



Noble Intentions (Noble series)

By Katie MacAlister

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Take one infamous earl...

Noble Britton, Lord Weston, has come to London intending to revisit old friends, enjoy a modicum of society, and-oh, yes-find a mild, biddable wife.

Add an irrepressible American

Gillian Leigh's Unfortunate Habit of speaking her mind and Shocking Susceptibility to Accidents have left her on the shelf at five-and-twenty. So why can't Noble resist her?

And good intentions are bound to fail

When Gillian meets the infamous Black Earl, she knows that at last she's found a man who can match her zest for life, even if that entails the occasional arson...or kidnapping. Not to mention the encounters with his former mistresses...

Although life with Gillian involves as much chaos as laughter, Noble fully intends to claim her for his own-if she doesn't accidentally kill him first.

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Editorial Review

Review

"This story is a true romp. There is much to laugh at when reading this book and much to miss when it is over. A true 'keeper' that will have [listeners] looking forward to the next one in the series." ---RT Book Reviews

About the Author

For as long as she can remember, Katie MacAlister has loved reading. Growing up in a family where a weekly visit to the library was a given, Katie spent much of her time with her nose buried in a book. Despite her love for novels, she didn't think of writing them until she was contracted to write a non-fiction book about software. Since her editor refused to allow her to include either witty dialogue or love scenes in the software book, Katie swiftly resolved to switch to fiction, where she could indulge in world building, tormenting characters, and falling madly in love with all her heroes. Two years after she started writing novels, Katie sold her first romance, *Noble Intentions*. More than thirty books later, her novels have been translated into numerous languages, been recorded as audiobooks, received several awards, and are regulars on the New York Times, USA Today, and Publishers Weekly bestseller lists. She also writes for the young adult audience as Katie Maxwell.

Katie lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and dogs, and can often be found lurking around online.

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One

Gillian Leigh's first social event of the Season began with what many in the ton later labeled as an uncanny warning of Things To Come.

"Well, bloody hell. This isn't going to endear me to the duchess."

Gillian watched with dismay as flames licked up the gold velvet curtains despite her attempts to beat them out with a tasseled silk cushion. Shrieks of horror and shrill voices behind her indicated that others had spotted her activities, which she had hoped would escape their notice until she had the fire under control.

Two footmen raced past her with buckets of water and soon had the fire extinguished, but it was too late, the damage was done. The duchess's acclaimed Gold Drawing Room would never be the same again. Gillian stood clutching the sooty cushion to her chest and watched mournfully as the blackened curtains were hastily bundled past the small clutches of people who stood talking intently, looking everywhere but at her.

"Sealing my fate as a social pariah, no doubt," she muttered to herself.

"Who is? And what on earth happened in here? Lady Dell said something about you burning down the house, but you know how she exag...oh, my!"

Gillian heaved a deep sigh and turned to smile ruefully as her cousin, and dearest friend, caught sight of the damp, smoke-stained wall.

"I'm afraid it's true, Charlotte, although I wasn't trying to burn down the house. It was just another of my Unfortunate Accidents."

Charlotte gave the formerly gilt-paneled wall a considering look, pursed her lips, then turned her gaze on her cousin. "Mmm. Well, you have certainly made sure everyone will be talking about your debut. Just look at you! You've got soot all over-your gloves are a complete loss, but I think you can brush the worst off your bodice."

Gillian gave in to the urge and snorted while Charlotte effected repairs to the sooty green muslin gown. "My debut-as if I wanted one. The only reason I'm here is because your mother insisted it would look odd if I remained at home while you had your Season. I'm five and twenty, Charlotte, not a young girl like you. And as for setting the ton talking-I'm sure they are, but it will no doubt be to label me a clumsy Colonial who can't even be a wallflower without wreaking havoc."

Charlotte rolled her eyes as she clasped her hand around her cousin's wrist and dragged her past the excited groups of people and out the door. "You're only half American and not clumsy. You're...well, you're just enthusiastic. And slightly prone to Unfortunate Accidents. But all's well that ends happily, as Mama always says. The curtains can be replaced, and I'm sure the duchess will realize the fire was simply one of those unavoidable events. Come, you must return to the ballroom. The most exciting thing has happened-the Black Earl is here."

"The black who?"

"The Black Earl. Lord Weston. It's rumored he's going to take a bride again."

"No, truly? And this is an event we must not fail to witness? Is he going to take her right there in the ballroom?"

