

## Chapter One

*A London ballroom—November 1815*

He was surrounded by the usual gaggle of giggling girls who found him charming. Fortunately, mused Lady Constance Stuart as she watched him from the opposite side of the ballroom, she was not one of them. Like his father, Aaron Wincanton had hair as dark as night and a heart as black as sin, and Constance was predisposed to hate him with a vengeance. But there was something about Aaron Wincanton that had always grated. Perhaps it was his cocky arrogance, or perhaps it was the way he constantly flirted with any woman in possession of a pulse, or maybe it was simply the fact that he was the most irritatingly handsome man in the room, but whatever it was she had developed a deep well of loathing reserved especially for him.

The gaggle of silly girls all stepped back at his command and Constance watched in reluctant fascination as Aaron Wincanton held an unopened champagne bottle upright in his palm. He had obviously procured a sword from someone and held it aloft in his right hand with far more flourish than was necessary. The blade glinted in the light of the chandeliers above, attracting even more attention to the exciting spectacle at the edge of the dance floor. He lay the flat of the blade against the side of the bottle and his mewling disciples began to count out loud in squeaking excitement. ‘One... Two...’

On three he slid the blade swiftly upwards against the glass, slicing off the cork and the neck of the bottle in one, deadly clean cut. Foaming champagne spilled from the top of the bottle like a fountain and the audience all held out their wine glasses for him to fill or clapped at the audaciousness of the trick.

As if he knew that she would be watching him, his eyes languidly lifted and locked on hers. Before she could look away, he was already smiling smugly and winked at her in that oh-so-arrogant way of his that suggested that he just *knew* she had been staring at him again. It was galling.

Irritated beyond measure at the man, and at her own stupidity at being caught gawping at him yet again, Constance forced her eyes to another part of the ballroom. The part that she had been deftly avoiding. For the third time this evening she spied her new fiancé, the Marquis of Deal, leering down Penelope Rothman’s ample cleavage. Despite the fact that her father had already instructed her to ignore it, explaining that a good wife understands that a husband might—from time to time—seek the company of other women, Constance still struggled to do so. She and the marquis had been engaged less than a fortnight. And he had chosen her over Penelope. Surely he could keep his urges under control for such a short period of time out of respect for his future wife?

Unless this was a bitter taste of the life she was destined to have with the man? Despite the fact that the marriage had been arranged, Constance had hoped that they might find some sort of happiness together. Secretly, she had nurtured the belief that he might, one day, actually fall in love with her. That the Marquis of Deal would see beyond the hard exterior she had always presented to the world as a defence mechanism, find some beauty in the unruly, unsubtle, red hair that did its own thing and the tall, gangly, unimpressive figure, and uncover the real woman who lay beneath. The one who felt things a little too deeply and worried constantly that she was not quite good enough. What an idiotic, hopeless fool she was to have such a ludicrous dream!

Deal would never love her. It was no secret that her father had increased her dowry as a sweetener to lure him and Penelope Rothman *was* considered to be the diamond of the Season. It was humbling to realise that the Marquis of Deal had chosen his future bride pragmatically and solely for economic reasons. That is where his attraction to Constance started and stopped. Connie’s vivid appearance could never tempt him in the same way that Penelope’s golden hair and ethereal beauty did. She was merely a better financial prospect. It was still Penelope he really wanted and no amount of money would change that. Her eyes flicked back towards Aaron Wincanton and she saw him watching Deal and Penelope briefly before his gaze locked with

hers again. She could tell by his bland expression that he also knew that her fiancé preferred petite blondes to gangly redheads. *Everybody* preferred petite blondes to gangly redheads.

The surge of disappointment was so sudden that tears threatened to form and hell would have to freeze over before she allowed anyone see her cry. Constance quietly disentangled herself from her mother's group and slipped away to an empty alcove. Once she was composed she would give Deal the sharp end of her tongue and remind him of the behaviour expected of a gentleman. She might well be able to overlook his indiscretions in time, a very long amount of time, but that did not mean that she wanted to witness them as well. Besides, she reasoned as she watched festivities from a distance, nobody was likely to miss her—least of all her devoted marquis. As always, her dance card was woefully empty, aside from the occasional polite invitation issued from older family friends and the first waltz that she had already danced with her indifferent fiancé. She was now doomed to spend the rest of the evening with the matrons and the wallflowers. As usual.

