

Kiss Me, Kitty

Shana Galen

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Also by Shana Galen

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Stealing the Duke's Heart
The Summer of Wine and Scandal
A Royal Christmas
A Grosvenor Square Christmas

Chapter One

Edmund Peters stepped out of the hackney across the street from a crowd of men gathered in front of Viscount Featherswallow's Mayfair townhouse. Edmund had arrived in London not even an hour before and barely taken the time to drop his luggage at the Clarendon Hotel before hailing the hackney. He'd wanted to see Kitty and her father as soon as possible. Clearly, he had not been the only gentleman with that goal in mind.

Edmund spotted the viscount in the crowd of young men and crossed the street, halting midway when he heard a crash. The sound seemed to have come from the townhouse, and Edmund looked up at the building in time to see the door open and a well-dressed gentleman race out. He looked over his shoulder to confirm he was not followed before joining the group of men. "She's mad!" he sputtered breathlessly. "She threw a vase at my head."

"Oh, dear. I hope it wasn't the Sèvres," the viscount said.

"She might have killed me! No dowry is worth this," the man said.

Another clatter sounded inside the home, and the recently evicted gentleman jumped.

“My lord,” another gentleman said, “your eldest daughter is clearly not to be tamed. I beg you to allow us to court your younger daughter. Miss Bianca Featherswallow is sweet and kind and—”

“Not available,” the viscount said. “I’m afraid you may court Kitty or no one.”

Edmund could attest to the veracity of the viscount’s claim. He’d seen Bianca at Godwin Priory, the Featherswallow country estate, two days before. She was hiding from fortune hunters who had attempted to abduct her and force her to marry to claim her dowry. Edmund was the son of the gentleman who owned the land adjacent to Godwin Priory. He’d known the Featherswallow sisters since they’d been children playing chase in sheep pastures and hide-and-seek by the old Roman wall. Kitty was not mad, and she did not need taming.

The window on the first floor opened, and Kitty stuck her head out. “I can hear you praising Bianca! Not a one of you will ever marry her if I have anything to say about it!” Her blonde head retreated, and the window slammed closed again.

“She’s done away with Miss Bianca!” one of the gentlemen said.

“Should we invade?” another asked. “Miss Bianca may be in danger.”

“My younger daughter is in no danger!” the viscount said, obviously trying to quell the riot before it began. He most certainly did not want to reveal that Bianca was out of town. He’d sent her away to keep her from these grasping gentlemen.

“Then may we court her?” another man asked.

“No. You may court my daughter Katherine.”

A gentleman next to Edmund muttered, “He says he won’t marry the younger until the elder is wed, but no one is brave enough to face the elder.”

“I am,” Edmund said. He raised his voice so the viscount might hear. “I would like to court Kitty.”

The viscount’s dark eyes searched the crowd for the source of the voice, and the men parted, revealing Edmund. The viscount smiled. “Mr. Peters! Well met, sir. Well met! I did not know you were in Town.”

Edmund bowed. “I’ve come to seek Kitty’s hand in marriage. If my proposal is acceptable to you, my lord.”

“Of course.” The viscount, who was almost the same height as Edmund, put an arm about him and drew him away from the crowd. “Why are you really here?” he asked, voice low. “Is Bianca well?”

“She was quite well when I left her two days ago. She mentioned Kitty was accepting suitors. I’d like to propose.”

The viscount nodded, shaking his head sadly. “You always did have a tender spot for her, though God knows she didn’t deserve it. Are you certain, lad?”

“Quite.”

A clang sounded inside the house, and the viscount glanced at it warily. “She’s in a bit of a temper. Perhaps you should return tomorrow.”

“I’d like this settled as soon as possible, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind if you don’t,” the viscount said. “Be careful, lad. Your father will have my head if you come home missing a limb.”

“I’m certain it won’t come to that.” Edmund straightened his shoulders and walked through the crowd. “Gentlemen, into the breach I go.”

A roar of approval greeted this announcement. “Good luck!” one man cried.

“Not necessary,” Edmund said. “I have a hard head and thick skin and don’t woo like a babe.” He passed a condescending glance over the gathered men then turned for the door. They shouted encouragement after him until he stepped inside the townhouse and closed the door.

