

Violet Durbin lives a quiet life on the fringes of society until she crosses paths with the Duke of Hawkinson, when the duke tries to prevent his nephew from seeing her and in the process falls in love with her.

Known To All

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Known to All

Gloria Gay

CHAPTER 1

The Duke of Hawkinston gazed at Jared, his nephew, with disapproving eyes while Jared looked nervously around the room.

Viscount Jared Falweir seemed even younger than his twenty years as he glanced back at the duke, purposely avoiding the duke's eyes. Jared's wispy flaxen hair stuck in a cowlick and the points of his collar rose to absurd heights.

This morning he had been certain of his attire as giving him the bang up to the mark image most young men of his circle sought. Now, he wasn't sure of that anymore.

He felt disconcerted and uncomfortable at this meeting with his uncle. For the hundredth time Jared wished his father had left as guardian the amiable Lester Cawlingford, rather than the formidable duke whom there was no way he was ever going to please. It was amazing to him that the Duke of Hawkinston must only be about ten years older than he. This fact never failed to astound him, for he could not imagine the duke as ever having been young. It would be too taxing to the imagination. His uncle to him seemed to have been on this earth the size and age he was, *always*.

Only a few months left in his guardianship, Jared told himself, in order to cope with the trying interview. He closed his eyes momentarily, wishing himself somewhere else. Every meeting he had ever had with his uncle had been nerve-racking. There was little family warmth and certainly no camaraderie between them. It was always the same: his uncle considered him immature and unable to have any opinion of his own on any subject. Even when he had dared to discuss the war with him a few years back, he had been sternly informed that he should not dare opine on something he knew little about and

Gloria Gay

even less experience with. How can one have a conversation with a person who appears to think of himself god-like? Even on a personal level, Jared was repulsed by the duke's power and wealth and an arrogance that seemed to know no bounds. He thought of the duke more of a king than the king was himself.

"I cannot comprehend why it is you cannot stay out of the gossip columns, Jared," his uncle now said. "Surely it isn't that difficult. From the rather explicit content of one column in particular it appears you have not only been frequenting 'The Cave,' a den of inequity that has felled more seasoned gamblers than you but you have been seen cavorting with Casey Sallingate..."

"There ain't nothing wrong with Casey, Uncle Perry, we went to school together. He's a right cove and a tight friend, and admitted in the best circles!"

"Kindly abstain from talking fustian, Jared," interrupted his uncle impatiently. "Save such talk for when you are with your 'coves'. Next you'll be dandifying your attire like Sallingate. I saw him at White's just yesterday and his clothes brought to mind his father, the poor slob, who had the poetic misfortune of dying at a duel that was meant for first blood only, by making a quirky movement."

"Sallingate is a right co—" Jared stopped himself in time.

"He hasn't got the sense the Lord gave a goat," said the duke, "in his choice of debutantes, either. He's courting Lady Jessica Blayne, Lord Kelly's niece."

"And you take exception to Lady Jessica, Uncle? Her bloodlines are sterling!"

"That may very well be," said the duke with a shake of the head, "but Lord Kelly became her guardian on her father's death. And I hope you're not indifferent to the fact that Lord Kelly went beyond the pale when he married his mistress, Jared. Anyone who associates with Lord Kelly now is stained by

association. Lady Jessica's prospects are diminished by association with that family."

"Lord Kelly is a right—"

"Yes, I know, a right 'cove'," said his uncle, "nevertheless, he is not admitted in the inner circles of society anymore, in case you haven't noticed, and they will remain closed to him because of his choice of brides. Why he had to go and marry a courtesan is beyond me. Bed, them yes, but marry them? Next you'll be telling me that the daughter he acknowledged publicly—what's her name..."

"Violet."

"That name sprang quickly to your mind, Jared, suspiciously so. I hope you are not developing feelings for the young lady, because I will be forced to nick that in the bud and very quickly too."

"Violet will never belong to anyone, Uncle Perry. But if she even glanced my way, I swear I would give up the world just to be a few minutes in her favor."

"Those Byron poems are going to your head, Jared. Less poetry and more schoolbooks would be more salutary in your case. You have your head in the clouds when it comes to women."

The duke shook his head again. He certainly had never been as intense and impulsive as an adolescent as his nephew was. The Duke of Hawkington was thirty-two years old and all of those thirty-two years he had spent in the luxury, privilege and ease that his position had ensured him from birth. Not once had he known what it was to long for something and know in his heart he would never have it.

His infancy and youth had been pampered, his adulthood doubly so. He had never questioned his position; to him it was an unconscious birthright. He would have questioned breathing and sleeping as natural facts before he questioned the position

he had been born to or wonder that it was merely by chance he had not been born a beggar in gaol. To have thought that would have been unthinkable and the duke never gave a thought to the unthinkable as related to himself.

From the moment he woke up each day he would have been reminded of his position had he ever perceived it as something that might not have been save for a Providence that had smiled on *him* and not on countless others.

"The little master is a old one," his old caretaker, Joseph, had said when Hawkinson was a child, "and 'e'll never be a young 'un."

That prediction seemed to have held fast throughout Hawkinson's early years and throughout his life. He had never really been young. So it was hard for him to understand his nephew Jared's youth and impetuosity.

The duke was not handsome in the usual way, but he was arresting nevertheless and his presence filled a room, overwhelming even the least timid. His eyes were the gray-green of moss. At times, when he became extremely interested in something, his eyes *did* approach a magnetic kind of attraction that had surprised a few people who had witnessed this change in them, for it was quite unexpected. Yet since he rarely gazed at anything that interested him too much, this unique feature in his eyes was destined to stay unused and almost completely hidden.

His other good feature was his well-shaped head of which attraction of shape he was absolutely unconscious. His fine head of dark and abundant hair and his regal composure made him an arresting sight whenever he entered a room.

"Ah, well, favors is what Violet would be bestowing right and left if her mother had not had the immense fortune of trapping that idiot, Lord Kelly, in her net," the duke now said to

his nephew. "I could not believe my ears when I heard the dolt actually allows her to use his name!"

"Violet and her mother are in the favor of the Earl of Arandale," said Jared. His fervent admiration and awakening love for Violet making him daring. Even the thought of Violet now sent a delicious shiver throughout his body so that he wished this interview over and he left free to call on Violet.

"Yes, I believe you're right," said the duke. "It seems this girl, Violet, alerted Arandale about the Lady Arandale's kidnapping, thus saving the countess. How the girl knew about the kidnapping seems suspect to me. However, Arandale is forever in the girl's debt and rightly so. But even that won't get 'Lady' Kelly and her daughter vouchers to Almack's—everyone would abstain in protest."

"I have accepted an invitation to a musicale at Lord Kelly's, sir," Jared now said, alarmed that his uncle's unexpected animosity about Violet and her mother might interfere with his social plans. "I have already sent my acceptance. Is it alright if I go, sir?"