"Gillian!" Charlotte stopped dead in the hallway, blocking people from either direction. Her china-blue eyes were round and sparkling with faux horror. "You really cannot say such things in polite company! It's shocking, simply shocking, and I cannot allow you to sully my delicate, maidenly ears in such a manner!"

Gillian grinned at her cousin and gave her a little push to get her moving again. "Honestly, Charlotte, I don't see how you can tell such awful whoppers without being struck down with shame."

"Practice, Gilly, it's because I pay the proper attention to perfecting a shy, demure look for an hour each morning. If you would do the same, it would do wonders for your personality. You might even catch a husband, which you certainly won't do if you continue to be so...so..."

"Honest?"

"No."

"Forthright?"

"No."

Gillian chewed on her lip for a moment. "Unassuming? Unpretentious? Veracious?"

"No, no, no. Green, that's what you are. Utterly green and without any sense of ton whatsoever. You simply cannot continue to say what you think. It's just not done in polite circles."

"Some people like honesty."

"Not in society, they don't. Now stop dawdling and fix a pleasant expression on your face."

Gillian heaved a little sigh and tried to adopt the demure look that spinsters of her age were expected to wear.

"Now you're looking mulish," Charlotte pointed out with a frown, then gave in to a sudden impish grin. She linked her arm through her cousin's and tugged her along the hall. "Never mind, your face doesn't matter in the least. Come, we don't want to miss Lord Weston. Mama says he is a terrible rake and isn't welcomed into polite circles anymore. I can't wait to see how depraved he looks."

"What has he done to make him unacceptable to the jades, rakes, and rogues who populate the ton?"

Charlotte's eyes sparkled with excitement. "Lady Dell says he murdered his first wife after he found her in the arms of her true love. He is said to have shot her in the head, but missed when he tried to murder her lover."

"Truly? How fascinating! He must be a terribly emotional and uncontrolled man if he didn't tolerate his wife having an inamorato. I thought that sort of behavior was de rigueur in the ton."

Gillian and Charlotte slipped past small groups of elegantly clad people and paused before the double doors leading to the ballroom. The heat generated by so many people inhabiting the confined space left the room stifling and airless.

Charlotte fanned herself vigorously as she continued to tell Gillian what she knew of the infamous earl. "He doesn't wear anything but black-'tis said to be a sign of his guilt that he's never been out of mourning even though he killed his wife more than five years ago. She cursed him, you know, and that's another reason he wears black. And then there are rumors of a child..."

Charlotte's voice dropped to an intimate whisper that Gillian had a hard time hearing above the noise of several chattering matrons standing nearby. "...and was born on the wrong side of the blanket."

"Someone is a bastard?" Gillian asked, confused.

"Gillian!" Charlotte shrieked and, with an appalled look toward the matrons, pulled her cousin closer to the ballroom doors. "God's teeth, you're as uncivilized as a Red Indian. It must be living among them as you did that makes you so unconventional. Do try to curb your tongue!"

Gillian muttered an insincere apology and prodded her cousin. "Who is illegitimate? The earl?"

"Gilly, really! Don't be such an idiot. How can he be illegitimate and an earl? Make an effort to pay attention, do-I was just telling you how Lord Weston murdered his first wife because she refused to bear him a son and turned to her lover for comfort. Isn't that thrilling? It's said she pleaded with him to give her a divorce so she could marry her lover, but he told her that if he could not have her, no man would. Then he shot her while her lover looked on." She sighed. "It's so romantic."

"Your idea of romantic and mine are most definitely not the same," Gillian said, looking around at the dandies, macaronis, fops, elderly gentlemen in silk breeches, and other assorted members of that small, elite group who possessed the combination of fortune, rank, and reputation to admit them as members of the ton. "And this man is here tonight? Which one is he? Does he look evil? Does he have a hump on his back and a squint and walk with a limp? Will he ogle the ladies?"

Charlotte frowned. "Don't be ridiculous, Gilly. The earl is not a monster; at least, not to look at. He is quite handsome if you like large, brooding men, which I most definitely do. When they're earls, of course. And perhaps viscounts. But nothing lower than a viscount, you understand." She forestalled Gillian's questions by turning toward the doors. "Come stand with me and we will watch to see if the rumor is true."

"Which rumor-that the earl killed his wife or that he is looking for a new one?"

"The latter. I will know soon enough if he is-men cannot keep a thing like that secret for very long."

"Mmm, no, I imagine not. If their intentions are not clear in the speculative gazes they impart on every marriageable female who can still draw breath, it's in the way they check the bride-to-be's teeth and make sure her movement is sound."