Kitty stomped across the drawing room, reached for a silver candlestick, reconsidered, and lifted a pillow instead. She threw the pillow across the room, accidentally hitting a framed landscape painting, which then clanged to the ground.

“Dash it all!” she said, though she would have liked to say something a good deal cruder. Fury burned through her, hot and bright. She had told her father she did not want to marry, and yet he’d invited suitors to woo her these past three days. She’d tolerated them the first day, though her ears had all but bled from the bad poetry, and every room in the house was now filled with dying flowers. She’d endured the sycophants the second day. She’d only cursed once (or twice) and had only thrown two (or three) books at the men.

But today...today her patience was at an end. If these grasping men who only sought her hand for her dowry could not understand she did not want them, she would *make* them understand. Clearly, her words had no effect. She'd had to resort to physical expressions of her displeasure.

Kitty almost smiled. Her tantrums had succeeded. They'd run away like the cowards they were. And now they stood outside her home and lamented Bianca's absence. What did she care if everyone always like Bianca better than her? Why did it matter if these men who had come to court her secretly wished she were the pretty, petite, delicate Bianca?

"Ugh!" Kitty grunted and threw another pillow. This one knocked the sheet music off the pianoforte.

"If you don't care for that song, I'm sure we can settle on another," said a male voice.

Kitty swung around, prepared to face another avaricious suitor, but the retort on her lips died when she saw Edmund Peters. For a moment, all she could do was look at him and shake her head. *He* was not supposed to be here. Edmund should be in Hampshire, seeing to his family's land. Unless...

"Is my sister—" she began.

"Quite well. I saw her two days ago."

Kitty felt a weight lift from her shoulders. She'd known it had been the right thing to send Bianca away, but she'd always looked after her younger sister, and Kitty felt uneasy not being able to protect her.

“I didn’t come about Bianca,” he said.

“Oh?” Kitty raised her brows.

“I came for you.”

For some reason those words made Kitty’s skin feel prickly and warm. Her gaze flashed to Edmund’s, which was a mistake. She’d forgotten how attractive he was with those gray eyes and that dark hair. She looked down, which was also an error, because then she noted his broad shoulders, slim waist, and muscled thighs. This was no pampered nobleman, like the dandies outside. This was a man who knew the feel of hard labor and whose body bore the effects of it.

Quite lovely effects...

“I beg your pardon,” Kitty finally managed after focusing her gaze on a spot on the wall near Edmund’s head.

“Bianca said you were in London for a husband. I came to offer myself for the role of groom.”

Kitty glared at him. “What trickery is this? Am I not humiliated enough?” She gestured to the window and the crowd of men outside. “Now you have come to mock me?”

“I don’t mock you at all. I intend to make an honest proposal.” He reached for her, and she scooted back, jostling a table and almost upending a lamp.

Panic raced through her at the thought of his touching her. Not because she didn’t want him to touch her. She did *want* him to lay hands on her. She wanted it too much.

“Edmund, you don’t want to marry me.”

“I do.” He moved forward again, and she slid around a couch, putting the furnishing between them. “Kitty, it can’t have escaped your notice all these years that I admire you.”

“It *has* escaped my notice.” But now she was lying, because she could remember many times over the years when she’d felt his dove-gray eyes on her, warm with approval or appreciation. She’d thought she only imagined it. “You’re only here for the dowry.”

“Ouch.” He touched his chest, over his heart. “Your words sting. I don’t need your dowry.” He moved around the couch, and she grabbed a chair and thrust it at him.

“Watch out. I’m like a wasp, and I can sting with more than words.”

He raised his brows. “If you’re a wasp, then I had better pluck out your stinger.” He grabbed for the chair and tossed it aside. Kitty let out a little scream and tried to flee, but he caught her about the waist.

“You’ll never find it,” she said, struggling against his hold and trying to ignore the feel of his strong, warm hands on her.

“Everyone knows where a wasp keeps her sting. In her tail,” he murmured in her ear.

“In her tongue.”

“Speaking of tongues in tails—”

She gasped. “I was not!”

“Come sit on my lap.” He moved to the couch and pulled her down on top of him.

“Let me up!”

“I will, Kitty. If you answer me one question.” His tone had gentled, and his hands loosened on her. She turned and looked into his eyes.

“What question?” she asked.

“Do you really not want me?”

