

*A Lesson in
Friendship*

Jennifer Connors

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To my three best friends, Debbie, Elise and Maureen. Although we're all married, have kids and I moved across the country, you are still the ones who know me best.



Chapter 1

She knew the moment she woke up. It was as if she'd just blinked and her whole landscape changed. No longer was she staring at a western sunset, sitting on the porch of her home in Wyoming. Now she was lying in a feather bed, under a giant, ornate canopy, staring at a ceiling decorated with plaster filigree.

Scanning the room slowly, Ginny took it in. The giant furniture, made of dark wood and expertly carved. The writing desk, set by the window, with an abundance of quills and foolscap. The vanity with oval mirror, covered in an assortment of jars and bottles and a white, rose covered jewelry box. It was all there, sometime again in the 19th century of England, presumably.

What wasn't there was her husband. Husband number three now, actually. No longer would she play the part of Ginny Miller, wife to Colby and mother to her brothers-in-law. Now she would be someone else, some other time, some other place. The weight of her situation came crashing down on her, even before she had the memories of her new persona to know what kind of silly games she would have to play this time.

Refusing to rise from her bed, Ginny kept herself tucked deeply under her covers. Although warm and physically comfortable, her mind rebelled against yet another new part to play. Her life in Wyoming had been good. Not perfect, but good. Colby was a wonderful man, after he'd gotten over his bitterness. He treated her well and his skills as a lover were magnificent. Although she had few of her modern life comforts, she had someone she knew she could easily spend the rest of her life with. So why, she wondered, did she have to go through this again?

A small knock on her door brought her gaze in that direction. Ginny watched as a small maid entered her room and opened her curtains. It was clearly late morning, but Ginny had no energy to move from her bed. Instead, she continued to watch the maid as she pulled items

from the armoire, preparing her mistress for whatever needed to be done for the day.

Finally, the maid spoke. "I will return shortly with hot water, my lady. Would you care for some chocolate this morning?"

Ginny heard the words, but barely registered the meaning. Chocolate? For breakfast? In lieu of answering, Ginny shook her head, not even summoning the energy to respond.

"Are you unwell, my lady? Shall I call for the physician?"

At the words, Ginny felt the tears entering her eyes, felt her lower lip begin to quiver. Turning away quickly, she buried her face in the pillow and started to cry. This was not where she wanted to be. This was not who she wanted to be. If she couldn't have Colby, then why the hell couldn't she just be home again, in her small house, watching TV and eating a big bowl of ice cream.

Ginny had no idea where the maid went and she cared even less. What she needed right now was solitude. As the tears continued to fall, all Ginny felt was exhaustion. Curling herself into a tight ball, she allowed her body to relax against the bed. If she couldn't be happy, she would lose herself to the oblivion of sleep. At least she wouldn't have to cry over the loss of yet another husband.

When she finally woke, Ginny heard soft voices. They were murmuring somewhere inside the room, not that Ginny bothered to open her eyes to find out. Instead of taking in their words, she merely listened to the cadence of their voices. The male voice was soft and soothing, but the female voice was loud and grating. Finally unable to take anymore, Ginny sat up and stared at the two occupants of the room.

Sometime during her slumber, Ginny must have received the

memories of her new body, because she immediately recognized the woman. Her mother, a Lady Felicia Dunworthy, was speaking to an older gentleman. By the look of him, Ginny surmised he was a doctor, sent to figure out why a young woman would stay abed and cry all day.

Seeing that his patient had awakened, the man approached the bed and looked down at Ginny. In return, Ginny stared back, not willing to speak. Again, his voice was comforting, like an old pair of slippers.

"How are you, my lady?" he asked, reaching over to feel her forehead.

Not wanting to be rude, but not in any mood to be overly accommodating either, Ginny responded, "Fine."

"You have your family quite worried. Your mother cannot imagine why you would be abed so long. Your maid told her that you were crying when she asked you a question about breaking your fast."

Ginny's attention went between the man at her bed and her mother across the room. The woman was wringing her hands in worry. Ginny saw both of them, but couldn't muster any emotion for them. All her pain was internal, none wasted on anyone else.

"Sorry," was all she replied.

The doctor turned to look at her mother, then turned back to Ginny. Smiling, he asked, "Has anything untoward happened to you, my lady?"

Ginny leaned back against the pillows and said, "No."

"Do you know who you are?" the doctor asked, clearly perplexed by her behavior.

Ginny scrunched her eyebrows together, as if in great thought. Of course she knew who she was, but the doctor didn't want to hear about Ginny, physician's assistant and 21st century woman of the

world. He wanted to know about the part she was playing this time around.

Just wanting the pair to leave her be, Ginny answered his question. "I am Lady Sarah Dunworthy. Daughter of Lord and Lady Weston."

Smiling in return, the doctor stated, "Very good, Lady Sarah. Now, do you remember where you were last evening?" The doctor used a tone of voice reminiscent of soothing crazy people. It almost made Ginny smile.

"A ball held by Lord Munroe."

Ginny saw that her mother bounced up and down. She seemed pleased by her daughter giving the correct answer. The doctor, not to be outdone, also beamed at her response.

Turning serious, the doctor asked his next question. "Did anything happen to you last night, my lady? Did anyone... accost you?" The last two words were spoken in a strained tone, as if he didn't really want to know the answer to the question.