Jared squirmed in his seat, as he always did in Hawkinson's presence. Hawkinson frowned. This was not the first person he saw squirm in his presence. It occurred to him for the first time that there were some people that would rather not be too long in his company. Being extremely fond of his own company, Hawkinson wondered why this was so.

"Well, a musicale is harmless, I suppose," said the duke and remembered that he too, had been sent an invitation. If Wattling hadn't tossed it in the ash can, it might still be there. He suddenly had a feeling of curiosity, aroused, no doubt by Jared's words that the girl, Violet, would never belong to anyone.

"What does Violet look like?" he now asked his nephew.

Gloria Gay

"She's..." Jared thought of Violet's tourmaline blue eyes. "Violet cannot be described."

"Come, now," said the duke with a frown. "She's not exactly an angel, from what I recall. She was the mistress of that cad, Alex Shackel, who was run through with a sword by the Earl of Arandale. That was six or seven years ago, I believe. I was in Scotland at the time so I don't know the particulars..."

"She was *forced* to become Shackel's mistress, Uncle Perry, and she was his mistress only for a few weeks before the Earl of Arandale killed him."

"The only difference is that she didn't say yes," said the duke impatiently. "The result is the same—loss of virtue. And a few weeks or a few years is all the same to me. And by the way, Jared, she may be Lord Kelly's acknowledged daughter now but she is not exactly a girl, nor an example to her sex. *She is known to all.*"

"No, Uncle, she is not—" said Jared, in the same instant wondering at his daring, "—*you* don't know her."

Jared's uncle wondered how anyone could awaken such a passionate defense on a young buck like Jared. Up until now Jared had taken a lazy attitude towards everything except horses. Jared, on the other hand, wondered how it was possible for him to have descended from such pompous prigs such as the duke and his father, who had been the duke's brother. A revolutionary like himself was an ill fit in such a family.

"How can you dislike someone you have never met, sir?" Jared asked, more boldly than his usual, even as his uncle noticed how he had leaned forward in his chair, earnestly.

"Violet seldom goes anywhere and does so only when Lady Arandale particularly desires her company, as when they went to view the antiquities last Tuesday. I accompanied them," added Jared proudly and when he noticed that his uncle was quietly gazing at him he finished with,

"Violet does not pretend to possess a virtuous past, Uncle Perry; she has accompanied Lady Jessica only to the places where she is allowed entrance. She does not attend the Almack balls with Lady Jessica."

"Nor many other places," said the duke, though less emphatically. He leaned over to the bell cord and rang for his valet.

"Bring me the invitation to Lord Kelly's musicale, Wattling," he said.

"Yes, your grace."

When Wattling had left Jared stared at his uncle. "You are planning to attend Lord Kelly's musicale, Uncle Perry?"

"I believe I shall, just to keep an eye on you," said the duke.

"I—" Jared stopped what he was about to say. Just the thought of the duke at the musicale, ruining his plans for the evening almost made him shake. He had looked forward to the musicale for weeks as it was the only social event held at Lord Kelly's house and one of the very few where he could dance with Violet.

"Don't worry, Jared," said the duke in a sardonic tone, noticing Jared's immediate reaction to his words, "I promise I will not cast a shadow on your movements. That is, if you behave. I believe your actions of recent months warrant a closer scrutiny. I don't believe your father would sanction your inroads into gaming hells in Whitechapel or interest in demimonde women. You may be a young blood eager for adventure but as your guardian I am not going to let you get out of hand. I have a duty to uphold to your father and I intend to keep it."

"There is to be a dance, too, Uncle Perry." Jared looked at his hands and winced as he waited for the duke's reply.

"Ah, now I see," said the duke, "when I had not expressed a wish to attend it was only a musicale. But now that I will be attending, you must disclose that it is to be a dance. And with

Gloria Gay

whom are you planning to dance, Jared, the woman, Violet? And how old is she, by the way?"

"She's eighteen, I believe."

"*Eighteen!* But—" the duke frowned. He had imagined Violet to be in her late twenties or early thirties. This certainly gave a whole different perspective of her.

"She was only thirteen when that cad, Alex Shackel forced her to become his mistress, Uncle," said Jared. "She was a mere child. He discarded Sadie, Violet's mother, and forced Sadie's daughter, a girl who was an innocent child to become his mistress. Thankfully it was only for a short time, as the Earl of Arandale put a stop to that. Surely you can't blame Violet for the actions of a villain?"

"You have become too attached to that family, Jared, and in particular you admire that girl too much. Where will this lead you? As your guardian and uncle I must warn you that you are treading dangerous ground. You have certain responsibilities to your family and to your name that you cannot ignore while you go skirt chasing."

But even the duke felt his own words had lost the ardor with which he had been initially against Violet. She was only a young girl, after all. However, she *had* been a courtesan, no matter that it had only been for a few weeks. That part of her life could never be erased. It would be much better to nip this interest in the bud, for Jared seemed to be unusually taken with the girl. If he allowed this to turn into a full-blown passion it would be more difficult to stop. Now was the time to act.

It was useless to argue with the duke, thought Jared. He would never view Violet as anything but a courtesan, no matter that Violet's conduct was impeccable and that her reputation, save for her unfortunate past, was above reproach. He would marry her in a heartbeat, thought Jared, and brave the havoc it

would create with his family, if only Violet would agree to marry him.

"You have become thoughtful all of a sudden," said his uncle suspiciously. "What's going through your mind, Jared?"

"Nothing, Uncle Perry, other than to wonder if this afternoon at Tattersall's I shall be able to obtain that sweet goer, Brightstar, for my curricule."

"I know when I'm being gamboled, Jared, so don't attempt it. I would lay a hundred to one that your thoughts are not far from that girl, Violet. But I do warn you, Jared, do not make me exercise my authority as guardian and interfere for your own good. You can't consider a relationship with that woman. It is absolutely out of the question. She is not of your class and since ardent passions lead either to affairs or marriage, both are dangerous at your impetuous age.

"And now, this meeting is over, Jared; I have other matters to attend to."

Jared sighed in relief. The half hour meeting had seemed like hours to him. Would there ever be a time when he would feel comfortable in his uncle's presence? He seriously doubted it.

"I shall see you at the musicale, Uncle Perry," said Jared at the door, his face lighting up with a broad smile, for he was thinking that in a few more months he was to obtain his majority and then the duke's orders would fall hollow on his ears.

He was well aware of how unfairly Violet and her mother were treated by society. They might have some cause to treat Sadie with contempt but as far as Jared was concerned, they had absolutely no reason to treat Violet in such a manner. Violet was completely innocent. She had been a child when this happened and a child has no control over the actions of adults. Had she asked to be forced into sexual slavery with that fiend?

Gloria Gay

Luckily, it had lasted only a short time. Fate had interfered and Violet had been freed. Why should society now become the jailer?