It had always been that way. Ever since her come out six years ago, she had been doomed to watch every ball from the far side of the room. A situation that had been made much worse by the unfortunate, but incredibly apt, nickname that she had been given by Aaron Wincanton on the night she had been introduced at Almack's. Of course, it had caught on almost immediately and Connie had learnt of it when she had overheard another group of debutantes laughing about it in the retiring room. Thanks to Aaron Wincanton, from that moment on she had been referred to scathingly as the Ginger Amazonian.

The first year had been mortifying. Only her pride had got her through it as she had stoically ignored all of the whispers and giggles, and tried to be grateful for the pathetic trickle of fortune-hunting suitors that still tried their luck. She knew that she looked ridiculous and ungainly up against the other girls. Nobody knew better than she how very unappealing she was. There had never been another debutante who had the audacity to grow to six feet. Nor was there one with feet so enormous that the cobbler had once bragged that he made the biggest slippers in London. The debutante pastels further washed out her already pale complexion and she positively towered over all of the other women—and most of the gentlemen as well. She endured every feeble joke about her height by laughing politely, even though she wanted to smash her fist in the face of the next person who asked her what the weather was like up there or suggested that she slept in a greenhouse.

In an attempt to blend into the background, for a few months she had even took to standing with her knees bent at all times. While this served to make her appear shorter when stationary, the effect was spoiled the moment she had to move because she found it far too painful to attempt to walk, or heaven forbid dance, in a crouch. Besides, as her younger brother had laughingly pointed out, her crouched gait was oddly reminiscent of that of the apes at the Royal Menagerie. She gave up squatting after that. It was bad enough being compared to a giant female warrior. She did not want to ever have to endure a simian nickname and would not put it past Aaron Wincanton to come up with something even more insulting, like the Giant Ginger Gorilla. Heaven forbid!

The second year Connie was more prepared. If she was going to be compared to a mythical warrior she might as well act like one. Nobody would ever witness her lack of confidence in her own attractiveness ever again. She had learned to watch the proceedings with a detached and slightly disdainful air, as if she would never deign to lower herself by courting the interest of the eligible gentlemen in attendance or attempting to make friends with the silly gossiping girls. She was better than that. Lady Constance Stuart never fluttered her eyelashes over her fan, or giggled or swooned or simpered. Lady Constance Stuart proudly loomed over any gentleman who had the audacity to be shorter. She also wore bold colours to set off her copper-coloured curls to best effect. Turquoise, emerald, and if she was feeling particularly unattractive, crimson became her preferred colours of choice. They were no longer merely gowns; now each dress was a statement of defiance. She might well be an ugly wallflower, but that did not mean that she had to be a shrinking violet. Connie had been doomed to stand out wherever she went so she gave the impression that she was comfortable with that by purposefully sticking out wherever she went. But she loathed it nevertheless. Almost as much as she loathed her wild red hair, pale skin and beanpole body.

Lady Constance Stuart earned the reputation for having a sharp tongue and used it to wound if the need arose, which it did with less frequency as the seasons passed. She was formidable, like a true Amazonian, and the character she had created was now so convincing that sometimes Connie could forget how much it all hurt and how much she hated being relegated to a curiosity rather than a woman.

Out of the corner of her eye she spotted her fiancé brush his fingers over Penelope Rothman's perfect cheek and whisper something close to her ear that soon had those perfect cheeks blushing a very pretty shade of pink. Enough was enough. Lady Constance Stuart would never silently condone such insulting behaviour. She was going to talk to her fiancé and lay out some rules.

Connie regally walked towards the Marquis of Deal, where he was stood still fawning over Penelope. 'My lord, if I might have a private word?' She fixed him with a pointed stare and watched him blink in surprise at her icy tone.

'Of course, my dear.'