Ginny thought about the ball. Nothing untoward happened to her. She remembered being giddy with the thought of being there, but as far as Ginny was concerned, it was a total bore.

"No. Nothing happened." What had started as amusing was now becoming tedious. Why couldn't they just leave her alone? All she wanted to do was curl back up and go back to sleep. They had no idea what her life had been like over the past few lives and she certainly wasn't about to tell them. Mental health was a science not yet explored to her satisfaction and the idea of spending a few months in Bedlam had little appeal.

"Then why do you stay abed, my lady?"

Good question, Ginny thought. She had to come up with something or the pair would stand there all day and ask inane questions. Rolling her

eyes toward the ceiling, Ginny answered. "Because I'm tired." Although made as statement, her tone made it sound more like a question.

"Are you feeling unwell?"

Ginny didn't even try to hide the heavy sigh. "I'm just tired. I just want to be left alone for a little while. Is that a crime?"

The doctor and her mother exchanged glances. The next question came from her mother.

"But what of the musicale this evening, my dearest? You would not want to miss that, would you?"

A musicale? Ginny closed her eyes and considered her response. Would she want to miss it? Hell, yes. Could she get out of it and would they allow her to sleep past her misery? Probably not. She remembered her time in Regency England, with her second husband Colin. These activities were always late in the evening, often going until dawn. Maybe that could be her bargaining chip.

"Perhaps I can sleep some more, then I'll get up and go to the musicale. It's not until much later, right?" Ginny shot her eyebrows up with her question.

Sputtering, her mother responded, "Well... yes, I suppose. We need not leave here until after eight this evening."

"Great. Why don't you two leave me alone until later. I'll just sleep some more." With that, Ginny rolled over, away from her annoying guests. As she settled down once again, she heard the two murmuring to each other. It was the last thing she remembered until her maid came in to stir her once again.

Her maid, MaryAnn, came in long before Ginny felt she had to be up. Without speaking a word, the little maid had her dressed and coiffed. MaryAnn explained that she was to have tea with her mother and sister before they attended the musicale, then dinner would be served after the entertainment.

Ginny felt the weight of her despair as she entered the drawing room. Her mother and sister were already seated, waiting for her before serving the tea. Again silent, Ginny went and sat in a chair furthest away from her family.

No, not my family, she thought morosely. These people are just pawns in some strange life experience I'm being forced to have.

Her sister, Charlotte, handed her a cup of tea, worry etched on her pretty face. Seeing the concern, Ginny felt even worse. It wasn't real, but Ginny had to admit that the experience felt real. Dropping her gaze to her lap, Ginny lamented having something new to feel bad about.

At that moment, a footman entered the parlor and requested Lady Weston's presence. As the older woman left the room, Ginny saw her give a look to her sister. The look said to find out what ever she could and report back.

Charlotte retrieved her own cup and sat near Ginny. With a placid smile on her face, she asked, "Is your tea to your liking, Sarah?"

With a great deal of effort, Ginny lifted her face and took a sip of the tea. It was too sweet, but it didn't matter. "It's fine. Thank you, Charlotte."

With a sigh, Charlotte leaned toward Ginny and asked in an earnest whisper, "Whatever is bothering you, dearest? You have mother worried sick. This is not like you at all. You were so excited about coming to London for the season."

Ginny thought about the girl in front of her. Her sister, half-sister

actually, was a few years older and already a widow. Charlotte's father, a Mr. Charles Bennington, was married to her mother for only a short time before being killed in a carriage accident. Her mother, after the proper period of mourning, married Sarah's father, Lord Weston and promptly gave birth to his heir, William Dunworthy. Sarah came along a few years later. Being both the last child and a girl, Sarah was doted on to the point of absurdity. Her personality was frivolous and gay. It made Ginny want to gag.

Charlotte, however, was proper and mature. Her stepfather never paid her any attention and her mother had the duties of being a countess to contend with so that Charlotte was often left to her own devices. She would assist with the caring of her half siblings and loved to read. Where Sarah was flirtatious and fun, Charlotte was reserved and shy. Although opposites, they'd always had a good relationship.

When Charlotte married a local boy near Lord Weston's country home, no one was surprised that he was the third son of a squire, who was the local vicar. His personality suited hers and they lived happily for a couple of years before he came down with consumption. In less than six months he was dead and Charlotte was back living with her mother and sister.

Thinking to all the memories she now possessed of Sarah Dunworthy, she wondered how Charlotte put up with her. Sarah was selfish and spoiled, but Charlotte always had some unlimited source of patience and understanding. Ginny thought that she needed to confide something to the girl, if only for all the kindness she'd paid to her persona over the years.

"Truly, Charlotte, nothing is wrong. I believe it may just be that London is more overwhelming than I realized." What else could she say? Ginny thought about using her period as an excuse, but didn't know how that would fly.

Releasing a breath, Charlotte smiled in return. "I remember when I had my first season. There are so many people and the activities seem endless, but you will survive it. You are a strong girl and you have a lot

to offer a nice gentleman.”

Ginny couldn't help but smile in return. Charlotte was the kind of decent person that made jumping from life to life tolerable. Although she still ached inside from losing Colby, she knew that as long as she had Charlotte as a friend, she just might be able to make it through another life. But one thing was for sure, she had no intention of falling in love. And if she had anything to say about it, she wouldn't be getting married either. Three husbands was enough for her.

