

Mr Cavendish, I Presume

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Extract

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Chapter One

It was a *crime* that Amelia Willoughby was not married.

At least that was what her mother said. Amelia – or more correctly, Lady Amelia – was the second daughter of the Earl of Crowland, so no one could fault her bloodlines. Her appearance was more than passable, if one's taste ran toward wholesome English roses, which, fortunately for Amelia, most of the *ton's* did.

Her hair was a respectable shade of medium blond, her eyes a grayish sort of greenish color, and her skin was clear and even, so long as she remembered to stay out of the sun. (Freckles were not Lady Amelia's friend.)

She was also, as her mother liked to catalogue, of adequate intelligence, able to play the pianoforte and paint watercolors, *and* (and here was where her mother punctuated the speech with an enthusiastic flourish) in possession of all of her teeth.

Even better, the aforementioned teeth were perfectly straight, which could not be said of Jacinda Lennox, who had made *the* match of 1818, neatly landing the Marquis of Beresford. (But not, as frequently reported by Jacinda Lennox's mother, before turning down two viscounts and an earl.)

But all of those attributes paled next to what was certainly the most pertinent and overreaching aspect of Amelia Willoughby's life, and that was her longstanding engagement to the Duke of Wyndham.

Had Amelia not been betrothed in the cradle to Thomas Cavendish (who was at the time the Heir Apparent to the dukedom and barely out of leading strings himself), she certainly would not have reached the unappealing age of one-and-twenty as an unmarried maiden.

She had spent one season back in Lincolnshire, because no one thought she'd need to bother with London, then she'd spent the next in the capital, because her elder sister's also-betrothed-in-the-cradle fiancé had had the misfortune of contracting a fever at the age of twelve, leaving his family heirless and Elizabeth Willoughby unattached.

And as for the next season—Elizabeth was almost, practically, *we're-sure-it-is-forthcoming-at-any-moment* engaged by then, and Amelia was, as ever, still engaged to the duke, but they went to London, anyway, because by that point it would have been embarrassing to remain in the country.

Amelia rather liked town. She enjoyed conversation, and she very much enjoyed dancing, and, if one spoke with her mother for more than five minutes, one would have learned that had Amelia been free to marry, there would have been a half dozen offers, at least.

Which meant that Jacinda Lennox would still have been Jacinda Lennox and not the Marchioness of Beresford. And more importantly, Lady Crowland and all of her daughters would still outrank the annoying little chit.

But then, as Amelia's father was often heard to say—life wasn't always fair. In fact, it rarely was. Just look at him, for the love of heaven. Five daughters. Five! And now the earldom, which had descended neatly from father to son since there were princes in the tower, would revert to the crown, with nary a long-lost cousin in sight to lay claim upon it.

And, he frequently reminded his wife, it was thanks to his early maneuverings that one of his five daughters was already settled, and they need only fret about the other four, so would she *please* stop yammering on about the poor Duke of Wyndham and his slow progress to the altar.

Lord Crowland treasured peace and quiet above all else, which was something he really ought to have considered before taking the former Anthea Grantham as his bride.

It wasn't that anyone thought that the duke would renege on his promise to Amelia and her family. On the contrary, it was well-known that the Duke of Wyndham was a man of his word, and if he said he would marry Amelia Willoughby, then as God was anyone's witness, he would.

It was just that he intended to do so when it was convenient to *him*. Which wasn't necessarily when it would be convenient to her. Or more to the point, her mother.

And so here she was, back in Lincolnshire.

And she was still Lady Amelia Willoughby.

"And I don't mind it at all," she declared, when Grace Eversleigh brought up the matter at the Lincolnshire Dance and Assembly. Grace Eversleigh was, aside from being the closest friend of Amelia's sister Elizabeth, the companion to the dowager Duchess of Wyndham, and thus in far closer contact with Amelia's affianced husband than Amelia ever had occasion to be.

