, and if that wasn’t enough for one evening, I’m facing a duel with a boy barely old enough to shave.”

“It should have worked,” Archie Jameson continued. “Would have if Potter hadn’t lured that lad into joining the table.”

“Unfortunately that beardless babe was sharp enough on the uptake to twig there are fluffy cards in play but not, it transpired, to ascertain who was doing the cheating. Just our luck that he pointed his metaphorical finger at me instead of Carl Potter.”

“Don’t forget the glass of claret on your new waistcoat.”

And dammit, he’d liked that waistcoat. Nothing flash like some would wear, but it was (or had been) a fine, forest-green damask. “Why, in heaven’s name, didn’t the stupid lad apologize when I demanded? The last thing I’d planned on was facing a belligerent schoolboy at dawn.”

Archie looked at his old friend across the table. “We’ll sort it out, never fear. His seconds will bump some sense into him, and he’ll withdraw his accusation.”

“You saw one of the seconds last night. He looked as out of his depth as a sparrow in a snake pit.”

"All the better to be coerced." Archie smiled. Bully for him! John saw little to enjoy with their scheme going headfirst downstairs. "I doubt our good Lady Marchant would be best pleased to hear her salon described as a 'snake pit.'"

"With specimens like Potter as welcome guests it's not a bad description."

"Come off it, John, she asked us to smoke him out."

She had indeed, and John Belkenham was not about to forget that the next time his aunt's best friend begged a favor. But there was little to be gained in belaboring the point—for either of them. "It's done now. Meet with that boy, and whomever else is foolish enough to stand as Robert Cartwright's second, and wring an apology out of them."

"Just leave it to me. I'll sort it all out. You might as well get some sleep, and I'll take myself off home. Eleanor will be waiting up. Shall I send a note to Justin to be your other second?"

Why not? The three of them had been friends since boyhood, and he welcomed them on his side in this unfortunate affair. "Might as well, and thank you, Archie." He saw his friend out himself—no point in disturbing his man—and John Francis, Viscount Belkenham, took himself off to bed, dropping his clothes on a chair to be retrieved by his valet in the morning. As he settled between the linen sheets, he couldn't but shake his head at a good plan gone hopelessly awry and to wonder what the foolish boy's parents would make of the ridiculous affair.

Viscount Belkenham slept well, confident his old friend would settle the whole wretched business in a satisfactory manner.

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