Glancing at her conspiratorially, Charlotte said, “Although Lady Hammersmith is having a rather small affair this evening, I have heard that many eligible men will be in attendance. Her own daughter, Penelope, is in search of a husband, so Lady Hammersmith is quite desperate to make a match for her.”

“What if I don't want to get married?” Ginny stated before she could check herself.

Charlotte's eyes widened in surprise. “Whatever do you mean, dearest? Not get married? That is all you have spoken of since you turned sixteen. What has happened to change your mind so abruptly?”

Crap, crap, crap! How could she be so careless? She knew that Sarah's whole existence relied on her not only getting married, but marrying fairly well. Although she had a sizable dowry, her dreams always involved a high ranking titled gentleman, who was so wealthy that Sarah would never have to worry about anything. Not that she worried now, since she had always been taken care of and never had to lift a finger for anything.

Placing her tea on the side table, Ginny turned to Charlotte, trying to formulate a logical response. *Oh, hell,* she thought. *Who cares?*

“I've been thinking lately...,” she responded lamely. “Do we really need to get married to be fulfilled? Maybe it's time we made a life for ourselves, rather than depend on a man to do it for us.”

Judging by Charlotte's face, Ginny knew she'd made the wrong move. Sarah's dear, sweet sister, who seemed to have an endless reserve of patience, looked about to pop. The rise of color to her cheeks and her gasping breaths were an indication of the confusion and worry she had to be feeling. Before her sister could answer, Ginny quickly covered her tracks.

Smiling and giggling, Ginny said, "Oh, silly, I am just kidding. But the look on your face was worth my jest. I swear I thought you were to pass dead away right in front of me."

Releasing a breath that she didn't know she was holding, Charlotte gave a relieved smile. "Oh, Sarah, that was an awful joke to play on me. If mother thought for one moment that you were siding with those types of women, she would take to her bed and never return to polite society."

Ginny felt the pang in her gut that reminded her of her place in British society. She was an ornament, only good for wedding and producing an heir. She was to have no opinions, other than those concerning her wardrobe and appearance. Could she really deal with this again? It seemed as though she could, mostly because she didn't have a bloody choice.

"Yes, dear Charlotte, I am only jesting with you. Please forgive me, but you and mother have such dire looks on your faces. Truly, I am fine, if only a bit overwhelmed." Each word nearly caught in Ginny's throat. She would play her role in this melodrama, but avoid falling in love. She certainly didn't want to care about anyone in this time period and she had no need for a new family.

Their mother returned to the room to see both her daughters smiling. Lady Weston would never notice that neither smile was genuine, nor would she care. To her, appearances were everything. If her beautiful daughters looked serene and happy, that was all that mattered.

"I see that you are back to your cheerful self, Sarah dear. I hope you are ready to meet some fine gentlemen this evening." Ginny noticed

that her mother's smile was painted on as well.

“Yes, mother. I had felt a bit out of sorts, but I assure you, that is all in the past. I look forward to our outing this evening.” Ginny never considered herself an actress before, but she was putting on the performance of a lifetime.

Charlotte chimed in. “Yes, mother, Sarah was only playing a bit of a joke on me. Still the scamp I remember from her youth.” The last part was delivered with a wink.

Ginny smiled, as she knew she was supposed to do. Every part of her rebelled the idea of living another life. Every thought was of what she'd lost. Although she kept telling herself that this was all make believe, she couldn't bring herself to believe it. Colby was gone, never to be resurrected, but her heart ached with his loss. Her only consolation was that in the world of romance novels, she knew he was living his happily ever after. Not that her consciousness got to enjoy it as well.

Chapter 2

After a brief carriage ride, they arrived at the home of Lord and Lady Hammersmith. Their townhome was enormous, with three floors full of gleaming windows. The entryway had shiny marble floors, with a mosaic inlay showing a coat of arms. A footman retrieved their coats and directed them to the second floor, where a large parlor contained seating for the musicale.

A footman approached as they entered the room to offer each lady a glass of champagne. Ginny, who was already breaking out in hives over the evening ahead, took a glass and swallowed a large gulp. Neither her sister nor mother saw her, which suited Ginny just fine. She was in no mood for a lecture on decorum.

By the time they'd made their way to the hostess to give their regards, Ginny had finished her first glass and pilfered a second glass from another passing footman. If there was one thing she could admit, it was that wealth did have its privileges.

"Good evening, Lady Hammersmith. Thank you so much for inviting us to your evening's entertainment." As the champagne began to work its magic, Ginny had to refrain from snorting over her mother's statement. All she'd listened to on the carriage ride over was how much she detested listening to second rate musicians butcher Mozart.

"The pleasure is mine, Lady Weston. It is good to see you too, Mrs. Stevens. Oh, and Lady Sarah, you look very pretty this evening."

Charlotte murmured an acknowledgment and Ginny smiled. "Thank you, Lady Hammersmith. And where is your beautiful daughter? Will she be exhibiting for us this evening?" Ginny's memories of Penelope were snobby and unkind. The girl, who wore glasses most of the time, was painfully shy.

"Oh, no. Lady Penelope is more interested in listening to the musician's play. I was not sure if I would be able to acquire him, but at

the last moment Mr. Wilhelm Richter has agreed to come and play the piano forte for us. His talent is... sublime."