Charlotte tried to stifle a giggle. "Mama says I am not to listen to a thing you say, that you are incorrigible and a bad influence."

Gillian laughed with her cousin as they entered the ballroom arm-in-arm. "It's a good thing she doesn't know I've learned it all from you, my dear Char. Now, after we view this rogue of the first water, tell me who has caught your fancy. As I told Aunt Honoria, I'm determined you will end your Season with a stunning match, but I cannot help you become deliriously happy if you do not tell me who your intended victim is."

"Oh, that's simple," Charlotte replied with a beatific expression of innocence that was spoiled only by a perfectly wicked smile. "Everyone knows rakes make the best husbands. I shall simply pick out the worst of the bunch-one riddled with vices, bad habits, and a reputation that will make Mama swoon and Papa rail-then I shall reform him."

"That seems like a terrible amount of work to go to just to find a suitable husband."

"Not really." Charlotte whipped open her fan and adopted a coy look. "After all, you know what they say."

"No, what do they say?"

"Necessity is the mother of intention."

Gillian stopped. "Invention, Charlotte."

"What?"

"Necessity is the mother of invention."

Charlotte stared at her for a moment, then rapped her cousin on the wrist with her fan. "Don't be ridiculous, where would I come up with an invention? Intentions I have aplenty, and that's quite enough for me, thank you. Now let's go find this delicious rake of an earl. If he's as bad as Mama says, he might just suit."

Gillian laughed at her cousin as the pair resumed their course across the brightly lit ballroom. Three men standing nearby turned at the sound of their merriment and considered the pretty picture in contrast the pair made.

"What have we here?" The shortest man, stylishly dressed in salmon satin breeches and an embroidered ivory waistcoat, lifted his quizzing glass and gazed at the two women. "Ah, it's the Collins chit. Who's the Long Meg with her?"

The tallest member of the group lifted a dark eyebrow at the question. "I haven't the slightest idea, Tolly. You're the expert on members of society. You tell us who she is."

Sir Hugh Tolliver toyed with his quizzing glass. "You'd know, too, if you came to town more often, Weston. 'Struth, you haven't even come for Parliament for the past five years! It ain't healthy to bury yourself in the country like that, my friend. A man of your consequence should be in town, taking your rightful place in society. You owe it to your title and your family to do so."

The Black Earl gave the young man a tolerant look. Tolly had always been a bit of a romantic, nattering on about chivalry and the rights of the nobility for as long as the earl had known him.

"You sound like my mother, Tolly," he said with as much gentleness as he could muster, then turned his gaze back to consider the two women. "I'm here now, that will have to suffice."

Sir Hugh flushed at the set-down. "But how long do you plan to stay in town? Don't look at me like I'm a candle short, man, it matters a good deal if I am to smooth your path into society."

"I'll stay as long as it takes. And as for smoothing my path-I've told you, Tolly, I don't give a damn what the ton thinks of me. I'm here for one purpose only, and once I've achieved my goal, I shall return to Nethercote."

"Ask St. Clair who the Amazon is, Tolly. He's tight with Collins and is sure to know." The third member of the group, who had also been watching the two women make their way to the opposite side of the room, nodded toward a door leading to the card room. Sir Hugh obligingly turned to find his quarry but was stopped by a soft voice.

"Get me an introduction."

Sir Hugh stared at his saturnine friend in surprise, the flush slowly fading from his face. "You're serious then, Weston? You're looking to get leg-shackled again? I would have thought after Elizabeth..."

The words dried in his mouth as Lord Weston gazed at him with a look he did not care to investigate further. "Er...yes. Which one?"

"Which what?" Weston drawled in a bored voice that made Sir Hugh even more nervous. His palms began to sweat. Weston was at his most dangerous when he appeared bored.

"Which chit did you want the introduction to?"

Weston sent an uninterested glance to where the pair had joined a flock of young women. "The redhead."

"She's a bit long in the tooth, don't you think? On the shelf, and all that." Sir Hugh regretted his comments the second they left his lips. One didn't inquire into the reasons behind Weston's actions. Although his gray eyes might be hooded by apparent disinterest, Sir Hugh knew how quickly they could turn frigid. His hands immediately stopped sweating and turned to blocks of ice.

"Tolly," the third man warned, taking on his accustomed role of peacemaker, "just get the introductions. Weston has my curiosity up now as well-the Amazon is damned pretty, even if she is a head taller than you."

Flushing again at the comment, Sir Hugh nodded curtly at the marquis and scurried off to garner the necessary information.