Connie headed purposefully towards the French windows that led out to the terrace and heard him follow. Despite the chill in the air, there were several other guests outside so she made sure that they were all well out of earshot before she turned around and faced him. Out of deference for the two inches of difference in their respective heights, Connie crouched until she could stare pointedly in his perfect blue eyes before she spoke. There really was no delicate way of putting it.

'Your behaviour this evening has humiliated me. I am your fiancée. We are newly betrothed. It is insulting that you should continue to flirt with other women in public. If I am going to be your wife, I expect to be treated with some respect.'

Her comments appeared to startle him. 'How exactly have I been disrespectful? I danced the first waltz with you. I have spent several minutes in your company. Surely you are not put out by my socialising with my friends? It is the norm for married or engaged couples to not linger in each other's company at social events. People would talk if we did otherwise.' The Marquis of Deal gave her one of his benevolent smiles. The one that set off the dimple in his square chin to perfection and made his blue eyes twinkle against his thick, golden hair. The man was far too handsome and far too aware of it. 'Although I do find your jealousy flattering, it is quite misplaced. I can assure you that Penelope and I were simply having a brief and platonic conversation.'

'It was hardly brief. She has dominated your time for at least the last hour and people are beginning to notice.' Aaron Wincanton had certainly noticed. 'In the future I would prefer it if you avoided cosy chats alone with Penelope, or any other unattached woman for that matter, out of respect for me.' Connie had hoped that Deal would feel ashamed of his behaviour. Instead he looked angry.

'It is not your place to tell me what I can and cannot do, madam, and I will thank you to remember it. Do you seriously expect me to avoid all contact with other women? I have already discussed this at great length with your father and he assured me that you understood that our arrangement was more about convenience than convention.'

Hearing that spew from his mouth was like a slap in the face and Connie balked. 'Do you have no affection for me whatsoever?' She had hoped that he had some and that the tiny seed would grow and she hated herself for that as well. Silly, needy fool!

Deal stared back at her as if she was quite mad. 'Ours is an arranged marriage, Constance. It is based on an agreement that is mutually beneficial to both of our families. I thought you understood that? I am doing you a huge favour by marrying you! You have been on the shelf for years and nobody else wants you. To be perfectly frank, you should be grateful for that and stop all of this nonsense. I will give you my name, a home of your own and a child or two to keep you company and secure the succession. In return, I have promised your father my support.'

A home of her own? What exactly did that mean? It certainly did not sound as if he wanted to share it. So much for her hopeful dream of a happy marriage. 'And then what?' she asked boldly, although she suspected she already knew the answer. Deal did not want her. He never would.

'And then we will both live our lives exactly how we want to! You will stay with the children in the country, of course, but as long as you are discreet I have no objection to you doing as you please once you have provided me with an heir.'

Connie was starting to feel a little queasy. Surely her father had not agreed to this? He had sold her off as a brood mare to a man who had no intention of being more than a temporary husband. 'And I am to accept the fact that you will continue to live the life of a bachelor in town?'

At that he looked her up and down with obvious distaste and then his expression turned to bemusement. When he finally spoke it was the final nail in the coffin of her foolish dreams.

'What else did you expect, Constance? Surely you did not think that I would miraculously fall in love? With *you*?'

## Chapter Two

Aaron had seen her face change almost imperceptibly just before she had hurried out of the ballroom and found himself watching the Marquis of Deal with downright disgust. Whilst it hardly mattered to him that Lady Constance was marrying a libertine, he could not help feeling a little exasperated at the man's behaviour. To consort openly with another woman when your fiancée was in the same room was worse than poor form, in his opinion, especially when the woman you were consorting with did not hold a candle to the one you were apparently betrothed to.