Kitty opened her mouth, the retort ready before she could even think the word *no*. But he put a finger on her lips, quieting her.

“Because I want you,” he went on, voice low and seductive. “I’ve always wanted you—first as a playmate, then as a friend, now as a lover.”

She shook her head.

“It’s true,” he said. “You’re clever and beautiful, witty and stubborn, strong and yet achingly soft.” His hand settled on her hip as he said this, emphasizing the soft parts of her he liked.

Kitty tried to speak again, but it was not simply his finger damming her reply. No one had ever said anything to her like this. No one had ever called her beautiful or clever or witty. No one had ever seen her as anyone more than Bianca’s sister. Perfect Bianca. Darling Bianca. *Why can’t Kitty be more like her sister?*

“Why do you think I kissed you all those years ago?”

Kitty felt her cheeks heat. She hadn’t thought he remembered that kiss. She’d been all of fifteen, which meant it was more than a decade ago. But there wasn’t a day that passed where she didn’t think of that kiss. They’d been out walking with Bianca and Edmund’s sister Rose. The young girls were skipping ahead and searching for berries. Edmund was returning to Oxford the next day for another

term. Kitty had told him she was jealous and wished she could go to university and learn all he did. “All I ever learn is French and embroidery,” she’d said.

“I promise it’s not nearly as exciting as you believe.”

“You’re lying,” she said.

“Yes, I am. University is jolly good fun. No parents. No waking up in the middle of the night when a ewe is having a difficult labor. No chopping wood for the winter or harvesting the wheat when we’re short of laborers.”

“You know you miss all of it.”

He’d looked at her then. Really looked at her. Those gray eyes focused on her with an intensity that made her shiver. “You know me too well, Kitty,” he’d said. “But you don’t know everything.” He’d moved toward her, and she took a step back until she was pressed against a tree. “I’ll wager you didn’t know I miss you.” He leaned a hand on the tree trunk beside her shoulder. “Do you ever miss me?”

Kitty *had* missed him, but she’d never admit it. She’d never admit she read his letters to the family over and over or wrote replies that she then tossed in the fire. “No,” she said.

“Now who’s lying?”

“I’m not—”

“Shh.” He moved closer so his body brushed against hers. “Kiss me, Kitty.”

He’d lowered his mouth to caress hers in a delicate manner that was almost chaste. She’d closed her eyes, and colors exploded behind her lids as her blood thrummed a beat in her ears. For a moment, she

hadn't been able to breathe. Then he'd pulled back, and she'd opened her eyes. She might have grabbed him and kissed him again—except Bianca chose that instant to holler, “Kitty! Come see this flower!”

Edmund had given her a rueful smile, and they'd broken apart and trudged after the girls. Neither of them had ever mentioned that kiss again.

“I thought you'd forgotten that kiss,” she said now, looking down at him. She'd forgotten she was supposed to be fighting to free herself from his arms and his lap.

“My first kiss?” He smiled and shook his head. “How could I?”

“That was *your* first kiss?”

He nodded. “Was it yours?”

“Of course.”

“Then we come full circle,” he said, cupping her cheek. “I was the first man to kiss you. I'd like to be the last.” He exerted gentle pressure to pull her mouth closer to his. “Will you be the last woman to kiss me, Kitty?” His nose nudged hers, and all she could think about was how close their lips were and how easy it would be to close that distance. “Say yes,” he murmured.

She would have said anything in that moment if it meant he would kiss her. “Yes,” she whispered, and was rewarded with the sweep of his lips against hers. She felt the same frisson of heady pleasure she remembered from over a decade ago. She'd never felt this way with any other boy or man she'd allowed to kiss her. For a long time, she thought she'd imagined it. But no. Here was that tingle, that heat, that drugging brush of his lips.

If this kiss was like the one from their childhood, it would end now—sweet and innocent. But neither of them was quite so innocent now. Edmund slid his hand to cradle the back of her neck and pull her closer. She pressed her hands against that steely chest, curling her fingers into the wool of his coat. His mouth moved over hers, tentatively at first and then with more confidence. The pressure of his lips was light and teasing. Kitty's thoughts were a jumble, but one thing was clear—Edmund knew how to kiss.