There was no hesitation in Jared's part. He only waited to attain his majority; then he would be free to marry whomever he chose. He was well aware of the firestorm it would cause in his family but he cared not a whit.

The trustees of his estate, among them the duke, would do everything in their power to prevent him from marrying Violet, but his mind was set in stone. Nothing they said would make him change his mind. In the end they would just have to accept it.

Why, he wouldn't even be the first in his family to stray from the strict code for marrying in his family. Uncle Jonathan, Baron Eldier, had been shunned by his family for marrying the daughter of a commoner. This had gone on for decades and in the end they had welcomed him back to the fold, when his father, strictest in his family, had died. So it would be in his case. If they shunned him it wouldn't matter to him. In the end they would have to accept it and move on.

CHAPTER 2

During the following days, being concerned with other matters, the Duke of Hawkinston forgot Lord Kelly's musicale and had he not received a missive from Jared informing him he had a very bad cold and would not be able to attend, the duke would have forgotten it entirely.

He now remembered that he had been curious about the girl, Violet. But now he wondered if it was wise for him to go when Jared was not to attend. Surely his presence would give Lord Kelly's household undeserved consequence. Had he not assured Jared that Lord Kelly had asked for the snubs he regularly got from society?

Yet something tugged at his mind and it suddenly came to him. He *had* seen the girl, once, some years back. Violet had been pointed out to him from some distance, at the time that everyone was talking of the *on-dit* of the moment.

Lord Kelly's marriage to his mistress had been attended only by a handful of people. He recalled that a few men at White's had been discussing the marriage in disparaging terms within his earshot. As he knew them well, he had asked who they were talking about for they seemed to find everything about it laughable.

Sir Waisfield had answered that Lord Kelly had married a woman so passed around that she should have put wheels on her feet.

"Who is that?" the duke had asked.

"Sadie Welsh. A comely wench who started out with Lord Kassing. You remember Kassing? Lived in London year around until he died in a race to Brighton?"

"Who did Sadie Welsh marry?" the duke had asked, his interest aroused. It was not unheard of that a man married his

Gloria Gay

mistress, but it was rare enough to cause a buzzing for weeks or even months, especially if the woman was a well-known member of the demimonde.

"Lord Kelly it is. Have you ever heard of such a noncock? He sealed his doom, alright," said Sir Waisfield. "Connie already told me in no uncertain terms Kelly is not darkening our doorway from this day forth." And then he added, "and so it will go with every household of any worth. The doors will be shut on his face. It's an affront that he tried to shove his mistress on us and an affront to our friendship."

"Friendship?" asked the duke, but the ironic tone was lost on Waisfield.

The duke remembered someone laughing and mentioning that the marriage had been witnessed only by the Earl of Arandale, Lady Arandale and Violet, who was shortly after acknowledged as Lord Kelly's daughter.

It was there that Hawkinson had learned that Sadie's daughter, Violet, had been instrumental in rescuing Miss Cecilia Sentennel, the Earl of Arandale's betrothed, from the clutches of her kidnapper, Alex Shackel. The adventure had brought Lord Kelly and Sadie in contact again and they had renewed their love. On learning that Violet was his daughter, Lord Kelly had married Sadie and published his recognition of Violet as his daughter.

Violet's features as the duke tried to recall them were indistinct; her face was like a vague pale vision shimmering underwater. And beckoning—curiously beckoning. He now understood why Jared was fascinated with the girl. A stirring of curiosity swept through him and something, else: an *expectation* toward attending a social event. He had not felt any kind of anticipation toward any social event for more years than he could recall.

Known to All

He had let his mind wander. In any case he realized that it was too late to decline the invitation, as he had already accepted.

And without examining his motives too closely, Peregrine de More, Duke of Hawkinson, summoned his valet.

* * *

"Your grace, we are honored." Harding Durbin, Viscount Kelly, said nervously, as the duke was announced. Lord Kelly had rushed over to the duke, leaving the small receiving line comprised of only he, Lady Kelly and Violet. The duke nodded to Lord Kelly and Lord Kelly directed him to Lady Kelly, who waited nervously. Hawkinson greeted Sadie tersely and dismissively and moved on to Violet. Violet glanced up as he approached her and her dark lashed blue eyes looked into his.

For a moment the duke felt dazzled—taken aback by unexpected, overwhelming beauty. He had never seen a woman so beautiful in all his life.

Hawkinson considered he was well seasoned in such things and had still felt the force of Violet's beauty like a sudden sharp gale. She could not be unaware of this; surely she must be pretending not to know of her effect on men. Her face was serene and composed. Hawk always suspected the motives of courtesans. He had had ample experience with them.

"Miss Durbin," said the duke, nodding.

"Your grace," said Violet with a curtsey. They exchanged a few pleasantries. Violet felt a thrill of awareness in the duke's company, as if the sun were blazing down on her. Yet her demeanor did not reveal any of it. What did this mean? She had never felt this way before. She felt hot and cold and as if she would suddenly take off soaring above the room.

For the first time in her life Violet felt she had no control over her senses.

Gloria Gay

And it was in that very same instant that the Duke of Hawkinston swore to himself that he would come to an arrangement with Violet before the night ended. The astounding beauty would be his, heart and soul, for as long as he wished it. Of that he was quite certain.

Once Violet quieted down her pulse and heart, she pounded herself back to reality. She had seen a lot in the duke's initial assessing glance and in the few words exchanged and she didn't like it. She now saw him as a man who was used to having his way in everything, especially concerning women. And she saw unmasked disdain in his eyes, both for herself and *especially* for her mother. For herself she didn't care, as it was what she usually got from society men; but Violet was wounded deeply by the disdain she saw in the duke's eyes directed at her mother. The duke had looked down at her mother and then away as if he pointedly wanted to snub her.

Sadie and Violet had been shunned by almost everyone in society, yet society at least stayed away. The Duke of Hawkinston had come to *their* house to show his contempt.

She also saw something in his seemingly cursory glance, the same assessing look she saw in the eyes of many of the society men who came into contact with her in the few social functions she and her mother attended. What she saw in his eyes was the belief that she could easily be made his mistress, that it would take only a little nudge. It was obvious to his grace, as it had been to those other men, that marriage to any of them was beyond her grasp and so the second best thing, a discreet liaison, could be arranged.

When it was polite to do so, Violet escaped the duke's oppressive presence and headed toward the terrace for a breath of fresh air. As she had gone through a back corridor to get to the terrace in a roundabout way she was able to enjoy a much

Known to All

prized solitude in the velvet darkness of the far corner of the terrace, where it turned just for a few short feet.

She glanced up at the moon. The silvery rays illumined a face that hid a soul scarred by sorrow, deep sorrow that was well hidden beneath a pearly complexion and shadowed blue eyes.

She could hear the opening notes of the musicians as they prepared for the recital and knew that she must soon return. For weeks she had looked forward to the musicale and dance. This was the only social event that was held at Lord Kelly's during the whole year. She had little opportunity to attend a dance and it had now been ruined for her by the duke's attendance. She would now go through the evening without the unalloyed enjoyment she had looked forward to before.