"Oh, no," Grace quickly assured her. "I did not mean to imply that you did."

"She didn't even ask," Elizabeth said, giving Amelia a queer look. "All she said was that his grace plans to remain at Belgrave for six months at least. And then *you* said —"

"I know what I said," Amelia bit off, feeling her skin flush. Which wasn't precisely true. She could not have repeated her speech word-for-word, but she had a sneaking suspicion that if she tried, it would come out something like —

Well, that's certainly lovely, but I shouldn't read anything into it, and in any case Elizabeth's wedding is next month so I certainly could not dream of finalizing anything

anytime soon, and regardless of what anyone says, I am in no great rush to marry him. Something something something. I barely know the man. Something something more, still Amelia Willoughby. And I don't mind at all.

Which was not the sort of speech one generally wished to relive in one's head.

There was an awkward, empty moment, and then Grace cleared her throat and said, "He said he would be here this evening."

"He did?" Amelia asked, her eyes flying to Grace's.

Grace nodded. "I saw him at supper. Or rather, I saw him as he walked through the room as we were taking supper. He chose not to dine with us. I think he and his grandmother are quarreling," she added as an aside. "They frequently do."

Amelia felt the corners of her mouth tighten. Not in anger. Not even in irritation. It was resignation, really, more than anything else. "I suppose the dowager pestered him about me," she said.

Grace looked as if she did not wish to answer, but finally she said, "Well, yes."

Which was to be expected. It was well-known that the dowager Duchess of Wyndham was even more eager to see the marriage take place than Amelia's own mother. It was also well-known that the duke found his grandmother vexing at best, and Amelia was not at all surprised that he would agree to attend the assembly just to get her to leave him alone.

As it was *also* well-known that the duke did not make promises lightly, Amelia was quite certain that he would indeed make an appearance at the assembly. Which meant that the remainder of the evening would follow a well-worn path:

The duke would arrive, everyone would look at him, then everyone would look at her, and then he would approach, they would share several minutes of awkward conversation, he would ask her to dance, she would accept, and when they were done he would kiss her hand and depart.

Presumably to seek the attentions of another woman. A different kind of woman.

The sort one did not marry.

It was not something Amelia cared to ponder, not that that ever stopped her from doing so. But truly, could one expect fidelity from a man *before* marriage? It was a discussion she and her sister had had any number of times, and the answer was always depressingly the same:

No. Not when the gentleman in question had been betrothed as a child. It was not fair to expect him to forgo all of the entertainments in which his friends partook, just because his father had signed a contract a few decades years earlier. Once the date was set, however, *that* was a different story.

Or rather, it would be, if the Willoughbys ever managed to get Wyndham to set a date.

"You don't appear to be terribly excited to see him," Elizabeth remarked.

Amelia sighed. "I'm not. Truth be told, I enjoy myself far better when he stays away."

"Oh, he's not so bad," Grace assured her. "He's actually rather sweet once one gets to know him."

"Sweet?" Amelia echoed dubiously. She had seen the man smile, but never more than twice in a conversation. "Wyndham?"

"Well," Grace hedged, "perhaps I overstated. But the duke will make you a fine husband, Amelia, I promise you. He's quite diverting when he chooses to be."

Amelia and Elizabeth stared at her with such expressions of disbelief that Grace actually laughed and added, "I do not lie! I swear! He has a devilish sense of humor."

Amelia knew that Grace meant well, but somehow this failed to reassure her. It wasn't that she was jealous. Amelia was quite certain she was not in love with Wyndham—How could she be? She rarely had occasion to exchange more than two words with the man. Still, it was still rather unsettling that Grace Eversleigh had come to know him so well.

And she could not tell this to Elizabeth, in whom she usually confided everything. Elizabeth and Grace had been fast friends since they'd met at the age of six. Elizabeth would tell her that she was being silly. Or she'd give her one of those dreadful looks that were meant to be sympathetic but instead came out as pity.