He took the teasing to tantalizing and then to demanding. Kitty was there with him, wanting more even as he gave it to her. When he licked at her lips, she parted them, allowing him inside. The sweep of his tongue was like a bolt of lightning to her senses. Her heart pounded so hard she thought it might burst. The breath caught in her chest, her lungs feeling as though they were gripped in a vise. Her body went absolutely limp, seemingly out of her control as she melted against him. She wanted to tear the coat off him, open his shirt, feel his skin against her palms.

What was the matter with her? But even as she had the thought, he deepened their kiss, and she made a low moaning sound that would have mortified her were she not made completely insensible by the flick of his tongue and the mesmerizing slide of his lips.

“Kitty?” a voice called from far away. “Edmund?”

Edmund pulled back, and Kitty wanted to cry out at the sudden break between them. She needed his mouth on hers.

“Are you both still alive?” came the voice, which she now recognized as her father's. She realized she was still sitting on

Edmund's lap and scrambled to her feet. This was not an easy task, as her legs felt about as solid as dandelion fluff. But she stumbled a respectable distance from Edmund just as her father opened the door to the drawing room. His gaze took in the two of them. Kitty didn't know what he saw, but a smile broke out on his face.

She blinked. When their mother had been alive, he'd smiled all the time. Now his smiles were few and far between. "There you are," he said. His gaze swept the room, probably taking in the destruction she'd wrought—pieces of broken pottery, pillows on the floor, an overturned chair. "Have you been catching up?" he asked.

Kitty felt her cheeks burst into flame. Edmund, however, didn't seem the least self-conscious. "We were just discussing childhood memories." He put an arm about her waist and pulled her close. Kitty stiffened and tried to move from his side, but he held her tightly. "And the future and making new memories, of course."

"Very good. Very good."

Kitty frowned at her father. He seemed quite pleased with himself. Just then, she heard more voices, and half a dozen men, whom she recognized as her would-be suitors, appeared behind her father. She drew in a breath, her fingers itching to grab for another vase to throw. Edmund squeezed her in a gesture that was vaguely reassuring.

Her father turned to the assembly. "Everyone must join me in a drink to toast the new betrothal of my daughter Katherine Featherswallow to Edmund Peters."

“What?” Kitty said, but her voice was swallowed by the roar of the men. She looked up at Edmund, but he was smiling broadly, like he was some sort of victorious gladiator and she was the lion he’d vanquished. He’d tricked her. Edmund had *tricked* her!

“Huzzah!” one of her suitors cried.

“You did it, sir!” another called out.

“All hail Peters! He’s finally tamed the shrew!” a third man called.

And that was the very last straw.

Chapter Two

Edmund knew the moment Kitty realized what was happening. Her body went from stiff to absolutely rigid.

“Kitty, let me explain—” he began. This wasn’t how he’d wanted things to go. He’d wanted to get on one knee and beg her to be his wife. He’d wanted to remind her of all the things they had in common—love of the countryside, the music of Schubert, eating berries until their fingers were purple. He hadn’t planned to kiss her, but it had seemed the only way to capture her attention. She’d been so agitated when he arrived.

Oh, who was he trying to convince? He’d kissed her because he couldn’t resist. He’d not forgotten how beautiful she was, but his memory was nothing compared to the reality of seeing her in the flesh. He was a tall man, three inches over six feet, and she was a woman just a few inches shy of six feet. He liked her height, how she didn’t make him feel like a giant. He remembered her always wearing her honey-blond hair in a severe knot at the nape of her neck, but when he stepped into the drawing room, it had come loose and swirled about her as though it had a life of its own. Her ice-blue eyes had warmed when she saw him, and his body had reacted instantly.

He'd wanted to kiss her until her eyes were dark with passion and her pale lips red as cherries. He'd made the mistake of pulling her into his lap, and he'd lost his senses altogether. How could he not when her soft, generous bottom rested on his knees, his hand caressed the curve of her hip, and her generous bosom was soft against his chest?

Then, when he had kissed her, all his plans had scattered like seeds in the wind. Her lips were so soft, her tongue so eager, her body warm and inviting. He wanted to pull her down and under him, sink into her, and love her until they were both sated.

He looked at her now, saw the way the color flooded her face, and knew he was in trouble. They were all in trouble.

“What did you call me?” she said, voice deceptively calm but her sharp tone cutting through the congratulatory cheers.