She knew she must now be on her guard for any invitation that came from those well-formed lips and the arrogant moss green eyes. She did not fear, though. She was apt at rejection and the duke, after all, was a gentleman. No matter that the duke had made her gasp for air, something she had successfully masked. She would just have to strengthen her defenses.

As a child she had lived in the uneasy comfort that her mother's occupation as "a kept whore" had provided. The tenseness that followed the ending of each of her mother's relationships was ingrained in her personality as a fear of the unknown.

When her mother's last lover, Alex Shackel, discarding Sadie, had forced Violet into becoming his mistress, life had taken a turn toward the horrible and dangerous. She had felt as naked as if she had been living on the streets in Whitechapel.

But life in the halls of society was hardly different as far as the lust of men. So it was in the brocade and silk rooms that she had perfected the art of rejection. For the first time in her life she enjoyed peace in her soul, the peace that had miraculously

come about when fate had placed her in the path of the Earl of Arandale and his betrothed, Cecilia Sentennel. Becoming aware that Alex Shackel had plans to kidnap Miss Sentennel to force her to marriage, Violet had alerted the earl at great risk to herself. The action had started the sequel of events that led to the earl's uncle, Lord Kelly, reuniting with his old mistress, Violet's mother, Sadie. Lord Kelly had realized Sadie was the only woman he had ever truly loved and defying society had made her his wife, had adopted his illegitimate daughter, Violet and had given her his name.

Violet smiled as she returned to the brightly-lit salon. The scent of burning wax and flowers, the din of voices and the music seemed suddenly heady and Violet knew in her heart that gentlemen, at least, would not force her, as Shackel had. And so long as she made it a point never to be alone with any man, she was safe. Experience at this sort of thing had now made her an expert at evading male company. That was an armor of itself and she felt the security of her present life wrap suddenly around her like a warm, soft shawl. She felt her spirits soar and was again grateful to her father, for in acknowledging her, he had given her the armor only a lady possesses—the protection of a name.

She need not *ever* marry. Her father had provided for her even should he die before she did. *She was safe*. Violet prized this safety more than anything in the world. Others might be born to it and so could not know what it was to be without it. She, on the other hand, had known what it was to be without it and held it dear to her heart.

Across the large room, the Duke of Hawkinston gazed at Violet and saw that she was lost in thought. He felt a sharp stirring that began at his loins and rippled throughout him. It was amazing that such a slip of a girl could cause such sudden longing in him. He had a sudden vision of himself stroking that

silken skin, burying his head in that amazing hair, holding her fast to his body...

What was she thinking about, he wondered. She looked so lost in thought she might be in another room, another city—and so unaware of him that it dazzled his senses. No one in his life had been as unaware of him in the same room as this girl was of him. Was the girl ignoring him to awaken his interest? Pursued as he was by hordes of females each season, Hawkinston could be forgiven for mistaking Violet's intentions. He had a small yardstick by which he judged the opposite sex, especially those he considered ladies of the demimonde, for Hawkinston considered Violet to be a former courtesan, however brief that state had been.

The duke was directed to the place of honor, a higher chair than the rest and something of a semi-throne. He wished he could decline the honor and sit closer to Violet, in order to observe her. Yet he could tell Lord Kelly and "Lady" Kelly, as he contemptuously thought of Sadie, had made a special effort to honor him and he could not outright reject the "scaffold" they had prepared for him. And what was worse, this chair was in the front and the duke could hardly turn around to glance at Violet without it being awkward. For the first time in his life he felt the inconvenience of being a duke. Had he been an earl or a viscount he would now be sitting wherever he felt like and his eyes would now be gazing at that lovely girl. No wonder Jared had been bewitched; who wouldn't be?

Well, being a duke also has its advantages, he thought, in that one can do as one pleases, which he intended now to do. The duke stood up and Lord Kelly, about to take his place in the next row to his, rushed over.

"Your grace—"

Gloria Gay

"I'm afraid I must decline your very comfortable chair, Harding," said the duke with a half grin, unusual in him. "I am afraid of heights."

"Certainly your grace...I...perhaps you might sit in this row..."

"Let me just move over to the back part of the room, Harding," said the duke quickly, before Lord Kelly could assign him another seat. Goodness, the man acted like he was an usher in Drury Lane.

"Please don't concern yourself with me at all," he said firmly. "Just stay here with Lady Kelly. And by the way, Harding," added the duke, "I'd much rather you called me Hawk—my friends do."

He intended to see a lot of Violet, and in turn Lord Kelly, so it was best he cut the formalities right away.

"Oh—your—" Lord Kelly's mouth had formed into a frozen "O."

"Hawk, that's the name, Harding," said the duke.

"Yes—ah—Hawk—" said Lord Kelly awkwardly. He had not crossed three words with the duke before in his life and now he was to call him "Hawk," as though they were lifelong chums!

"Continue with what you were doing and never mind me," said the duke and exited Lord Kelly's presence quickly.

Violet, viewing this scene from the back of the room, figured out exactly what was going on. She had not grown up on the harsh streets of London without developing a sixth sense. She now smelled danger as quickly as a wolf in the woods does and just as quickly moved away from the place where she was certain the duke was headed—towards her.

So he was to be the cat tonight, thought the duke as he saw Violet from a distance move away from the back of the room and down to the middle, amidst a group of chattering females.

Known to All

These ladies made room for her among them and for the moment she was as safe from the duke as if he were barred from her by a high fence. But just for the time being, he thought. Anyone knows that the mouse hasn't a chance against a tomcat. She would struggle a bit making the game more interesting for him, but that she would be his in the end there was absolutely no doubt in Hawkinston's mind.

Violet sat rigidly as she listened to the opening notes of the music and stared straight ahead. And no one, judging from her hauntingly lovely face, would have guessed that she was assessing the duke's weapons just as much as he was assessing her vulnerabilities. He must think her easy prey, she thought, for he had moved quickly, without any need for convention. And she knew with a lead weight in her heart that she must fight not only the duke's advances but herself, as well. For the first time since she had said a tearful goodbye to her first love on that long ago day, an awakening of interest in another man had happened for the first time in her barren heart. Her attraction to a man who obviously saw her as prey was perplexing, yet there it was, and she must fight not only the duke, but herself as well, if she was to succeed—and she *must* succeed, of that there was no question.

She knew in her heart that the trust and love her father had placed in her was a treasure she would die before betraying.

She would never become anyone's mistress, neither the duke's, or any other man's.

When her father, Philip Harding Durbin, Lord Kelly, acknowledged her, he had given her a new life. Lord Kelly had fallen from grace by marrying her mother and acknowledging her, Violet, and she had never seen the slightest hint of regret in him in the years that followed. He seemed the happiest of men. He had not only acknowledged her publicly and legally as his daughter and given her a home with him, but he had given her

Gloria Gay

his *name*, as well, the most precious gift of all. She would never betray that trust and that gift by becoming what she most hated becoming in this life—a *kept whore*.