Amelia seemed to be on the receiving end of many of these glances these days. Usually whenever the topic of marriage arose. Had she been a betting woman (which she actually thought she might be, should she ever be given the opportunity to try) she would have wagered that she had received sym-pitying looks from at least half the young ladies of the *ton*. And all of their mothers.

"We shall make it our mission for the autumn," Grace suddenly announced, her dark eyes sparkling with intent. "Amelia and Wyndham shall finally become acquainted."

"Grace, don't, *please*..." Amelia said, flushing. Good Lord, how mortifying. To be a *project*.

"You are going to have to get to know him eventually," Elizabeth said.

"Not really," was Amelia's wry reply. "How many rooms are there at Belgrave? Two hundred?"

"Seventy-three," Grace murmured.

“I could go weeks without seeing him,” Amelia responded. “Years.”

“Now you’re just being silly,” her sister said. “Why don’t you come with me to Belgrave tomorrow? I devised an excuse about Mama needing to return some of the dowager’s books so that I might visit with Grace.”

Grace turned to Elizabeth with mild surprise. “Did your mother borrow books from the dowager?”

“She did, actually,” Elizabeth replied, then added demurely, “at my request.”

Amelia raised her brows. “Mother is not much of a reader.”

“I couldn’t very well borrow a pianoforte,” Elizabeth retorted.

It was Amelia’s opinion that their mother wasn’t much of a musician, either, but there seemed little reason to point it out, and besides that, the conversation had been brought to an abrupt halt.

He had arrived.

Amelia may have had her back to the door, but she knew precisely the moment Thomas Cavendish walked into the assembly hall, because, drat it all, she had *done* this before.

Now was the hush.

And now – she counted to five; she’d long since learned that dukes required more than the average three seconds of hush – were the whispers.

And now Elizabeth was jabbing her in the ribs, as if Amelia needed the alert.

And now – oh, Amelia could see it all in her head – the crowds were doing their Red Sea imitation, and here strode the duke, his shoulders broad, his steps purposeful and proud, and here he was, almost, almost, almost –

“Lady Amelia.”

She composed her face. She turned around. "Your grace," she said, with the blank smile she knew was required of her.

He took her hand and kissed it. "You look lovely this evening."

He said that every time.

Amelia murmured her thanks and then waited patiently while he complimented her sister, then said to Grace, "I see my grandmother has allowed you out of her clutches for the evening."

"Yes," Grace said with a happy sigh, "isn't it lovely?"

He smiled, and Amelia noted it was not the same sort of public-face smile he gave her. It was, she realized, a smile of friendship.

"You are nothing less than a saint, Miss Eversleigh," he said.

Amelia looked to the duke, and then to Grace, and wondered — *What was he thinking?* It was not as if Grace had any choice in the matter. If he really thought Grace was a saint, he ought to set her up with a dowry and find her a husband so she did not have to spend the rest of her life waiting hand and foot upon his grandmother.

But of course Amelia did not say that. Because no one said such things to a duke.

"Grace tells us that you plan to rusticate in the country for several months," Elizabeth said.

Amelia wanted to kick her. The implication had to be that if he had time to remain in the country, he must have time to finally marry her sister.

And indeed, the duke's eyes held a vaguely ironic expression as he murmured, "I do."

"I shall be quite busy until November at the earliest," Amelia blurted out, because it was suddenly imperative that he realize that she was not spending her days sitting by her window, pecking at needlework as she pined for his arrival.

"Shall you?" he murmured.

She straightened her shoulders. "I shall."

His eyes, which were a rather legendary shade of blue, narrowed a bit. In humor, not in anger, which was probably all the worse. He was *laughing* at her. Amelia did not know why it had taken her so long to realize this. All these years she'd thought he was merely ignoring her –

Oh, dear Lord.

"Lady Amelia," he said, the slight nod of his head as much of a bow as he must have felt compelled to make, "would you do me the honor of a dance?"

