

## Excerpt from Chapter One

*“Here come the lovers, full of joy and mirth. —Joy, gentle friends! Joy and fresh days of love accompany your hearts!”*

William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act V, Scene i

2 December 1815

James Highcliffe, 10th Earl Hough, stepped into the crowded ballroom. He knew his appearance would cause a stir. He had never been one to frequent the entertainments, especially as his lady wife had despised dancing, but Lady Jocelyn Lathrop had been pressed into service as her niece’s sponsor to finish up the Season, and so James had agreed to aid her brother as escort to Lady Lathrop and Lady Constance, for the last fortnight of the girl’s Come Out.

James’s motives were certainly not all charitable, for his curiosity regarding Lady Lathrop had never waned. He had desired the former Lady Jocelyn Powell since he discovered girls were more than silly nuisances. Their families’ estates marched along together on one side, and James had known Joy, as her family and friends called her, his whole life.

As if it were yesterday, he recalled the day he had first kissed her—a sloppy, too much mouth kiss that captured his heart immediately. After that momentous occasion, James had kissed her often, each time with more fervor. He also recalled how his father had pulled him into his study when news reached Robert Highcliffe’s ears that his only son had set his eyes on Lord Powell’s daughter. It was not as if Jocelyn Powell would be a bad match socially, for his father was an earl, but hers was a marquess. On the contrary, the match would have been perfect except for the fact Robert Highcliffe, 9th Earl Hough, had contracted away James’s future while James was still in the cradle.

“Your choice of a bride is not yours to make,” his father had explained to a shocked James. “An agreement exists between our family and that of Lord Connick. You have been betrothed to Miss Louisa Connick since the girl’s birth.”

Naturally, James had argued over the fairness of such an arrangement, but earned no concessions on his father’s part. In the end, he had sat in witness as Jocelyn—*his Joy*—married Lord Harrison Lathrop, a man James had never liked, but even more so after Lathrop stole Jocelyn away. Shortly after her departure from Yorkshire, James recited his vows with Louisa. Jocelyn removed to her husband’s estate in Kent, while he and Louisa resided at Hough Hall, never again to travel in the same circles.

“Hough?” a very masculine voice called before James received a testing male slap on the back. “I thought Caroline spoke of the Second Coming of our Lord when she declared your presence in Lady Beauchamp’s ballroom. Whatever has you making an appearance so late in the Season?” Lord Beeson asked. “Do not tell me you mean to do the pretty. Thinking of taking on one of this year’s crop as your new countess?”

James had waited eighteen months after Louisa’s passing to venture out into Society again. He wanted no gossip regarding his planned pursuit of Lady Lathrop. He and Louisa had spent twenty-two years together, but the last three, she had not left her bed for more than her personal needs. For two and twenty years, he had served his duty to the earldom. Now, he planned to serve his duty to his heart.

“I promise you, Beeson, I am too old to chase after a young skirt, not even half my age. I simply promised Lord Powell I would make certain his sister and daughter were safely escorted this evening and until the two return to Powell Manor for Christmastide. His lordship was unexpectedly called home to Yorkshire. Lady Constance has agreed to perform at a musicale before her return, so Powell left her under his sister’s care and my oversight.”

“Now that you mention it, I recall your and Powell’s estates align, do they not?” Beeson nodded his understanding.

“Yes, they do. We have been friends since childhood. We each came into our titles within a year.” James’s eyes scanned the ballroom, searching for Jocelyn. At last they found her. “If you will pardon me, Beeson, I should inform Lady Lathrop of my arrival.”

Beeson chuckled. “I imagine Lady Lathrop is well aware of your presence in the ballroom. Every unattached female, as well as many attached ones, have turned their eyes in your direction.”

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Even before she turned around, Jocelyn knew Lord Hough had entered the ballroom. A hush fell over those in attendance, followed by a swell of whispers. Slowly, she pivoted to take in the magnificence of the man. James Highcliffe stood beneath the archway, his still muscular frame filling the opening. A tall figure dressed in black. Except for the blue hue of his waistcoat, he reminded her of a character from a Minerva Press romance. He was not as lean as she remembered, but there was nothing amiss with the manner in which his evening clothes set off his figure.

Irritably, she realized she had held her breath until his gaze found hers. A slight smile lifted his lips. Their gaze held for several elongated ticks of the clock. Jocelyn could not look away. She knew she should turn and pretend not to notice his presence; yet, like a ninny, she studied his approach, enjoying the ease with which he moved. He was the one by whom she judged all other males—unfortunately, he was the one who had broken her young heart.

Jocelyn purposely turned to remind her niece Constance not to appear too eager to greet Lord Hough. “It would be unseemly,” she whispered her caution.

“But it was kind of his lordship to agree to escort us, Aunt.”

“It was,” Joy reluctantly agreed. When she learned her brother had made arrangements with Lord Hough without consulting her, she was most upset at the prospect of encountering the earl again. She had been in Kent with Lathrop when James Highcliffe spoke his vows to another, and she was glad for it. Such was the reason she had agreed to an earlier date for her nuptials than the one James had named. Jocelyn knew she was not strong enough to witness his marrying another. “I forget you see Lord Hough often at home.”