Charlotte's eyes lit up with excitement. "Wilhelm Richter? Truly? I have heard he is magnificent."

Lady Hammersmith, realizing her coup, went on about the talents of Mr. Richter. Ginny, who enjoyed well played music, still didn't care that "the" Wilhelm Richter was going to be playing, no matter how magical his fingers were against the keys of the piano forte. To fortify her for the rest of the night, Ginny helped herself to another glass of champagne.

By the time they were seated for the concert, Ginny was feeling no pain. She even thought she would be able to stomach giggling at some gentlemen later, befitting Sarah's demeanor. The first performers were a pair of opera singers. When the female singer hit a few high notes, Ginny cringed and hoped her glass didn't crack.

When Wilhelm Richter came on next, Ginny felt Charlotte sit a little straighter in her chair. Her eyes alighted as the man began his set. Ginny had to admit that he was truly talented. Even through her champagne buzz, she could recognize his skill and feel the emotional response he elicited from her. As moved as Ginny was, Charlotte had tears in her eyes when his performance was over.

"Have you ever heard anything so beautiful, Sarah?" Charlotte asked as the crowd began to stand up and mingle.

"No. Mr. Richter has an amazing talent," Ginny replied, truthfully.

Looking to her sister, Charlotte was amazed. As much as she loved Sarah, her sister was often self-centered and unwilling to see the beauty in ordinary things. "I should love to meet the man, if only to express my gratitude for his coming tonight."

Ginny's eyes looked around, then set on her sister's face. "Then why don't we?" she asked.

Looking appalled, Charlotte face flushed. "We have no proper introduction, Sarah. It would be unseemly," she whispered as Ginny pulled her toward the crowd surrounding the virtuoso.

"Charlotte, sometimes you have to take the bull by the horns." Ginny knew that the champagne was talking now and it would end up getting her in trouble. Although she realized it, she didn't give a damn.

When her sister dug in her heels and refused to continue, Ginny sighed her exasperation. Spotting Lady Hammersmith, she saw her solution. "Lady Hammersmith, could you introduce Charlotte and I to Mr. Richter? His music so moved us both."

"Oh, of course. Mrs. Stevens, I had no idea you were so enamored with music. I, myself, have always given great patronage to the arts."

Ginny followed the two women as their hostess babbled on about her greatness for musicians everywhere. Taking yet another glass of champagne, realizing that her regret would come the following morning, Ginny still drank it down. Her whole life seemed like a regret, so what was one more thing.

Waiting their turn, Lady Hammersmith finally bullied her way to the front of the group surrounding the young pianist.

"Mr. Richter, may I present Mrs. Stevens and Lady Sarah. Both were so moved by your performance that they begged an introduction."

Ginny scrunched her eyes. That was laying it on a bit thick, she thought as the young man bowed to both ladies. Performing her curtsy, Ginny smiled as Charlotte took over the conversation.

"I was so moved by your performance, Mr. Richter. Never before have I heard Mozart played with such feeling."

Speaking in a slight German accent, Richter replied, "Thank you, Mrs. Stevens. I am so honored to be able to play in the finest homes of

London.”

Ginny tuned out the conversation and instead surveyed the room. She spotted Lady Hammersmith's daughter, practically hiding behind a potted plant. Excusing herself from her sister, Ginny made her way over to the young woman.

Slightly drunk, but still capable of sounding sober, Ginny said, “Good evening, Lady Penelope. Why would you be hiding at your own party?”

Penelope's eyes widened. Ginny began to wonder if she sounded drunker than she thought. Then the mousy young woman, with dull, brown hair and non-descriptive brown eyes, asked shyly, “Lady Sarah, is there something you needed?”

Taken back for a moment, Ginny realized that Sarah had never been particularly kind to the girl. They'd met on a few occasions, even before the season began, and Sarah had always acted her superior, snotty self. Well, it was Penelope's lucky day, she decided, since that personality would forever be altered.

“Yes. I need to understand why this is fun,” Ginny remarked, smiling to show she was joking.

Penelope smiled in return. “It makes the aristocracy feel intelligent and important.”

“Yes, there seems to be a real superior air tonight, don't you think?”

“Since most of my parent's guests couldn't begin to understand the finer points of Mozart, I would doubt that.”

Laughing out loud and drawing attention to the pair, Ginny grabbed Penelope's arm and dragged her out of her hiding place. Taking a turn about the room, which had been emptied of most of the chairs, she asked, “Why should you hide? There are many eligible men here tonight, or so my mother has told me. Don't you want to make

anyone's acquaintance?"

Shrinking before her eyes, Penelope shuddered. "I have not the skills to make conversation with strangers. It has never come easy for me."

Pulling her new friend aside, looking her in eyes, Ginny asked, "How much champagne have you had tonight?"

"None. My mother would not approve."

Smiling wickedly, Ginny said, "Well, then, it's time you did, because believe me when I say that alcohol makes everyone interesting."

Ginny made Penelope pound two glasses and then handed her a third to sip. Not accustomed to the effects, it didn't take long before Penelope was having a much better time at her own party. Although she still refused to make conversation, she did follow Ginny around as she waxed drunkenly to anyone who was willing to listen.

After an hour, the two girls had made several rounds of the room. Penelope had never felt so loose and easy going before. One thing perplexed her though. Why was Lady Sarah being so nice to her all of a sudden? The few times they'd met, she'd ignored Penelope, even on the one occasion she'd tried to speak to the beautiful girl. Bolstered by the champagne, Penelope decided to ask.