Elizabeth and Grace turned to her, both of them smiling serenely with expectation. They had played out this scene before, all of them. And they all knew how it was meant to unfold.

Especially Amelia.

"No," she said, before she could think the better of it.

He blinked. "No?"

"No, thank you, I should say." And she smiled prettily, because she did like to be polite.

He looked stunned. "You don't wish to dance?"

"Not tonight, I don't think, no." Amelia stole a glance at her sister and Grace. They looked aghast.

Amelia felt wonderful.

She felt like herself, which was something she was never allowed to feel in his presence. Or in the anticipation of his presence. Or the aftermath.

It was always about *him*. Wyndham this and Wyndham that, and oh how *lucky* she was to have snagged the most handsome duke in the land without even having to lift a finger.

The one time Amelia allowed her rather dry humor to rise to the fore, and she'd said, "Well, of course I had to lift my little baby rattle," she'd been rewarded with two blank stares and one mutter of "ungrateful chit."

That had been Jacinda Lennox's mother, three weeks before Jacinda had received her shower of marriage proposals.

So Amelia generally kept her mouth shut and did what was expected of her. But now...

Well, this wasn't London, and her mother wasn't watching, and she was just so *sick* of the way he kept her on a leash. Really, she could have found someone else by now. She could have had fun. She could have kissed a man.

Oh, very well, not *that*. She wasn't an idiot, and she did value her reputation. But she might have imagined it, which she'd certainly never bothered to do before.

And then, because she had no idea when she might feel so reckless again, she smiled up at her future husband and said, "But you should dance, if you wish it. I'm sure there are many ladies who would be happy to partner you."

"But I wish to dance with you," he ground out.

"Perhaps another time," Amelia said. She gave him her sunniest smile. "Ta!"

And she walked away.

She walked away.

She wanted to skip. In fact, she did. But only once she'd turned the corner.

Thomas Cavendish liked to think himself a reasonable man, especially since his lofty position as the seventh Duke of Wyndham would have allowed

him any number of unreasonable demands. He could have gone stark raving mad, dressed all in pink, and declared the world a triangle, and the *ton* would still have bowed and scraped and hung on his every word.

His own father, the sixth Duke of Wyndham, had not gone stark raving mad, nor had he dressed all in pink or declared the world a triangle, but he had *certainly* been a most unreasonable man. It was for that reason that Thomas most prided himself upon the evenness of his temper, the sanctity of his word, and, although he did not choose to reveal this side of his personality to many, his ability to find humor in the absurd.

And this was definitely absurd.

But as news of Lady Amelia's departure from the assembly spread through the hall, and head after head swiveled in his direction, Thomas began to realize the line between humor and fury was not so very much more substantial than the edge of a knife.

And twice as sharp.

Lady Elizabeth was gazing upon him with a fair dose of horror, as if he might turn into an ogre and tear someone from limb to limb. And Grace – drat the little minx – looked as if she might burst out laughing at any moment.

"Don't," he warned her.

She complied, but barely, so he turned to Lady Elizabeth and asked, "Shall I fetch her?"

She stared at him mutely.

"Your sister," he clarified.

Still nothing. Good Lord, were they even educating females these days?

"The Lady Amelia," he said, with extra enunciation. "My affianced bride. The one who just gave me the cut direct."

"I wouldn't call it *direct*," Elizabeth finally choked out.

He stared at her for a moment longer than was comfortable (for her; he was perfectly at ease with it), then turned to Grace, who was, he had long since realized, one of the only people in the world upon whom he might rely for complete honesty.

“Shall I fetch her?”

“Oh, yes,” she said, her dark eyes shining with mischief. “Do.”

His brows rose a fraction of an inch as he pondered where the dratted female might have gone off to. She couldn’t actually leave the assembly; the front doors spilled right onto the main street in Stamford – certainly not an appropriate spot for an unescorted female. In the back there was a small garden. Thomas had never had occasion to inspect it personally, but he was told that many a marriage had been proposed in its leafy confines.