Serenity passed over her face like mist. There was nothing to be worried about, after all. Her determination would be the beacon that lighted her way—steadfast before her until the day she died. The duke could not succeed against her determination. The only way he could succeed was by force, and Violet was certain he would never use force against her. She was a good judge of character.

The endless recital, the longest in the duke's memory, finally came to an end and he saw that the small orchestra was beginning to play the opening dance. He headed straight to where Violet was. At the same time a pale and scrawny young buck—Sir Ashtin Blakely—had timidly approached her.

The duke was not within earshot but he was almost certain that Violet had agreed to a dance before the young man had asked. He could tell by the surprised pleasure in the young man's eyes and the way that Violet hurriedly wove her arm through his. Young Ashtin led Violet to the dance floor and the duke would have been increasingly bemused if he had heard Violet induce the delighted young man into asking her for the following waltz.

CHAPTER 3

The duke viewed these two dances as he stood by himself at the wall, shooing off like flies anyone who so much as approached him with a deterring look. He was becoming increasingly frustrated. Was the girl going to evade him all night?

And that was precisely what Violet intended as she crossed the ballroom in the arm of the same young man and went to where the young man's friends were. She then managed, before the duke was able to cross the ballroom himself, to assign them all dances, successfully filling up all her time for the evening.

Well, she was allowed the opening volley, thought the duke, smiling, and one must admit there was something plucky and enterprising in the way Violet had evaded him. The duke crossed the ballroom after the first few dances and approached Violet head on. Without ceremony he took her hand and as the first notes of the next waltz began he bowed before her, his eyes looking intently into her eyes.

"Ah, Miss Durbin, I must entreat you to honor me with the supper waltz."

"But I have no dances left to give, your grace," said Violet, "the supper dance is taken."

"Ah, but you do," said the duke, "*now*," he added as he took her hand and led her to the dance floor among the other couples.

There was not a man young or old in the room who would have challenged the duke. Certainly *she* could not, thought Violet, giving in for the moment. And certainly young William Cordeville, realizing his dance with Violet had been usurped, saw no reason to make a scene. Instead, melting under Hawkinston's withering gaze, he retreated, with a quick glance at his father, Sir Galloway, who motioned him away with a warning shake of the head.

Gloria Gay

"You can start by telling me, Miss Durbin," asked the duke, "where you have been hiding all these years."

"Hiding in plain sight," said Violet with an amused look. "Perhaps your grace has not noticed but we hardly attend any social functions. This recital is a rare event for us."

Violet felt her heart thud alarmingly under the silk of her ball gown and wondered if she would ever again be completely composed in the duke's company. Each moment near him made her more susceptible to him and she was silent for the rest of the waltz as she let herself enjoy the pure joy that being in the duke's arms now meant. She had never felt thus in anyone's arms, not even Jay's arms, her long ago lost love. When it was over, the duke directed her to the tables where supper was being served.

Violet glanced at the food in her plate, wondering how she would manage to eat any kind of food in the duke's presence and keep her composure. She was glad when the other two couples approached the table and greeted them, placing their plates before them. Lady Sally Waycliffe, accompanied by William Cordeville and smelling of a heavy French perfume, smiled brightly, and suddenly realizing that the duke was at the table became instantly confused and perplexed as to what she should say.

The duke stood up immediately until the ladies were seated. He assessed the occupants of the table in seconds and recalled that the families of these young persons were on the fringes of society through their parents' excesses. Well he knew that Lady Sally's scoundrel of a father had lost his fortune through gambling; his estate, a dilapidated shell beaten by the winds of Cornwall was on the brink of disaster from mismanagement. William Cordeville nodded tersely to the duke. He was the young man who had won the supper waltz with Violet and who had been out-manuevered by the duke. He was still miffed but

hid his feelings, prompted by his father's stern warning. It was a well-known fact of his existence that the duke owned most of his father's gaming vows and could recall them at any time.

Lord Chester and Lady Delvina, the other couple at the table, were each other's last hope, as their families were hanging on from thin threads. But they seemed blissfully unaware that there was not a living to be had between the two of them and too much wrapped up in each other to be affected by the duke's presence, much to the duke's relief. The entire guest list was a patchwork such as the occupants of this table, thought the duke, hanging on to the fringes of society, near outcasts and sons and daughters of gamblers and mushrooms.

The duke was thinking that never in his life had he had to struggle so much to get a couple of words across to a woman he was attracted to and Violet was thinking that never in her life had she been so grateful for the presence of others.

The endless dinner finally over, the duke led Violet to the dance floor. Her arm, lying lightly along his, felt such radiating little sparks that she almost snatched her arm away, so upset she was by the contact. She felt dizzy and warmer than the weather called for and wondered what in heaven's name was happening to her.

Up until now, Violet had kept at a safe distance from society men. Now this man was rushing headlong into the vital space around her that she had guarded so carefully.

How to convince the duke that she would *never* be his mistress, that death was a more welcome thought to her? Somehow, if he attempted to get too close, she would say it straight out. Perhaps that would deter him. Or would it? How well Violet knew that it would only be more of a challenge. What to do, whom to consult?

Violet felt light-headed as she danced in the arms of her enemy, for she now considered the Duke of Hawkinston as

much an enemy as Alex Shackel had been. One could not make a distinction between the opposite characters of the two men, one dead and the other very much alive and gazing into her eyes with a conviction that frightened her. What made him so certain she would give in?

"I shall come right out with what I wish, Miss Durbin," said the duke as they glided to the waltz. "I find that I have become quite smitten with you and I desire your company."

"My company? In what way, your grace," asked Violet. She felt as if a hot iron had been placed across her heart, searing it to shreds.

Again, Violet said to herself. She had thought the duke would be more subtle when he approached her but apparently he did not consider her "gentle" enough for the niceties. And his decision to approach her with this was so quick, too. All in the course of one night!

"Forgive me if I am explicit, ma'am, but since I am not speaking to a virgin, I hope my frankness will be forgiven."

"I hear a duke is forgiven *everything*," answered Violet, feeling the color steal up her neck and on her cheeks, "so of course, your grace, your frankness is forgiven."

"I hope it is not for that reason alone I am forgiven, but that my frankness is interpreted as sincerity."

"I hardly know you, your grace. Please forgive me if I am unable to distinguish frankness from sincerity."

"Of course," said the duke, "but we are drifting from the subject. Perhaps we can resume this chat in the terrace, where there is more privacy."

"Whatever you desire to convey to me, your grace, will have to be done here, among a crowd of people—*or not at all*."