Constance Stuart might well be snooty, disdainful and disapproving towards him, that was only to be expected when they shared such an unfortunate history. But to others she was always the epitome of what a proper lady should be. Yes, she might well be aloof and in possession of one of the sharpest tongues in Christendom, but she had a way of carrying herself that set her apart from so many of the other young women of the *ton*. And with her height and willowy figure and all of that red hair, she was certainly distinguished. Added to that was her obvious intelligence and innate grace, combined with a rare and spectacular smile that lit up the room. Not that she ever bestowed it on him, of course, nor could he conceive that she would ever have cause to, but he could imagine that such a smile must make the recipient of it feel as if the most glorious sunrise had been created only for him to enjoy. Yet Deal preferred to humiliate the girl by fawning over the Rothman chit. And Aaron had never met a more scheming, manipulative and shallow creature in all of his life than Penelope.

Remembering his purpose, he turned back towards Violet Garfield and feigned interest. If he was going to propose to the girl, he had to at least appear to care about whatever it was she was currently wittering on about. Two hours into the ball and already he could feel his mask slipping. Being Aaron Wincanton was becoming exhausting.

Once upon a time being the charming and slightly mischievous rogue had come as naturally to him as breathing, but he had left that effervescent young man behind somewhere on a battlefield in Spain and he doubted they would ever cross paths again. The new Aaron Wincanton found no joy in balls or parties, nor did he find it in intimate gatherings or quiet solitary contemplation either. He did not deserve to feel joy any more. Most of the time he felt burdened. The rest of the time, if he was lucky, he just felt numb. He caught Violet looking at him as if she expected him to say something. He had not been listening and he did not want to offend her. Out of habit he turned on the charm. 'Violet, when I am with you I wish the minutes were hours and the hours were days.' They certainly felt like that.

As he had expected, the inane platitude worked wonders and she started to chatter afresh, with such gusto that all he had to do was listen and nod. A few seconds later and Aaron found his mind wandering again—it made him feel quite unsettled. He had hoped that he could convince himself that he might be content with Violet. There was no doubting that she was very pretty, which was a bonus, but much as he liked her poor Violet bored him senseless. Unfortunately, she was also an heiress—with a staggeringly large dowry—so beggars, like him, could not be choosers. The estate needed funds fast and his father wanted him to start producing the next generation of Wincantons while he was still alive to see it. Therefore, Aaron needed to step up and propose to Violet. And he needed to do it tonight.

But before he did, Aaron definitely needed a bit of peace and little Dutch courage. With nothing stronger than ratafia at the refreshment table he excused himself from the conversation and wandered out of the ballroom to see if he could find something suitably fortifying to drink alone elsewhere.

At the furthest end of the darkened hallway he found the empty library. Empty, except for the full brandy decanter and the one solitary redhead sat on an immense sofa and staring sightlessly into the fireplace. For a moment he considered turning around and looking elsewhere for sanctuary. The very last thing he needed was a dressing down from Lady Constance Stuart, even if he hoped that such encounters would eventually lead to an introduction to her brother, when he would broker the idea of an end to the silly feud that threatened to bankrupt him. His nerves were shot as it was and he needed a rest before he forced himself to become Aaron Wincanton again. But something about the way she sat, with her shoulders uncharacteristically slumped, made him dither. Perhaps they both needed the comfort of a sparring match this evening?

'How clever of you, Connie,' he said to vex her, 'to find a place where we will not be disturbed.'

Her startled head whipped around and Aaron thought he saw tears shimmering in her green eyes but, if he had, she covered them quickly with her usual frostiness. The shocked expression dissolved into a harsh frown instantly.

‘You are like a bad smell, Mr Wincanton, which always seems to follow me around.’ She stood stiffly and glared. ‘I was hoping that, for once, you would leave me in peace.’

‘And where would the entertainment be in that? I look forward to our little exchanges, Connie. I find your disdain refreshing when I am so admired by all wherever I go.’

‘So you seek me out for your entertainment, then? Does your father know that you regularly converse with a Stuart?’

‘No more than your father knows that you engage in discourse with a vile Wincanton, I will wager.’ Aaron gave her a cheeky wink because he knew that nobody else ever dared to flirt with her and he watched her eyes narrow in annoyance.

‘But I do not seek you out, Mr Wincanton. That is the difference. I could happily go to the grave and never exchange another word with you. Therefore, I must conclude that I must hold a particular fascination, or pose a particular challenge, to you. Does it bother you that I am immune to your flirtatious charms? Does my obvious distaste wound your frail ego?’