Proposed being something of a euphemism. Most proposals occurred in a rather more complete state of attire than those that came about in the back garden of the Lincolnshire Dance and Assembly Hall.

But Thomas didn’t much worry about being caught alone with Lady Amelia Willoughby. He was already shackled to the chit, wasn’t he? And he could not put off the wedding very longer. He had informed her parents that they would wait until she was one-and-twenty, and surely she had to reach that age soon.

If she hadn’t already.

“My options appear to be thus,” he murmured. “I could fetch my lovely betrothed, drag her back for a dance, and demonstrate to the assembled multitudes that I have her clearly under my thumb.”

Grace stared at him with amusement. Elizabeth looked somewhat green.

“But then it would look as if I cared,” he continued.

“Don’t you?” Grace asked.

He thought about this. His pride *was* pricked, that was true, but more than anything he was amused. “Not so very much,” he answered, and then, because Elizabeth was her sister, he added, “Pardon.”

She nodded weakly.

“On the other hand,” he said, “I could simply remain here. Refuse to make a scene.”

“Oh, I think the scene was already made.” Grace murmured, giving him an arch look.

Which he returned in kind. “You’re lucky that you’re the only thing that makes my grandmother tolerable.”

Grace turned to Elizabeth. “I am apparently unsackable.”

“Much as I’ve been tempted,” Thomas added.

Which they both knew was untrue. Thomas would have laid himself prostrate at her feet if necessary, just to get her to remain in his grandmother’s employ. Luckily for him, Grace showed no inclination to leave.

Still, he would have done it. And tripled her salary at the same time. Every minute Grace spent in his grandmother’s company was a minute he didn’t have to, and truly, one could not put a price on something such as that.

But that was not the matter at hand. His grandmother was safely ensconced in the next room with her band of cronies, and he had every intention of being in and out of the assembly without their having to share a single word of conversation.

His fiancée, however, was another story entirely.

“I do believe I shall allow her her moment of triumph,” he said, coming to this decision as the words crossed his lips. He felt no need to demonstrate his authority – really, could there be any question of it? – and he did not

particularly relish the idea that the good people of Lincolnshire might imagine he was besotted with his fiancée.

Thomas did not *do* infatuation.

"That's very generous of you, I must say," Grace remarked, her smile most irritating.

He shrugged. Barely. "I'm a generous sort of man."

Elizabeth's eyes widened, and he thought he heard her breathe, but other than that, she remained mute.

A wordless female. Maybe he should marry *that* one.

"Do you depart, then?" Grace asked.

"Are you trying to be rid of me?"

"Not at all. You know I always delight in your presence."

He would have returned her sarcasm in kind, but before he could do so, he spied a head – or rather, a part of a head – peeking out from behind the curtain that separated the assembly hall and the side corridor.

Lady Amelia. She had not gone so far afield, after all.

"I came to dance," he announced.

"You loathe dancing," Grace said.

"Not true. I loathe being required to dance. It is a very different endeavor."

"I can find my sister," Elizabeth said quickly.

"Don't be silly. She obviously loathes being required to dance, too. Grace shall be my partner."

"Me?" Grace looked surprised.

Thomas signaled to the small band of musicians at the front of the room. They immediately lifted their instruments.

“You,” he said. “You don’t imagine I would dance with anyone else here?”

“There is Elizabeth,” she said, as he led her to the center of the floor.

“Surely you jest,” he murmured. Lady Elizabeth Willoughby’s skin had not recovered any of the color that had drained from it when her sister had turned her back and left the room. The exertions from dancing would probably lead her to swoon.

Besides, Elizabeth would not suit his purposes.

He glanced up at Amelia. To his surprise, she did not dart immediately behind the curtain.

He smiled. Just a little.

And then – it was most satisfying – he saw her gasp.

She ducked behind the curtain after that, but he was not concerned. She’d be watching the dance. Every last step of it.