Violet felt a pressure in her chest. Was her lot to always be rejecting propositions such as this one? She had felt a soaring unfamiliar feeling when she first met the duke and had hoped

that in spite of the assessing look he had seen in his eyes as he gazed at her, that she was mistaken and he would not be as the others.

How naïve she had been in her hopes. He was no different.

"I see," said the duke. "Very well, Miss Durbin, as I said before, I am quite attracted to you and desire your company in a more intimate relationship. And To be more explicit, as my mistress."

"Of course," he added quickly, "I don't expect you to answer right away, if you feel you need time to consider it."

"On the contrary, your grace," answered Violet, as she aptly suppressed the tremor in her voice, "I can answer you right now, in fact."

"Before you answer," said the duke, "do consider that the society doors that are shut to you now would be instantly opened to you, as my companion."

"I do consider that, your grace. I consider these doors that you mention to be opened wide for the *mistress* of the Duke of Hawkinston. I have been offered many enticements, your grace, in the hope of luring me to become this or that man's mistress—jewels, clothes, furniture—but this is the first time I have been lured by the opening of doors. And I believe those same doors would be slammed shut once I ceased to be in the favor of the Duke of Hawkinston."

"Don't be too hasty with your answer, madam," said the duke. "Perhaps I have not expressed myself with the eloquence needed on an occasion such as this. I hope my clumsy attempt will not be held against me. I do want to emphasize the enormous advantages you would enjoy: access to a lavish apartment that would be for your very own use, extended visits to my several estates, balls at which you would reign as queen—"

Gloria Gay

"Perhaps I have not expressed *my* response clear enough, your grace," interrupted Violet with a frown, "let me make it clear then, that I have no interest in the position you are offering me."

"Position? I did not say it was a 'position.'"

"Really? Forgive me then for my assumption, for it sounded very much as though I were being interviewed for the 'position' of your mistress."

"You have a way with words, Miss Durbin, that in no way detracts from your personality; on the contrary, it enhances it and proves to be a part of the charm you have over men, but I plead you do not use it in this occasion in particular, for it casts a cynical tone to our discussion. I merely asked you to become my mistress. I do not recall saying it is in any way a 'position' for which you are applying."

The answer is *no*, your grace."

"Miss, Durbin," said the duke anxiously, "take care you are not hasty with your answer, for you may be passing up an opportunity that at the present moment you are unable to gage entirely. Perhaps at home, and having given it careful thought, you will come to realize the immense advantages of it."

"The answer is still no," insisted Violet.

"You can never obtain a better offer, Miss Durbin," said the duke. "Surely you don't think a gentleman will offer you marriage, do you?"

"I do not expect a gentleman will offer me marriage, your grace," said Violet through a tight throat, "and I fail to see why my marriage prospects or my lack of them should be any concern of yours. I have had no contact with you before this night. Who granted you the right, sir, to employ such familiarity in your tone when you address me?"

The duke, who had dealt with coy mistresses before and who considered Violet's words to be only small obstructions

placed there by artifice to get the best offer from him before acceding was undaunted.

"If you are aware you will never get an offer of marriage from a gentleman, what then is your reason for refusing my offer, Miss Durbin?"

"I need a reason to reject the Duke of Hawkingston's offer to become his mistress?"

"Surely there must be one. There is always a reason for every human action."

"Very well, then, your grace, I shall provide you with a reason. The reason is that you expected me to say yes."

"And because you believe I expected you to say yes you are saying no—that doesn't make sense, Miss Durbin."

"It makes sense to me."

"So it's not because of virtue, it is merely because I expected you to say yes."

"I am surprised at your words, your grace; I thought that virtue held no consideration in your proposal to me, nor did your words convey the idea that you consider me to have any."

Violet felt sadness envelop her. This was a conversation he could only have with Violet and others of her "kind." He would never have approached a gently bred girl with such a proposal. The thought gave her a sudden pain in the pit of her stomach. No matter how much she tried to erase the past, pretend it hadn't happened, it was always there, lurking. It lurked in the eyes of every man who leered at her and thought her of easy virtue; no matter that she was irreproachable in manner and deed and had been for the last six years.

Those few weeks as mistress of Alex Shackel would brand her for life. She would always be a strumpet in the eyes of society.

Gloria Gay

There was nothing she could do to escape it. And it hurt that the duke had leered at her in just the same manner as the rest. There had not been any difference.

From the first moment she had set eyes on him she had become very attracted to him. Never had any man given her such a jolt on a first meeting. She had felt an exhilarating liberating feeling which she had never felt before. She doubted that she would ever feel the same about any other man on the first meeting. Even now, she dared not look too closely into his eyes for there was for her an attraction that was not easy to define and one that called out to her in the deepest part of her being.

But he was made of clay just as the rest of them.

"You have surprised me with your answer Miss Durbin," the duke added, "In that you declined my offer merely because you believe I expected you to say yes."

Violet felt a sudden sharp headache coming on. "I cannot believe that the Duke of Hawkingston can be surprised by anything anymore," she said wearily.

The dance now held no joy for her. She suddenly felt as though she had been on this earth hundreds of years and not merely eighteen. She viewed herself suddenly as the duke viewed her. So different from how she saw herself and the feeling brought her an immense sadness.

"I do not comprehend your meaning, Miss Durbin," the duke was now saying, insisting on his same tract. "Is it perhaps you believe I am jaded?"

"Those are your words, your grace, not mine," she said, "From the proposition you made to me it is obvious you are a man of the world, for I hardly believe it to be the first of its kind you make to a woman. That you are surprised by little would be the obvious conclusion. My assertion that I refused merely because you expected me to say yes and was surprised by my

refusal is a logical answer in that my position in society assured you of my answer. In other words, you expect people to act within their station. Well, let me inform you in no uncertain terms, your grace, that I am not to be classified, by you or any other person on earth. My explanation that I said no merely because you expected yes is merely a light covering to the obvious reason: my answer to your proposal will never be in accordance to what you have decided my 'class' would answer, but uniquely mine."

She looked deep into the duke's eyes. He was silently staring at her.

"Good night, your grace."

Violet stopped dancing and turning on her heel left the duke standing by himself in the middle of the room.

The Duke of Hawkinston was oblivious to the curious glances and stares and even of the furious whispering.

His mind was blank to everything except to the fact that he had jumped to the conclusion that Violet would not dream of rejecting his offer.

He had expected her to accept and in the remote chance that she might not, he believed it would be only to increase the size of the apartment where she would be housed, the servants at her disposal and the jewels that she would receive.

He honestly had not dreamed that her answer would be so final and cutting.

He realized now that he had repeatedly held her to words that seemed to have an ulterior meaning. This, too, had upset her and made her want to flee his company. A fine mess he had made of it.

He had been left standing in the middle of the ballroom before the dance had ended—he, a duke! But what was even more surprising was the fact that for the first time in his life he thought that Violet's treatment of him had been well deserved.

He should not have burst out with his offer right there at the ball, without any consideration at all for her feelings and her surroundings. He had been an insensitive prig and she was right in her reaction. She was certainly not to be treated as if she were a common courtesan.