She gave him a withering look that only spurred him on further. When she was riled those green eyes hardened to cold emeralds and her red hair crackled copper in the firelight. It was a sight to see and one that might send a lesser man running for the hills. But Aaron was made of stern stuff. He had fought Napoleon, for goodness sake, so he could survive a war of words with this fiery redhead. Besides he had an ulterior motive that he could not ignore. He needed to improve relations to put an end to the costly feud between their two families, and so far Constance Stuart was the only Stuart who would deign to speak to him. ‘Why don’t you admit it, Connie? You find my persistence exciting. Too many men treat you like a marble statue with their dull politeness, the rest bore you because they are terrified of your sharp tongue. But I am different. I make your blood run hot. I suspect I might even fire your passions.’

The man was as mad as he was insufferable. In a strange way Connie was grateful that he was here. She could take out all of her hurt and anger on him. At least then she would not feel so utterly despondent and powerless. ‘Do not flatter yourself, Mr Wincanton. You fire my temper, not my passions.’

‘How many times must I ask you to call me Aaron? After all the jolly conversations we have shared these last two months, surely it is time that we dropped the formalities, Connie?’

He knew perfectly well that her name was always Constance—her father disliked informality of any sort—and that she would never, ever give him permission to use it. He was also the only person in the universe who ever shortened her name to Connie. She despised his familiarity even though she quite liked the name. ‘In case it has escaped your notice, *Mr* Wincanton, we are mortal enemies. Have you forgotten the fact that the Stuarts and the Wincantons have been at loggerheads for nigh on three hundred years?’

‘We have? I confess I have forgotten what all of the fuss is about now. Why should we care about an argument that happened almost three hundred years ago? I would prefer to hold out an olive branch and declare a truce.’

‘Indeed. And I suppose we should simply brush under the carpet the despicable behaviour of your father, only a few years back, where he swindled mine out of land that should rightfully have been his?’

He merely brushed that away with his hand. ‘A misunderstanding Connie. Nothing more.’

At times his irreverence did amuse her, not that she would ever let him see that. Nobody ever spoke to her like Aaron Wincanton did. No one else dared. ‘Then there is the unfortunate incident that occurred between our grandfathers. What did your foul grandfather do to mine again?’ She tapped her chin as if in deep thought. ‘Ah, yes! Now I remember. He shot him dead in a duel on Hampstead Heath.’

‘To be fair, my grandfather only did that after your grandfather seduced his wife. And it was a proper duel with rules and seconds. It is hardly my fault that your grandfather did not have the good sense to try to dodge the bullet.’

Connie waved away his warped logic. ‘Such things cannot be overlooked. If my father caught me talking to you, he would disown me. Yet here you are again, Mr Wincanton. Bothering me.’

It had been like this for the entire Season. Ever since he had returned from Waterloo, in a blaze of glory, he had sought her out. Despite the bitter and long-running feud between their two families, the Stuarts and the Wincantons had managed to co-exist in society very well by pretending that the other side simply did not exist—despite the fact that their ancestral estates were right next door to each other. They were always invited to the same functions and happily imagined the other to be invisible when in a social setting. Society understood this perfectly. Thus, there were never any public scenes and there was certainly never any attempts at conversation. It was a system that worked very well because it had been that way for centuries. Until now.

Unfortunately, Aaron Wincanton, heir to the house of Ardleigh and all-round blackguard, had no respect for tradition. It had been two months ago when he had first started to speak to her—and to her alone. It was never done openly, of course, or in front of any member of her family or his. But at every function he managed to catch her by herself at some point, no matter how much she tried to avoid it, and each time he did he would flirt a little and try and make her smile. Sometimes he would be loitering near the retiring room just as she came out, other times he would find her in an alcove or he would appear behind a potted palm or at her elbow at the refreshment table. And now he was here, in this remote library where she had sought sanctuary, and he had almost seen her cry. That was a situation Connie found the most intolerable.