"Why do you wish to be my friend, Lady Sarah? We have hardly spoken two words together before tonight."

Ginny turned her head and regarded Penelope for a moment. "I suppose I realized that I was being a first class snob and needed to come off my high horse."

Sputtering, Penelope stated, "No... I never thought... you have been very..."

Ginny laughed. "No, I haven't been particularly nice or kind. I'm self-absorbed and annoying. Most of the girls I associate with are the same way. You seem like you'd be a genuine friend to me."

Looking down at her hands, Penelope was humbled. She'd always thought she'd be a good friend, but had never been given the chance to try. "I should like to have you as a friend, Lady Sarah."

"Good. Let's start by dropping the 'lady' part. Now, my sister said there was to be many eligible men here tonight, but all the men I see are old and infirm."

"The eligible men usually show up in time for dinner to be served."

Arching an eyebrow, Ginny smiled. Penelope couldn't help but laugh in response. Just as the pair were to head downstairs toward the dining room, Charlotte walked up to join them.

"Mr. Richter is a fascinating gentleman. He has played in almost every royal court in Europe. Can you imagine?" Charlotte's cheeks were flushed and she had a dazed look in her eyes.

"Is that right? Will he be joining us for dinner?" Ginny asked.

Charlotte's blush intensified. "He has been invited to dine this evening, but I am sure he has many admirers who would request his company."

Ginny looked over at the man in question, standing by himself, sipping a glass of champagne. "He doesn't look occupied at the moment. Let's go nab him."

Charlotte grabbed Ginny's arm and gave her a look. "How much have you had to drink tonight, Sarah?" The tone was condescending and Ginny was in no mood for condescending.

Looking back at her sister, pulling from what she knew, Ginny stated, "Maybe you should have a few glasses yourself, Lottie. It's obvious

you admire the man and have been conversing with him for over an hour. He's probably surprised that you haven't invited him to sit with us at dinner."

"Sarah, a lady does not ask a gentleman to dine with her. That is behavior reserved for a certain type of woman."

During the exchange, Penelope kept silent but watched each woman in turn. Normally she wouldn't get involved, but she was feeling pretty confident at the moment. "I think Sarah is right, Mrs. Stevens. You enjoyed his company, did you not?"

Turning her mature eye toward Penelope, Charlotte exclaimed, "I believe both of you should get something to eat. You have both obviously had too much to drink."

Laughing, Ginny replied, "Okay, we swear we'll eat. But only if you ask Richter to join us."

Gasping at her impertinence, Charlotte's face turned pink. When she refused to move, Ginny grabbed Penelope's arm and starting walking toward Richter. Before Charlotte could stop her, she was standing before the man, making a curtsy. All Charlotte could do was watch and pray that her sister didn't embarrass her too much.

Ginny had spent over a year living in Regency England during her second romance novel life, and although it was 1830, she knew the rules were the same. She wouldn't be too outrageous, but only because she would never want to embarrass Charlotte that much.

"Good evening, again, Mr. Richter."

"Good evening to you, Lady Sarah."

"Have you met our hostess's daughter." Turning to pull Penelope forward, she smiled. "Mr. Richter, may I introduce you to Lady Penelope Hammersmith."

After his rigid bow and her wavy curtsy, Ginny continued. "Have you anyone to dine with yet this evening, Mr. Richter? My sister, friend and I were just about to make our way to the dining room and were wondering if you would care to join us." Ginny leaned forward slightly and said conspiratorially, "I know it is somewhat improper for me to ask, but I just can't abide someone eating alone."

Richter smiled and leaned slightly closer as well. "To be honest, Lady Sarah, I am ever so glad you asked me. It is difficult to be the odd man out."

"Indeed it is." With that, Ginny turned and grabbed Penelope's arm, leaving Mr. Richter to offer his arm to Charlotte. Blushing slightly, but determined to keep her dignity, Charlotte accepted and allowed herself to be led to the dining room for dinner.

As they made their way down the steps, Ginny pulled Penelope to the side and allowed her sister to precede them. Before she could explain herself, Ginny spied a group of men who had just entered the house. There were four of them, all tall, all handsome and all finely dressed. It didn't take a script to read who these gentlemen were.

Gasping quietly, Penelope turned her head so none of the men could see her face. Ginny looked at her new friend and noticed a blush creeping up her neck and settling on her cheeks. Her face must have revealed her confusion because Penelope started to explain.

Whispering, Penelope said, "They are know as the Fearsome Foursome. They all attended school together and have always been inseparable. It is rumored that the group are seeking out brides, as they have all reached their thirtieth year."

Penelope's face was so serious that Ginny felt laughter begin to bubble up in her. Trying to quash it, she just ended up snorting. Turning her face away from her friend, Ginny walked down the nearest hallway and entered the study. Penelope, hot on her heels, joined her in the room, giving her a worried look.

When the door was closed, Ginny burst out laughing. "Really?" was all she could manage, before continuing her loud guffaws. It wasn't like Ginny's prior experiences were not anything but formulaic, but this one took the cake. Four friends, all finally deciding to take a bride, working together to find the perfect mate. Ginny dropped her head in shame over the ridiculousness of it all.