"Don't tell me you're shopping for a wife as well, Harry?"

Grimacing at the thought, Lord Rosse adjusted his spectacles and took another look down the line of this year's crop of debutantes. "Lord, no. But you never know what lovely bit might be agreeable to *carte blanche*."

"You're looking in the wrong spot, old friend. Allow me to direct you away from the virgins. The widows and bored wives are kept on the other side of the room."

Rosse ignored the gentle ribbing and continued his perusal. "If you hadn't told me yourself you intended to wed again, I wouldn't have believed it. I suppose you're doing it for Nick's sake?"

Weston took two glasses of whiskey off the tray of a passing footman and handed one to his friend. "My son is part of the reason, my nursery another. It's time I fill it."

"Damned shame you didn't marry Nick's mother."

The gray in Weston's eyes turned to icy silver, but Rosse wasn't daunted by the waves of almost palpable hostility that emanated from the man next to him; they'd been through too much together not to speak their minds in private.

"If you recall," Weston said softly as he directed his gaze back toward the Amazon, "I was already married at the time."

"Ah, yes. The lovely Elizabeth."

Weston's gut tightened, as it did every time her name was mentioned, his lips thinning into a cruel parody of a smile as he fought down waves of bitterness and deep pain. It never failed to surprise him that he could feel such pain; for the last five years it had been the only emotion that breached the icy numbness that was his constant companion. The lovely Elizabeth. By God, he would make sure his second wife was nothing like that cold, heartless bitch.

He surprised himself by putting his thoughts into words. "My next wife will be a quiet, unassuming, biddable woman who will not draw attention to herself or cause scandal. She will be pleased to stay in the country, take care of my son, and provide me with heirs."

Harry smiled. "In other words, this paragon of virtue will be everything your first wife was not."

Weston's answering smile, icy as a fjord in February, matched the coldness he felt within. "Exactly." Unbidden, his eyes wandered back to where the tall redheaded woman towered above the handful of dandies dancing attendance on her blond companion.

"Rosse, good to see you." A deep voice rumbled behind the two men. Rosse and Weston turned to greet the Duke of Sunderland, but the greetings froze on their lips when the duke continued with a frosty, "I can't say as much for your companion. Bad company you're keeping, Rosse, bad company."

Rosse stared after the retreating figure with an unhappy frown. "That was a direct cut, Noble."

Weston tossed back his whiskey and nodded, rubbing his hands to warm them.

"It was indeed," he answered, turning back to gaze across the ballroom.

"But damn it, man, it's unfair! He's your cousin! If you'd just let me speak about what happened that night--"

Weston made an abrupt movement. "It's not important, Harry. Sunderland is a fool. I don't particularly care what he thinks."

"But-Noble, this is getting worse. You've been in town only a fortnight and already you're being given the cut on the street, in your clubs, and now here! If you don't take steps soon, you won't be recognized in polite society."

Weston snorted, pleased to feel the whiskey burning a path down to his stomach. At least he could still feel that. "Polite society. The day I care about what polite society thinks, Harry, is the day hell will freeze."

His brows drew together as he watched across the room where Sir Hugh and another man approached the woman who had caught his eye. Tolly was paying far too much attention to the redhead, gazing up into her eyes as if she was the most fascinating woman on earth.

"Looks as if Tolly has cleared the path. Shall we?" Lord Rosse gave his friend an inquiring glance.

"Yes." Surprised by the sharp bubble of emotion remarkably akin to jealousy, Weston gathered the mantle of boredom he habitually wore and sauntered after his friend across the inlaid wood floor toward the gaggle of tittering misses.

Charlotte's keen and eager eye, ever on the alert for a titled rake, saw the two men heading toward them from across the room. She was certain after the interested looks the Black Earl had been shooting at Gillian he would claim an introduction and couldn't decide what attitude to adopt about this unexpected turn of events. A hasty evaluation of the number of suitors gathered around her went far to assuage her plans for reforming the Black Earl, so it was with no sense of pettishness or ill feeling that she turned her mind to plotting the future happiness of her dearest cousin. A quick glance at said cousin showed that Gillian was in her usual state of disarray: her gloves were wadded up into sooty balls, tendrils of unruly red hair were fighting their way out of the once tidy coronet on her head, and her gown showed signs of having lost the battle with the fire. Unfortunately, there was no time to rush her off to the ladies' withdrawing room to effect repairs, but Charlotte was not one to go down without a fight-not when her cousin's future was at stake.