After all, she had been recognized as his daughter by Lord Kelly and been given his name. She must be proud of such an accomplishment and here he had bungled in with his offer, without consideration that although Miss Durbin may be on the fringes of society, she nevertheless *was* in society.

He directed his steps to his host and after thanking Lord Kelly for the soiree, mentioned that he would be honored if Lord Kelly and his family accepted an invitation from him that would soon be forthcoming. As he seemed to expect Lord Kelly's answer in that same moment, Lord Kelly readily agreed, although he had no idea to what kind of invitation he was agreeing, for the duke had not specified.

"Very swell, Harding, I shall send you the invitation shortly."

After saying this, the duke offered his apology for leaving the dance so abruptly, informing Lord Kelly that a previous engagement precluded him from staying any longer.

He was anxious to start all over with Violet and had little interest in a ball where he knew Violet would avoid him for the rest of the evening. Better to regroup at home and plan his next move.

He would, he realized, have to start all over with Violet, as he had bungled his first move. The best kind of gathering would be at the castle, where at a house party he would have her company for five or six days. In that time he would convince her in a more subtle manner than he had done until now. His hospitality would dazzle her, as he knew how to give a party,

Known to All

and it would be obvious to everyone including herself, that all the preparations were in her honor.

Yes. That was the best plan. And in so saying the duke closed her eyes and was soon fast asleep, for he had found the way to a solution to his problem.

CHAPTER 4

"Violet—"

Lady Kelly had approached her daughter in the hallway and stopped. She sighed and beamed at the same time. She noticed that Violet was wearing her riding habit, a bottle green well-fitted gown with rust velvet ruching. Her glorious hair was partly hidden by a small chip bonnet with a matching velvet ribbon that was most becoming.

Sadie had never become used to Violet's beauty. A radiant splendor that emanated from her always startled her anew, as it had done on this moment.

"You're going out?" she asked her.

"Yes, Mama. Jed is waiting for me, don't worry," she assured her. Jed was the footman that accompanied Violet everywhere. "Rob and Sam are going with us, too, as I'm taking the carriage to the stables and then on to Green Park—"

"But Violet," interrupted her mother, "it's the day after the ball, flowers have arrived since eight; what am I going to tell the young men who come calling? They'll start arriving in less than an hour." She cast a worried look at the clock on the mantle.

"Tell them I'm out—but not where I went, Mama, promise me that. Aunt Bea will help you."

Lady Beaton, or Lady Bea, as everyone called her, Lord Kelly's sister, was one of the few companions Sadie and Violet had. Lady Bea was six years older than her brother and a kindly soul. She was tall and stooped.

Her bad posture dated to her youth. For this and other reasons there had been only one suitor she liked of the very few that had proposed and then that one had died a few days after the wedding, leaving her a title and a dilapidated house in

Known to All

Derbyshire. This had been the only part of Lord Beaton's inheritance that had not been entailed. Lord Kelly managed it for her through an agent and she received a small income from it, enough for her clothes and pin money. She had never thought of marrying again and was now happy to be living with her brother.

She was glad to give over the management of Lord Kelly's household, both the townhouse in London and Kelly's Forester Hall in Surrey to Sadie when Sadie and Lord Kelly had married.

Unlike most of society, Lady Bea neither judged nor shunned Sadie and Violet. On the contrary, she had welcomed them with open arms—her thin long arms. But then as most in the society knew, Lady Bea had always been eccentric. She wore strange bonnets and clothes, so out of style as to be of another era entirely. She looked all the time as though she had dressed for a masquerade, in her Elizabethan gowns and quaint velvet patches, of which she was extremely fond—and pale powder, lots of pale powder. Sadie believed Aunt Bea bought the powder by the pound. On the few occasions they had attended a social event, she left the house in her regalia floating about in a cloud of shimmering dust, like a fairy godmother. But she was a kind soul and both Sadie and Violet had quickly become very fond of her.

Violet left soon thereafter. She chatted comfortably with Jed as he rode alongside her carriage on his horse. Ever since Lady Arandale's kidnapping which Violet had been successful in thwarting, Violet never left the house except accompanied by Jed and Rob. Even when Rob drove her in the carriage two or three blocks away she had Jed with her.

"I'm your shadow, Miss Violet," Jed now said with a laugh.

"My trusty guardian angel, Jed," Violet answered.

"There'll be a lot of young men coming to call, Miss Violet," said Jed companionably, as he rode alongside. "Just like last week. Mary told me there were ten bouquets for you."

"Yes, my hand hurt from writing all those thank you notes." Violet sighed, "And I will have to do the same this time, for I cannot be there to thank the young men in person, as I was not able to attend last week, either."

"At the very least you won't be starving for your breakfast, Miss Violet, Cook filled the hamper to the brim."

"Did you tell her to put enough food for all three of you, Jed?"

"Yes, Miss Violet, she put more than enough for all. How long do you think you'll be staying at the park?"

"All morning, I think." She then mounted her horse and she and Jed began at a walk. "Just see, Jed, not a soul to be seen and the mist makes everything seem otherworldly."

Then Violet and Jed reined in their horses abruptly, almost in unison, and glancing quickly at each other stared ahead at a rider rapidly gaining on them.

Violet's heart sank as she realized that the man was now cutting through the mist and riding directly toward her. He was now near enough that his posture and carriage were distinct.

As he approached, Violet's pulse quickened for she now saw that the rider was the duke and that he seemed to know exactly whom he was approaching. He did not even feign surprise but said it outright.

"Miss Durbin, a fine day for a ride you've chosen. I commend you for your taste. Fortunately, I was due to exercise poor Galleon who suffers badly from little exercise in town and when I heard that you favor this spot for morning rides I could not but invite myself."

"I like to ride alone, your grace," said Violet coldly. Didn't the man take no for an answer? No one could make her over

into a harlot if she chose not to, not even the Prince could. Besides, Violet disliked being put into a position where she had to wrestle with her heart, for more and more she felt drawn to the duke—disturbingly so. How could she be so attracted to a man who thought so little of her, who believed she could be coaxed into becoming his mistress by biding his time? She was certain that was the duke's thinking, that it was just a matter of time. He probably thought that she was being coy just to gain more material benefits before succumbing.

"I am asking most humbly to be allowed your company, Miss Durbin," entreated the duke. "Besides," he added, "I have something of importance to convey to you."

"Another *delicate offer*?"

The duke laughed, "A well deserved riposte, Miss Durbin; I assure you."

"Such assurances from you, your grace, must be accepted with a bit of wariness."

"It is of that I must speak to you, Miss Durbin, among other things, but only to beg for your forgiveness. I apologize most wholeheartedly for my bumbling idiocy of last night."

"Apology accepted," said Violet, impatient at standing around on her horse, who was now fidgeting.