“More so since the death of his wife,” Constance explained. “But often enough, at church and such. How long has it been since you encountered Lord Hough?”

“Twenty-two years, four months, and eighteen days,” his lordship responded before Jocelyn could claim her wits about her.

Constance’s mouth stood agape in astonishment. “How can you be so certain, my lord?”

Lord Hough winked at Constance before presenting Jocelyn’s niece a proper bow, a reminder to Constance to respond accordingly. “I recall clearly, Lady Constance, for that was the day Lady Jocelyn married Lord Lathrop, and the viscount spirited away Aberford’s sunshine.”

Jocelyn willed the embarrassment from her cheeks. “Lord Hough bams you, Constance. His lordship possesses a great sense of humor.” The fact the numbers he quoted were accurate to the day of her exchanging her vows with Harrison Lathrop not only surprised her, but irritated

her. Lord Hough had walked away from their blossoming romance when he was nineteen and she several months on the other side of sixteen. Two years later, she became Lady Lathrop. Four months later, James married Lady Louisa Connick, a woman he had never courted. For more than two decades, except for one brief encounter after her father's death, they had never stood in the same room together, certainly never side-by-side.

Before Jocelyn could continue, Lord Sheldon appeared at Constance's side. "Lady Constance, I believe this is our dance. The set is forming."

"May I be excused, Aunt?"

"Certainly." Jocelyn deliberately nodded to Lord Sheldon. "I shall be waiting here for my niece's return."

"Yes, ma'am."

Attempting to ignore the very masculine man standing beside her, Jocelyn watched Constance as her niece and Sheldon took their places in the set.

"Would you care to dance, Joy?" Hough asked softly.

Despite her best efforts, Jocelyn's heart hitched higher just hearing her family's pet name for her on Lord Hough's lips.

In a frustrated warning to control her emotions, her eyebrows drew together in a fierce frown. "A chaperone does not dance," she chastised.

When she turned to him, his cinnamon-colored eyes presented her a long, slow look. Staring into those eyes, Jocelyn recognized the familiar merriment she had known years prior. "Do you not recall the steps, my lady?" he teased.

"When was the last time you danced, James Highcliffe?" she challenged.

"Your sixteenth birthday," he said without hesitation.

The idea shocked her. "Surely you and Lady Hough shared a dance upon occasion."

His brow climbed a fraction. "I am not accustomed to exaggerating when speaking of momentous events. I assure you, Louisa and I never danced. My late wife despised the exercise, but I recall your being quite fond of twirling about a dance floor, as well as your being excessively light on your feet and on mine."

Jocelyn blushed and covered the emotion with a flick of her fan. "Not any longer," she said tersely. "Girlish fantasies. A woman who has borne two sons can no longer be termed *light on her feet*."

Lord Hough leaned closer to whisper in her ear. "Do not fish for compliments, Joy, for you must surely own a looking glass. But if you do not, simply know, in my eyes, you remain the most beautiful woman of my acquaintance."

"Your lordship—" She meant to caution him against such forwardness, but her eyes landed upon his lips, and all thoughts of anything but whether his kiss would be as exciting as the last one they had shared filled her brain.

"No reprimands," he said in what appeared to be bemusement, "or I will be compelled to kiss you into silence."

Joy struggled against the shiver of desire skittering up her spine. There was a time the man standing before her was her world. She would not make that mistake again. Lathrop had taught her all the lessons she required about disappointment.

"No kissing, my lord," she hissed through tight lips. "No cuddling. No dancing. No flirting. I am Constance's chaperone, and, until my brother's return, you are our escort. If you are interested in female companionship, I am certain there are many in this ballroom willing to oblige you, whether you desire a mistress or a wife."

His voice, when responding, was both low and demanding. “We will kiss, Lady Lathrop.” His words were quiet and deliberately stressed. “And cuddle and flirt and dance. And when *I choose* a wife, it will be you. I will have no mistress—only you, Joy, as the chatelaine of my manor and of my life.”

“Most assuredly, you jest. We have not laid eyes on each other for twenty years, and you expect me to consider marriage to a man I barely know.”

“You know me, Joy. It was Lathrop you did not know.” They stared at each other in unrelenting stubbornness. “If you require my services, my lady, I will be playing cards.”

Jocelyn watched him walk away. She remained frozen to the spot. James Highcliffe wanted her as his wife. How absurd! Once, such had been her dearest dream, but fancy was no longer a part of her nature. Any whimsical bits of her character had been dutifully drummed from her by her late husband. “Less than a fortnight,” she reminded herself. “Then Lord Hough will again be gone from my life. I shall return to Kent and my simple existence. I prefer my days without all the chaos a husband brings. No more will I place my faith in another—in one who promises the world with one hand and snatches it away with the other.”

Resolve settled in her shoulders: The temptation to kiss Lord Hough again as she once had done would not come about. Harrison Lathrop had not broken her. Neither would Lord Hough. “It will not happen,” she whispered. “I am no longer the naïve girl his lordship once knew.”