"Would it be an inconvenience to ask for a cup of punch, Sir Hugh? I fear the warmth of the evening has made Miss Leigh rather thirsty, but she's much too shy to ask you herself."

She dimpled charmingly at him as he shot a curious look at an equally surprised Gillian, then let her smile fade as he left to fulfill her request. As soon as he was out of hearing, Charlotte swung around to her cousin and began dabbing at the faint soot marks on Gillian's bodice. "Cousin, pinch your cheeks."

"I beg your pardon?"

Charlotte cast a glance over Gillian's shoulder to where the two men were approaching. "Bite your lips."

Gillian wondered if the stifling heat of the ballroom was affecting her dear cousin's mind. "Is it the heat, Charlotte? You look flushed. Are you ill? Shall I call your mother?"

"Oh, heavens no! You know how Mama is, she'll rattle on about nothing and monopolize all the conversation." Charlotte waved her fan in a vigorous manner and slapped an artificially bright smile on her face.

"Monopolize the conversation with whom?" Gillian was becoming concerned; although Charlotte was in

truth a vivacious, exceptionally headstrong woman, she made it her habit to adopt the pose of a shy, timid maiden when in public, the better, she said, to snare a husband. Yet here she was smiling with a ferocious intensity that would scare the spots off a leopard.

"Smile," Charlotte hissed at her cousin as she deepened her dimples. "Look pleasant. He's been watching you. I think he's interested."

In a flash, Gillian understood. She'd heard of this. Obviously her cousin had fallen victim to a temporary derangement. She put an arm around Charlotte's shoulders and gave her a little squeeze. "It's all right, dearest. Don't worry, I'll see that you get home without your mother becoming aware of your...your unfortunate condition."

"My what?"

Gillian took charge, gently turning Charlotte, intent on making their escape before anyone else noticed her cousin's sad mental condition, when the sight of Sir Hugh approaching with two tall men halted her. Her eyes widened as they met the gaze of the dark man who stopped in front of her. God's elbows, he took her breath away!

"Lady Charlotte, Miss Gillian Leigh, may I be permitted to introduce the Earl of Weston and the Marquis Rosse?"

Gillian's mouth formed an O, but she couldn't get any words out. The earl's gray eyes were flecked with bits of silver and ringed with the darkest, lushest lashes she'd ever seen. She felt her toes curl in her green satin slippers when the Lord of Lusciousness raised her hand to his lips. His touch sent frissons of fire down her hand. Thank heaven I ruined my gloves.

The earl raised one beautiful glossy black eyebrow. "Indeed. It makes an introduction so much more personal when the lady has a bare hand."

Gillian felt the flush sweep up from her chest as she realized her Unfortunate Habit had once again made itself known. "Oh, blast!"

A second dark eyebrow climbed upward. The flush reached Gillian's face. "I'm sorry, my lord, it's my Unfortunate Habit, you see. It makes me speak without thinking." She tried for an insouciant smile, but it came out watery instead.

The corners of the earl's mouth twitched. Gillian's knees threatened to buckle at the sight of it. She tried to drag her gaze from his mouth but was fascinated by the sensual curve of his lower lip. Lips like that ought to be made illegal. Sending blasphemous thoughts heavenward about the unleashing of such a stunning creation willy-nilly upon unsuspecting and highly susceptible women, she made a desperate attempt to calm her wildly beating heart. It wasn't as if she was a silly, naive miss who knew nothing of the way of things-heaven knows, she had been to Boston! She was a woman experienced in the ways of the world. She would not shame herself by expiring on the spot, overcome by one man's masculine beauty.

The bespectacled man next to Lord Adonis bowed over her hand, but she missed what he said, so enthralled was she by the earl. She let her eyes wander over the sharp, masculine planes of his features and wondered how he felt about the softening effect the cleft in his chin gave his otherwise harsh face. She knew how she felt about it. Looking at it made her lips burn with the desire to scatter kisses along his jaw and dip her tongue into the indentation...oh heavens, what was she doing, thinking such sinful thoughts? Another wave of heat washed over her as she clutched her hands together in an attempt to get hold of her wild imagination.

She shouldn't be thinking about kissing an earl. Especially an earl who had, if the gossip flying around the ballroom was true, quite possibly murdered his wife.

The earl's fascinating mouth was moving. Oh, Lord, he was speaking to her and she hadn't been paying the slightest bit of attention.

"I beg your pardon?"

A corner of his mouth twitched again. She didn't know if it was in irritation or amusement, but she hoped for the latter. "Woolgathering, were you?"