"What is so funny? Did you not see them? They are so handsome." The wistful tone sent Ginny to giggles once again.

Finally controlling herself, wondering if in part her laughter was caused by too much champagne, Ginny said, "Oh, Penelope. I can just picture all the girls falling over them. Surely, they don't deserve so much attention."

"Oh, but they do. They are all titled, handsome and wealthy. What mother would pass up such an opportunity? Tis hard enough to find men to marry during any season, but four titled gentlemen during the same season? Tis unheard of."

Taking a deep breath to relieve any possibility of future outbursts, Ginny stated, "Okay, then. Let's go meet'em." With that, she walked to the door and didn't bother to wait for Penelope to catch up.

When she returned to the foyer, the men were still standing around, looking self-important, and casually turning their gazes toward the other guests in attendance. Penelope's father was talking to the men, trying to engage them in conversation. All of the four seemed bored by his attempts.

"Damn fine filly you have, Conway. I believe it was the same horse I saw at Tattersall's not long ago."

Arching an eyebrow, Baron Conway replied, "Indeed."

"How is she treating you? I had hoped to purchase her myself, but you must have beat me to her." Lord Hammersmith, both a little loud and a little drunk, smirked at his guests.

Baron Conway, Oliver to his friends, knew that the old Earl never meant to buy the horse. Not only was she damn expensive, and the Earl without the proper funds to purchase her, but the man couldn't tell fine horseflesh from steak and kidney pie.

Oliver looked over in time to see the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen walking straight up to the group of men. Her boldness made his breath catch, as he wondered what kind of chaperone would allow their ward to breach such manners. He took in her measure immediately. She was tall for a girl, standing at least to his chin, with golden brown hair caught up in a chignon in the back. Soft tendrils of gold framed her oval face. Her eyes were the color of sapphires, brilliant and sparkling. A petite nose and full lips completed her face, making the young girl, probably not yet twenty, stunning. Her neck was slender and long, only adorned with a simple gold necklace with a charm shaped like a butterfly. Before he could casually assess her body, another young woman came to stand next to the bold minx.

"Oh, there you are, my dear. Gentlemen, may I introduce my daughter, Lady Penelope."

Conway felt a momentary panic when he thought the old Earl was referring to his vision. Then, Hammersmith took the other girl's hand and brought her forward. Oliver took in her measure, her dull brown hair and lifeless brown eyes behind spectacles. It wasn't that she wasn't pretty, she simply didn't compare to the vision standing next to her.

Each of the men bowed, as was courtesy. Then all four men stared at the other young lady standing before them. Hammersmith, who just noticed the girl as well, cleared his throat, obviously embarrassed because he didn't know who she was. It was Penelope that came to his rescue.

"May I introduce my friend, Lady Sarah Dunworthy. Lord and Lady Weston's daughter."

All the men bowed their heads once again, and Ginny executed a

nearly perfect curtsy. It would have been perfect had she bothered to make it so and with a little less champagne.

It was Conway who spoke first. "Lady Penelope, Lady Sarah, I am Lord Conway. It is a great pleasure to make your acquaintance. You both look stunning this evening."

Penelope, unused to such flattery, giggled quietly behind her fan. Ginny, who couldn't give a damn about this man or any other, managed a half smile. Oliver felt his heartbeat quicken at the sight. Although not a vain man, he knew he held some appeal among the ladies. His bed was never cold, so to speak, but this girl seemed unimpressed. He'd been told that his chocolate brown hair and his emerald green eyes could turn even the most elderly and infirm ladies to swoon.

Before Conway could speak another word, one of the other gentlemen cleared his throat. Coming out of his reverie, Conway smiled at both women and turned to introduce his friends.

"Allow me to introduce my friends." Pointing first at the tallest gentlemen, with flaxen hair, brown eyes and beautiful full lashes, he said, "Lord Doncaster."

The Earl of Doncaster, William Scott, bowed deeply and flashed his perfect smile on the ladies. Penelope was reduced to giggles once again, while Ginny's smile was gone, replaced by a look of boredom.

Pointing to the next man in line, Conway stated, "Lord Devon."

The Earl of Devon, Chester Nevins, was the shortest of the group, but much taller than either girl. He had jet black hair, liberally sprinkled with premature gray. His cerulean blue eyes danced with amusement, as if he was the bearer of some inside joke. Tilting his head, he remarked, "Such a lovely evening, is it not?"

Finally turning to the last man in line, Conway said, "Lord Townshend."

Viscount Townshend, Martin MacHugh, seemed the most introspective. He had light brown hair and gray eyes. His eyes stayed on Penelope, as if drinking her in. He gave a curt nod, but did not bother to smile.

When nothing more was said, Ginny finally filled the awkward silence. "It is a pleasure to meet you. Have you come for dinner?"

The gentlemen looked at each other as if to determine who would be the one to speak. Finally, Conway spoke up since he was the first introduced.

"We had hoped to make it to the musicale, but were unfortunately detained."

What a load of shit, Ginny thought as she watched the man who obviously thought she'd buy his line. After spending so much time in the romance world, Ginny was accustomed to men thinking that women were stupid and naïve. Unfortunately detained, he said. *More like he was fortunately detained by a glass of brandy and a card game or two.*

"What a shame, my lord. You missed an extraordinary performance by Wilhelm Richter." Ginny's tone couldn't have been misinterpreted. It was a combination of boredom and disbelief. Bored with having to have the conversation in the first place and disbelief over his bullshit assertion.