Yet he merely shrugged in response, as if all of that bad blood did not matter, and then fixed her with his unusual and intense gaze. Unusual because only when you were up close could you see that his eyes were almost russet brown surrounded by a ring of dark, melted chocolate. Those eyes could be very unsettling at times, as if they saw too much. ‘Has it occurred to you, Connie, that our situation might be similar to that of the Montagues and Capulets? History might dictate that we be enemies, but apparently fate wants us to be friends—or perhaps more than friends?’

‘You are aware, Mr Wincanton, that Romeo and Juliet are fictitious and therefore not really pertinent to our situation? But as I recall, things ended very badly for both Romeo and Juliet because they did not listen to their fathers, so perhaps they should have ignored the will of fate, as you put it. The ending might have turned out very different if they had simply let things be. However, you do seem to be missing the point. Juliet welcomed Romeo’s attentions. I do not welcome yours. And in case it has escaped your notice, Mr Wincanton, I am engaged to be married and happy to be so.’

‘How can you be happy to be marrying a man who has shown more attention to Penelope Rothman this evening than he has to you?’ As soon as the words came out of his mouth Aaron regretted them. He felt even worse when he saw her frown turn into an expression of raw pain before she attempted to cover it. ‘I am sorry, Connie. That was uncalled for. I apologise unreservedly.’

‘Pay it no mind,’ she said with a shrug of bravado that did not ring quite true. ‘The Marquis of Deal has had a little too much to drink this evening and Penelope Rothman is trying to incite my jealousy, and failing. It must be quite galling for her to lose her most favoured suitor to the Ginger Amazonian.’

She looked him dead in the eye as she said this and saw him wince. He still felt guilty about calling her that, more so that the nickname had stuck. But he had been young and foolish back then and she had dented his pride. He had never meant for her to ever hear it. Or for her father to respond with such malice. It had come as quite a shock to come back from years of fighting Napoleon to see how dire the situation between their two families had become. His own father had become so obsessed with the feud that he had almost bled the estate dry in his attempts to get revenge on Connie’s father.

‘For what it is worth, I am sorry that I called you that, too.’

She gave him a regal and cold smile that did not touch her eyes and stood slowly. At her full height her face was almost level with his. The woman must be close to six feet in height, he mused, as she loomed in front of him, perhaps a little more. ‘I can assure you, Mr Wincanton, that I have never really given it a passing thought.’

Then, to the apparent and total horror of both of them, she promptly burst into tears right there in front of him.

Aaron felt like a total cad. At a loss as to what else to do with a crying woman who was evidently not usually prone to crying, he rushed towards her and pulled her into his arms. ‘There, there Connie,’ he murmured ineffectively as she buried her face into his neck and wept noisily, ‘I genuinely am sorry for calling you an Amazonian. It was most ungentlemanly of me.’

‘I am not crying because of that, you idiot!’ Her brief flash of anger was still peppered with tears, but it did make him feel better. At least this rare and noisy display of emotion was not specifically directed at him. The poor girl was clearly upset at Deal’s callous behaviour.

‘I am sure Deal’s flirting means nothing,’ he said, not believing his own words. Deal was a shameless philanderer and one who liked to brag about his many conquests.

‘Hardly nothing. It means that he prefers her charms to mine,’ she sobbed. ‘And who can blame him? Penelope is so beautiful. Everyone says so. And I am pale and plain in comparison, with hideous freckles and my figure is as flat as a washboard. And I have all of this ghastly carrot-coloured hair.’

Clearly, he had inadvertently kicked a hornet’s nest. Aaron could feel her slim shoulders shaking as she wept and felt the most peculiar urge to hunt the Marquis of Deal down and give him a well-deserved punch on the nose. ‘For a start your hair is glorious. Your skin is not pale, as such. Think of it more as alabaster. The freckles on your nose are quite delightful. Really they are. I have never understood why freckles are considered unbecoming. And you are not as flat as a washboard. You have a lovely figure.’ He could feel the gentle flare of her hips beneath his hands and there was definitely something interesting pressed against

his chest that his body was responding to—against his better judgement and his black mood. What on earth was the matter with him? This was Constance Stuart. Constance *Stuart*...

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