She smiled, happy he understood. "Oh yes, I'm afraid I was. Another bad habit, you see. You were saying?"

If she didn't know better, she'd swear the gray eyes softened for a moment. But they wouldn't soften—he was a rake earl, and she was a penniless, half-American nobody. Gillian suddenly felt it important that he know she wasn't one of the ton.

"I asked if you would honor me with the next waltz."

Gillian was sure she wouldn't be able to drag her gaze from the earl's eyes if her life depended on it. She mused upon the black flecks interspersed with the silver. The effect was mesmerizing. "I'm afraid I do not waltz, my lord."

A flicker of annoyance passed over the earl's face. "Do not, or will not, Miss Leigh?"

"Cannot, Lord Weston." Gillian put her hand on his sleeve and leaned forward. "It's shameful, I know, but you see, I was raised by my aunt and uncle in Boston."

Weston leaned closer. She was drowning in his eyes. Happily, eagerly, willingly drowning. A heady, spicy scent wafted up from him and tickled her nose. She greedily inhaled it, feeling it permeate down to her bones, sure that if she were to expire on the spot, she'd die a happy woman.

"Do they not waltz in Boston?" His voice rumbled intimately around her. Gillian's mouth went instantly dry.

"Yes, they do," she croaked.

"Then why?" Weston took her hand and held it between his palms. Gillian felt the touch burn up her arm and directly into her brain. "Why will you not waltz with me?"

"Um." She was lost in the silver and black and gray of his fascinating eyes. Why was he trying to distract her with talk? And what was he talking about? Waltzing? What was that? "My uncle would not allow me to learn how. He was a very devout man. A Shaker, as a matter of fact."

Gillian's eyes rounded and she stepped back under the influence of Weston's sudden, feral smile.

"Then you must grant me the privilege of teaching you how. The next waltz?" He squeezed her hand gently.

"No, my lord, you mustn't," she gasped, horrified at the thought of learning to dance in such a public venue. Given the accidents that inexplicably seemed to shadow her, he'd probably end up with a broken leg—or worse.

"Ah, I see. You have not yet been given permission to waltz? I will speak with Lady Jersey on your behalf."

Gillian frowned up at the quirked brows. "Good heavens, my lord, I don't care about having permission to dance. It's not as if I'm...that is, I should warn you..." She glanced over at her cousin for help, but Charlotte had turned away in an obvious attempt to give them privacy. Gillian leaned forward again. "I'm not supposed to be here, you see. On virgin's row, that is."

"Virgin's row?" One side of the earl's mouth curved up. Gillian watched it, fascinated. She'd do anything short of murder to run her fingers along those lips.

"Yes, that's what I call it. I'm not really here to have a Season, I'm merely accompanying my cousin, Lady Charlotte. I'm not an heiress, you know. I don't have any illustrious family connections other than my uncle, and I'm not an Original or an Incomparable, so you needn't feel obliged to dance with me."

The other side of that lovely mouth curved up, and Gillian blinked with pleasure at the surprising warmth of the Lord of Sunshine's smile. She felt her own lips curving in response. Perhaps she had been a little hasty in ruling out murder.

Noble noted with interest that Gillian's dark green eyes had brilliant little gold flecks that seemed to light up when she smiled. "I assure you, Miss Leigh, I do not have a standing requirement that my waltz partners be heiresses, titled, or Incomparables."

"Or Originals?" Gillian asked with a decidedly mischievous look.

He pressed her hand, then released it. "I suspect, my dear, that you fit that title rather well. Ah, it sounds as if that's a waltz beginning. Shall we?"

He held out his arm for her.

"Oh-but-are you sure? I wouldn't want to hurt you." She tilted her face up to peer into his eyes.

Weston noted the fine bone structure of her heart-shaped face. She was heavily freckled on all her exposed surfaces-obviously she was one of those redheads who freckled at the slightest hint of exposure to the sun, and if the golden hue of her skin was any clue, he suspected she spent a good deal of time outdoors. Rather than finding fault with the flaw in her complexion, he found himself wanting to stroke the silky, freckled skin. The warmth of her presence drew him like a moth to a flame.

He took her hand and, placing it on his arm, led her out onto the floor. "I have survived many worse situations, I assure you."

"Not with me," she mumbled, looking momentarily disgruntled, but immediately that look fled and one of sheer terror replaced it.

"Just follow my lead," Weston said, speaking softly into her ear, "and listen to the music. A waltz moves to the count of three."