Lord Conway raised his eyebrow to the girl in question. In response, Ginny smiled prettily while grabbing Penelope's arm. "If you'll excuse us, gentlemen. We are to sit with my sister and Mr. Richter for dinner."

Ginny didn't notice that Penelope only had eyes for Lord Townshend. She merely pulled the shorter girl away and made haste for the dining room. Without so much as a backwards glance, Ginny left the men standing in the foyer. Penelope, on the other hand, turned her head and smiled at Lord Townshend as she disappeared into the other room.

Lord Conway was the first to recover from the display. "Your daughter and her friend are quite extraordinary, my lord. I shall look forward to seeing them in various settings." The rest of the men nodded and murmured their affirmations.

"Well, capitol, gentlemen. Shall we have some sup ourselves, do you think?"

Lord Townshend, who hadn't taken his eyes from the doorway the women entered, answered, "I find myself famished. Shall we go, then?"

The men entered the dining room as though about to conquer the continent. After helping themselves to the buffet, all four men went their separate ways. Lord Doncaster went to sit with a couple members of his family that were in attendance. Lord Devon spotted a widow who had been making overtures toward him for a few weeks. Lords Townshend and Conway were of a like mind, choosing to sit near Lady Penelope and Lady Sarah.

The dining room had been transformed from the usual large table to several smaller tables that sat four. True to her word, Lady Sarah was sitting with her sister and some gentlemen Conway had never met. He assumed he was the extraordinary Mr. Richter. After observing her interaction with her tablemates, Conway became annoyed. Sarah smiled and laughed. He noticed that she gave no one any looks of boredom or contempt. What could he have possibly done in the five minutes in her company to warrant such animosity? Nothing as far as he was concerned and he certainly shouldn't be giving it so much thought.

Turning to Townshend, he asked, "You seem interested in the Hammersmith chit. Never took you for one who liked girls with spectacles."

Still not smiling, Townshend responded, "I cannot explain it, but there is something about her. I have no intention of marrying her, but it

could not hurt to get to know her better." His eyebrow raised in a knowing fashion.

"You mean to know her... intimately?" Conway liked seducing women, but innocents were a bore and could get a man dragged before the vicar.

"I would never ruin her. Merely see how far I can get her to play the game."

"How hard could it be? I doubt she has suitors knocking down her door. It would only be cruel."

"Relax, Conway. I know what I am doing." Townshend brooked no further discussion on the matter. Instead, he turned back to his mediocre meal and drank from his glass of watered down wine.

"What do you think of the other girl? Lady Sarah." Conway wanted to know if anyone else was as affected by her indifference as he.

"Well, she is quite beautiful, to be sure. Seems like she is holding out for someone of more consequence than you."

Townshend always had a way of putting things perfectly. "She does strike me as a bit of a high stepper. It is not as though I have so few women to choose from." Straining to keep his voice disinterested, Conway knew he would pursue her nonetheless. He didn't even stop to consider that by pursuing her, meant that he would eventually marry her.

Seeing exactly what his friend had in mind, Townshend smiled for the first time that evening. "Perhaps we should make it interesting. A wager... just you and I."

Scrunching his face with concern, Conway asked, "What kind of wager?"

"Who can catch his chit first."

Shaking his head, Conway was no fool. "Absolutely not. Lady Penelope was practically panting over you. Lady Sarah, on the other hand, will be difficult, to say the least."

"Shying away from a challenge? So unlike you Conway. It is usually you who comes up with these interesting diversions."

"I am not foolish, Townshend. If you insist on a wager, we will have to decide on something more equitable."

At that moment, Lord Devon walked up and sat across from the two men. Stretching his legs out in front of him and lacing his fingers behind his head, he gave the impression of the cat having caught his canary.

"What are you two brooding about? 'Tis a fine evening, altogether." Devon's mouth curved into a huge smile, showing off his straight, white teeth.

Townshend looked about the room and realized what had him smiling. "Were you able to make plans with the newly widowed Lady Hopewell?" he asked, maintaining his ever present acerbic tone.

If possible, Devon's smile increased as he answered. "She has invited me for a nightcap after tonight's festivities."

"Well done, Devon and in record time." Conway had to admit to being a little jealous. He doubted he would be so lucky.

"Don't mind Conway. He's brooding over the Dunworthy chit. Seems he did not like her snubbing us."

Devon glanced over to the girl in question. "She did seem peculiarly uninterested. Not many *débutantes* would give up a chance to talk to me." Devon reached over and punched Conway in the shoulder, emphasizing his joke.

Rolling his eyes, Conway responded, "Perhaps you are not as irresistible as you thought."

"Perish the thought. I have it on good authority that I am as damn near irresistible as one can be." Of all the four friends, Devon was by far the most outgoing. His good natured attitude toward life went far with the young and old ladies of the ton.

"We were discussing a wager when you walked up."

"Were you now? And this wager would be..."

"Whether Conway could get his chit before I could get mine."

Laughing out loud, Devon looked over at Conway. "Sounds like a worthy cause, Conway. What ever could be the problem?"

Townshend continued. "He feels that since Lady Sarah would be more of a challenge, I would easily win the bet."

Glancing once again at the woman in question, Devon asked, "Which chit were you vying for?"