But please disclose your news," said Violet. "I assure you, I am most intrigued."

"Could we not enjoy a little privacy in this fine day, Miss Durbin," asked the duke with a slight glance at Jed.

"Jed, ride a few feet behind, if you please, his grace has something to discuss with me."

"Yes, Miss Violet," said Jed, good-naturedly.

"Now, sir, what is it that needs discussion so early in the morning?" Violet did not look at Hawk as she asked him this. She was beginning to realize that the less she looked into his

moss green eyes the better it was for her; he unsettled her so that she could not think straight.

"Well," said the duke, a bit disconcerted, "It does not necessarily need discussion. What I wanted to ask you, Miss Durbin, is if you and your family would honor me with your presence for a few days next month, at my county seat..."

"Your county seat? Surely not—"

"Cynweir Castle."

"Cynweir Castle," said Violet slowly, "I am duly impressed, your grace. Cynweir Castle is legendary. Do you actually hold soirees there?"

"We most certainly hold all manner of social gatherings there, Miss Durbin. Those old castle stones can withstand a few more centuries of wear and tear and a few more scandals, you can be certain."

"It has withstood the test of time, and numerous battles," said Violet. The duke's invitation had taken her by surprise. To be invited as houseguests to a place that figured in the history books was an honor in itself, apart from the fact that it would be extremely interesting to view both the castle and the grounds which were said to be without match. He was certainly trying to make up for his behavior of last night. But Violet was still not convinced that the invitation was in the up and up.

"And who is to be the hostess, my lord?" she asked. Should the answer be that there would be no hostess, or that she had been assigned that honor, Violet would know for certain that the event would be for the demimonde and would decline the invitation firmly. But the duke's answer took her by complete surprise.

"My sister, the Marchioness of Deckworth will be the hostess, Miss Durbin. She is my closest relative."

"Well," said Violet, "That's even more impressive than that the soiree will be held at the castle, sir."

"Well, Miss Durbin? Shall we be honored then with your and your family's attendance?"

"Thank you, your grace. It is *we* who are honored," said Violet. "I am certain papa will be delighted at the invitation, as will my mother." Violet was happy for her father and mother more than she was for herself. She knew that this would go a long way to eroding the wall that had been built between society and her father. For herself, she was not so trusting that she did not see through the duke's intentions.

The duke must feel the castle would be a strong persuasion into convincing her to accede to his proposition. Or perhaps he was convinced it would be a good place in which for a few days he would use all his powers of persuasion in a setting that allowed them to be in each other's company on many occasions. And it would certainly be an experience to visit and live for a few days within the walls of a castle of which Violet had often heard, as a child.

"I am glad, Miss Durbin. I will have the invitation sent to you on the morrow."

"Thank you, your grace," said Violet, "And now—"

"Could I not be allowed to ride for a while with you, Miss Durbin?" interrupted the duke. "I plead most humbly to be allowed your company for just a few short minutes. It is much too beautiful a morning to be wasted in sad solitude when we could ride together. You cannot be so callous as to send me off to ride by myself into the mist, from where I came."

"Well, I—"

"The few minutes that would have taken you to receive me and my bouquet this morning, Miss Durbin," pleaded the duke. His eyes had that special spark that appeared on such rare occasions, when his smile stole to his lips, as it was doing so now.

"But you did not take a bouquet to my house, did you, sir?"

Gloria Gay

"I sent you three dozen white roses there by messenger, Miss Durbin, having learned of the fact that you would not be there to receive flowers from your admirers but would be here in the park, instead."

"You have trusty spies, I can tell," Violet said with a laugh. "Very well, a few minutes, sir. Let us proceed then."

"I cannot promise to stay away *every* time, now that I have found your secret morning hiding place," said the duke, taking the moment to establish the ground for future meetings.

Hawk was thinking that he seldom made a bumbling misstep and he had done so with Violet. He should not have shown his colors so quickly. Because she was the daughter of Sadie, a strumpet whom he despised for having trapped Lord Kelly in her spider's web, he had assumed the daughter was of equal character. What a mistake!

Was he so sure of his consequence in her eyes that he had actually thought she would jump at his offer? Now he must back track and hope Violet would forget this awful beginning. He never for a moment doubted that Violet would eventually become his mistress, just not in the small amount of time he had wagered it would take.

In fact, the invitation to Cynweir Castle had come out of desperation. He had invented the house party out of whole cloth to tempt Violet. Few would not be tempted. In fact, he could not think of one person in all of London who would not. He was aware that this invitation would elevate her, her mother and Lord Kelly and that should give one pause. It would certainly give his shrew of a sister pause.

The chore ahead, to convince Arabella to be the hostess at this extended party was something he didn't look forward to. He could just imagine a high stickler like his sister and an even higher stickler that was his brother-in-law, Marquess

Known to All

Deckworth, to host a party for a couple of demimonde ladies and the bumbling idiot who had elevated them.

Well, *he, the Duke of Hawkinson, no less*, was helping to elevate them further, he now thought with chagrin. But there was not another choice. His hunger for Violet grew by the minute and if it took the monumental task of forcing his sister to be hostess at the party, he would undertake it gladly, so long as it advanced his pursuit of Violet.

* * *

Had Hawkinson known that Violet's interest in Cynweir Castle other than its historical value was mostly for her father's and her mother's sake, it would have given him pause. And had the duke been able to see into Violet's mind and her steely resolve, his conviction that Violet would eventually be his mistress would have been considerably shaken.

Violet, on the other hand, regarded the duke with growing interest. She could not deny that she was drawn to him and to his rare smile. He smiled seldom and only to her. This in itself was extremely flattering to a girl who had known great hardship, danger and humiliation in her life.

"I have learned of your heroic actions of six years ago," said the duke, as they walked their horses over the misty green, "And was impressed by your courage, Miss Durbin. I don't believe there are many young ladies who would have taken the chances you took to save another person from extreme harm."

"I'm glad that I was able to be of assistance to Lady Arandale, who at the time was Miss Cecilia Sentennel," responded Violet, "But I can't say it took any great courage on my part. I don't believe I thought much of what I was doing, only that it needed to be done."

"That is what courage and resolve are made of, Miss Durbin."

Gloria Gay

"I always imagine courage to be more like the courage displayed by our officers and soldiers in their direct combat in the battles against Napoleon in recent years, sir. I believe they saved a whole nation from being conquered and enslaved."

"Courage is not counted in numbers alone, Miss Durbin. You saved one person, while they saved a whole nation."

"Thank you, sir," said Violet and asked, in an effort to divert attention from her, "And did you participate in the battles?"

"I was for three years in the Peninsula, Miss Durbin, under Wellington. Though the battles were bloody and the conditions often appalling, I do not regret one minute of it."

Violet Durbin lives a quiet life on the fringes of society until she crosses paths with the Duke of Hawkinson, when the duke tries to prevent his nephew from seeing her and in the process falls in love with her.

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