He tried to maintain his amusement at her terror, but truth to tell, he found himself drawn to the warming glow that seemed to surround her. Her unsophisticated display of emotions beguiled him; if she wasn't voicing her every thought, they were quickly discerned by one look at her easily read face. Weston found such candor refreshing in a society that did its best to hide honesty and truthfulness.

"Oh, my!" Gillian gasped as he moved her expertly into the dance. She caught her lower lip between her

teeth as she obviously concentrated on matching his steps. Despite her stiffness and awkward movements, the earl felt a sudden flash of lust knife through him. His attention was drawn to her lips. They were mirrors of her emotions, twisting into a rueful grimace as she made a misstep or curving into a stunningly brilliant smile when she caught the rhythm of the dance.

"Look at me, not your feet," he quietly commanded, wanting to bask in the glory of that smile again. She tipped her head back and flashed him an impish grin that he felt deep in his chest.

"You'll be sorry, my lord. Or rather, your toes will."

"How old are you?" Weston asked before he could stop himself.

"Five and twenty. How old are you?"

"A decade older than you," Weston answered, amused by her brashness. She was forward, that was certainly true, but he didn't see any signs that she was putting on an act of innocence for his benefit. One look in her guileless eyes convinced him that she was indeed an Original-open, honest, and completely untouched by the debauched society that made up the ton. The glow from her innocence and gentle femininity washed over him in a wave of sudden welcome warmth. He entertained a pleasant picture of her sitting by the fire in his library, her head bent over a bit of feminine frippery, their evenings spent in quiet, tranquil companionship.

Charlotte watched as the pair danced, a smile playing about her lips. Gillian and the Black Earl were well suited, in her opinion, Gillian's height matching the earl's well. She grimaced when Gillian stepped on the earl's toes yet again, stifled a giggle when Gillian laughed at the earl's response, and watched with surprise when the earl suddenly stumbled and came to a halt for a moment before picking up the tempo of the waltz again. What had Gillian said that disconcerted him so?

Gillian couldn't believe her mouth had blurted out the words she had been thinking. The earl's eyes glittered silver as she held her breath for his response, and hoped he'd realize that she hadn't meant to be impertinent, it was just natural curiosity. If he hadn't distracted her by staring at her lips, she'd have been paying attention to their conversation. God's toes, he drove her wits straight from her mind when he looked at her lips like that. It was surely his own fault if she babbled at him as a result.

"I must decline the opportunity to answer your question, my dear."

Put in my place, and rightly so, Gillian thought with relief, and gave herself up to the heady pleasure of being in the arms of the handsomest man at the ball. She wasn't concerned with what people were saying about him-she prided herself on being an excellent judge of people and was quite confident that he was innocent of the crime society had pinned on him. No man could hide a soul capable of such a heinous act behind those forthcoming, open, beautiful eyes.

"Is there a particular reason you wish to know?" Weston asked curiously.

"There usually is a reason for everything I ask," Gillian replied dreamily, dismissing his frown as she gave herself up to the music and the magic of the dance. The earl was right-there wasn't much to the waltz once you remembered to count. She felt pleased she had picked it up so quickly, stepping on his toes only eight or nine times in total, and wondered if Charlotte was watching her triumph.

"Oh, I beg your pardon! I forgot to count. Did I hurt you badly?"

The wry twist to the earl's lips belied the attempt he made to brush off her apology. Gillian cursed her

clumsiness as the music ended and the earl escorted her back to her aunt's side. Weston expressed his appreciation for the dance with Gillian, bowed over a speechless Lady Collin's hand, and made a graceful exit.

Lady Collins stared at her hand as if there were hairy, eight-legged insects crawling on it, but quickly recovered both her poise and her voice.

"My dear, do you think-was that at all wise accepting-he is an earl, but-Lavonia is so certain-oh, why wasn't Theodore here when he asked you to dance?"

Gillian frowned as she tried to follow her aunt's convoluted thoughts. "Lord Weston? Why would Uncle Theo have an objection to my dancing with him?"

Lady Collins looked at her niece as if the insects were now on her. "My dear Gillian, surely you must know-I was quite certain Charlotte would warn you-but then, you've been around no society but that of Red Indians-and such a nice-looking man, too. Tragic. Always in black, you see-but still, murder! No, indeed! And the Duke of Sunderland has cut him, they say. Just this evening! His own cousin! Not good ton at all, not even with eighty thousand pounds a year."

It took a strong person in their prime to follow her aunt's thought process, but Gillian was learning the knack. If you didn't listen too closely, and allowed your attention to wander slightly, it was possible to glean enough kernels of information to respond.