"Lady Penelope."

Devon, who had been taking a sip of his wine, nearly choked. Looking at his friend since University, he stated, "Do not do it, Conway. You have not a chance in hell."

"My thoughts exactly," Conway responded, glancing over at Lady Sarah with a touch of longing in his eyes.

Townshend noticed and couldn't resist teasing him. "Look at him, Devon. I believe he may be half in love with her already."

Conway turned his glance back to his friend, giving him his most impertinent look. Before he could make another comment, the last of the group joined them. Doncaster looked about the table and knew

instantly that he'd missed something good.

Sitting down in the last available seat, he asked, "Whatever is happening here? What could I have missed in my twenty minute absence?"

Townshend again explained the wager and why Conway was against it. Doncaster, raising an eyebrow toward his oldest friend, asked, "Why bother, Conway? She is pretty, to be sure, but is she worth it?"

"How would I know? I have barely spoken above a handful of words to the girl. She just intrigues me for some reason."

Devon, leaning forward and whispering conspiratorially, stated, "Yes, for some reason." He held his hands spread out in front of his chest, indicating the size of Lady Sarah's breasts.

Conway shot him a look. "Perhaps I am the only one who is maturing. We cannot stay bachelors forever, gentlemen. There will come a day when we will have to marry."

"But why would you consider an obviously gold and title digging chit?" Doncaster asked.

"There is no evidence of that..."

"Then how do you explain her snubbing us?" Devon asked, cutting his friend off mid-sentence.

"I have no idea. But I intend to find out." With that, Conway stood up and walked over to Lady Sarah's table. As he approached, Charlotte spotted him first and smiled sweetly. Then, Mr. Richter, who had been staring at Charlotte, glanced up to notice the new arrival. He stood up and bowed to Conway.

"I am sorry to disturb your meal."

It was Penelope who took pity on the man. "Lord Conway, please

allow me to introduce Mrs. Stevens, Lady Sarah's sister. And Mr. Richter, our piano soloist."

Conway bowed his head to the new introductions. Then, steeling his nerves, he asked, "I was wondering if Lady Sarah would care to take a turn about the room with me." As he asked his question, his attention was solely on Sarah.

Barely paying attention, mostly because she was listening to all the buzzing too much champagne can cause inside one's head, Ginny looked up at the man. He definitely had the mega-hunk look, but Ginny wasn't interested in any man. Before she could say something rude, Charlotte answered for her.

"Why, what a kind offer, my lord. I am sure that Sarah would be most pleased to accommodate you."

Ginny looked at her sister as if she'd grown a second head. There would be no getting out of it now, not without embarrassing her sister. And after all Charlotte had put up with growing up, she couldn't openly embarrass her.

Putting on a strained smile, Ginny rose and took the man's arm. Her head buzzed from the alcohol, but she could still keep coherent thoughts going. The truth was that this man had never done anything to her but get stuck in the same formulaic novel that she landed in. Not one to be rude for any reason (well, almost any reason), Ginny allowed Lord Conway to lead her around the edge of the room, into the foyer and into the parlor across the way. There were several people about, so there was no problem with propriety.

"You seem a bit melancholy, Lady Sarah. Are you unwell?"

Ginny thought about what he said for a minute and decided against her sarcastic response about how could he possibly think she was melancholy when he didn't know her. Instead, she took the high road, and answered, "It has been a long day and I've had too much champagne."

Her companion stilled for a moment and looked at her. He whispered, "Are you in your cups, Lady Sarah?"

Ginny got the impression that he asked as if he needed an explanation from her. As if he suspected there was something wrong and this would be as good as any other explanation.

"I'm not drunk, if that's what you mean, Lord Conway. Have you never wanted to just be alone?"

Drawing back from her as if she'd slapped him, he looked perplexed. "Are you not interested in company this evening? Seems a strange place to be if that were the case."

Turning her head slightly to the side, she regarded him more closely. Conway felt a sudden chill come over him, as if he'd said the wrong thing.

"And what kind of choices do you perceive me to have, my lord? Do you think that my mother would have allowed me to stay home, go to bed early and read a book? Or do you think that it is more likely that she would harangue me until I complied with her wishes?" Ginny was done. She didn't want to play this part in the first place, so she didn't really need to stand around explaining herself to some guy that she was supposed to eventually marry.

To say Conway was shocked was an understatement. Most of the girls coming out this year would be giggling, simpering half-wits, with mothers that made a grown man want to grind his teeth. But this girl was willing to stand up to him and express her views. It was rather refreshing, if not a little disturbing. Did he really want to marry a woman who would challenge him at every turn? He hadn't thought so.

"I beg your pardon, Lady Sarah. I had not thought... I had not considered..." He couldn't finish his sentence because he hardly thought he had anything to apologize for.

Smiling at her potential suitor, Ginny replied, "Don't sweat it, my lord. I've found that most gentlemen prefer women who keep such thoughts to themselves. If you would like to return me to my sister, I will completely understand."

Without thinking, Conway walked Ginny back to the dining room and deposited her next to her sister. He bowed his head and walked back to his friends, who were heading out to the terrace to smoke and drink some port. Conway was speechless. He'd thought that he should have dismissed her, put her in her place at least. But instead, the clever minx had dismissed him and without a second thought. One thing was for sure, there was no way he would take that bet with Townshend. It was certainly a wager he could never win.