"You mean I should not have waltzed with him because it's said he killed his wife? Aunt, I'm surprised at you for believing such a ridiculous and patently untrue falsehood. Why, one only has to spend a short amount of time in the earl's presence to ascertain his innocence. Of all the maligned men of my acquaintance, he certainly has suffered the most at the hands of the very people who should stand at his side, offering him support and succor rather than tearing his reputation and character to shreds. Society should be ashamed of itself for slandering him in such a manner! I for one won't tolerate the sort of base lies and cruel implications that seem to delight the ton, and I must say, Aunt, I'm appalled that you would be cozened into believing such blatant untruths and can only hope you do nothing to encourage similar vile and reprehensible fabrications! Indeed, I would hope you do your part to help that poor, lonely, troubled man regain the sterling reputation that was tarnished by the unexpected death of his no doubt very beloved wife. I know I shall do all that I can to help him!"

Lady Collins wilted under her niece's blistering attack. Gillian felt an immediate rush of guilt at having raised her voice at her aunt-truly, it seemed as if half the occupants of the ballroom had heard her, and held their collective breaths while they waited for her tirade to continue. Thankful that the Black Earl was not present to witness her unladylike display, Gillian made a feeble moue and turned back to her aunt.

"Such a lovely evening, isn't it?" she said loudly, for the benefit of the people who were attempting to eavesdrop. "And the weather-my, how lovely the weather has been for June. Delightfully warm, wouldn't you say, Aunt?"

"Warm, yes, it is warm. Lilacs and lilies-strolls in the garden and picnics at the riverside-Oxford, you know-oh, there is Her Grace. I will just pay my-yes."

As Lady Collins made her escape, Charlotte tore herself away from her group of admirers and hurried over to speak with her cousin. She laid a dainty glove-clad hand on her cousin's arm, flashed a dimpled smile over her lace fan at a passing admirer, and, with a grip that would do a stevedore proud, hauled Gillian into a sheltered spot guarded on either side by two large palms.

"What on earth were you thinking, Gilly?"

Gillian's stomach felt as if it were filled with lead shot. She had been unaccountably rude to her aunt and had no excuse for her behavior. She hadn't the slightest doubt that her cousin was about to dress her down, and she would deserve every harsh word. "I'm sorry, Charlotte. I had no right to speak to your mother that way-

Charlotte stared briefly at her, then made a face and waved the apology away. "Oh, fustian! Mama drives me to distraction too. But why did you let the earl get away? The supper dance is next, and if you were to intimate that you were free, he might ask you for it. You should have kept him by your side with amusing anecdotes and witty repartee until that time."

"What amusing anecdotes and witty repartee would that be?"

Charlotte waved her hand around vaguely and bobbed a curtsy to a pair of elderly ladies as they passed. "Oh, you know-stories of your life among the Red Indians. Tales of your harrowing journey to Civilization. Surely you must have a large collection of lurid tales to enable you to do something as simple as keeping a man enthralled at your side for an hour or so."

Gillian choked back a laugh. "The only lurid tales I know are the ones the sailors told me on the ship when I sailed here, and I doubt if they would interest a man of the world like Lord Weston. I'm surprised you would want me to try and keep his attention, Char. Your mama just told me he's bad ton."

Charlotte shot her cousin a disbelieving look. "Oh, pooh, who cares about that? He is an earl and that is all that matters. Well? What did he say to you? What did you say? Did he ask to call on you?"

Gillian felt her face flame as she remembered her appalling gaffe. "He taught me how to waltz, then asked how old I was."

Charlotte's blue eyes widened as she snapped her fan closed and smacked her cousin on the arm with it. "Good! That means he's interested in you!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Gillian said, suddenly exhausted and wishing she were at home, where no silver-eyed rakes lurked to torment her with lascivious thoughts and strange yearnings. "He's an earl and I'm-well, I'm me. No one in particular. Even if he had been temporarily interested, he is no longer."

"Now who's being ridiculous?" Charlotte dimpled. "Of course he must still be interested. What could you possibly do on the dance floor to disinterest a man of his reputation? Even stepping on his toes wouldn't stop the likes of him."

"I did that quite enough, I'm afraid," Gillian admitted, feeling an ache starting at the front of her head. She rubbed her forehead wearily. "But I went beyond stepping on his toes."

Charlotte looked a mute question at her.

Gillian summoned up a feeble smile. "I asked him if he murdered his wife."

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