“Er—” The man who had referred to her as a *shrew* took a precautionary step back.

“Now, Kitty,” the viscount began.

“And you, Papa! How dare you announce my betrothal without even asking me if I wish to marry this man? I am not a stag to be hunted. You are all cheering as though he”—here she gestured to Edmund—“shot me between the eyes. Well, I'm still standing!”

“Kitty, might we speak about this in private?” Edmund said, holding a hand out and wishing she would glance at him. If he could just catch her eyes, perhaps he could give her a look that would remind her of their kiss. He could speak to her alone, do things the right way.

“And *you!*”

Or perhaps not.

“I trusted you.” Her eyes filled with betrayal, and Edmund shook his head.

“Kitty, please.”

But she wasn't listening. She reached for the nearest object, which was a book, and hurled it at his head. Edmund ducked, and the book flew across the room and smashed into a figurine of a shepherdess. Shards of pottery exploded, and several of the men screamed and ran. Kitty stomped out of the room, calling out insults to the suitors fleeing her wrath. Finally, the front door slammed, and then what Edmund assumed was the door to her chamber banged and the house was thrust into silence.

The clock perched precariously on the mantel ticked loudly. The viscount moved across the room, righted the clock, then lifted two glasses from the drinks cart. “Well, at least she didn't smash the brandy,” he said. “Drink?”

“Please,” Edmund said.

The viscount poured two generous glasses, handed one to Edmund, and drank the other in one long swallow. He poured himself another. “She has her mother's temper, you know.”

Edmund did remember Lady Featherswallow's temper. Once a group of them had brought a dog into Godwin Priory and attempted to give the muddy creature a bath. All they'd done was track water and mud throughout the house. Lady Featherswallow had scolded them so harshly that Edmund thought he might have preferred the

lash. He and his siblings had slunk back home. The next time they saw the viscountess, she'd been all smiles and given them small cakes with tea. She angered quickly and forgave just as quickly too. He could only hope Kitty forgave as easily.

"It's my fault," he said to the viscount after taking a sip of brandy. "I hadn't asked her to be my wife quite yet."

"Oh dear. I was too hasty in my return to the house. Everything was so quiet suddenly."

Edmund wasn't about to explain the reason for the silence. "We started talking of what we remembered from our childhood, and I didn't have the opportunity to mention matrimony."

"I fear I've ruined your chances now." The viscount looked so despondent that Edmund put a hand on his shoulder.

"Rubbish. I won't give up so easily."

The viscount looked up. "You won't?"

"You think a little temper scares me? I love Kitty, my lord. I will not be swayed by harsh words."

"What about objects flung at your head?"

"I'll just have to catch them. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll return to my lodgings and reconsider my strategy."

Edmund took his leave and made his way to his hotel, where he bathed and changed and then walked to Covent Garden and stepped inside Brown's Coffee Shop. The establishment was the same as the last time he'd been here, more than six months ago. Heavy wooden tables and heavy conversation took up most of the space and the air in the building. Outside the sun shone intermittently through the

clouds, but inside it was perpetually dark. Kenneth sat at the same table where Edmund had met him last year, surrounded by the same friends, possibly wearing the same clothes.

Though he hadn't written ahead, Kenneth saw him immediately. "Brother!" He stood, crossed the shop, and embraced Edmund. Edmund embraced him back, noting that though his young sibling was no taller, his shoulders were broader, and he had a shadow of a beard. "Come sit," Kenneth said, leading Edmund to the table he shared with two other boy-men who looked barely out of leading strings. He called the pretty serving girl over and ordered more coffee, then introduced his friends.

Edmund bowed then dismissed the men from his thoughts. Kenneth had a talent for making friends. He had many, and Edmund rarely met the same one twice.

"What brings you to Town?" Kenneth asked. "Don't tell me Papa has charged you with trying to convince me to join the navy again. Or is it the army this time?"

"Papa did not send me, though he and Mama do send their regards. I fear they've quite given up trying to steer your future."

"Excellent, as I am the captain of my own ship." A light came into his eyes, and he reached for a piece of parchment and a quill lying on the table. "I may be able to use that." He scribbled something on the paper while Edmund took the coffee from the serving girl and waited.

Finally, Kenneth looked up. "I must work when my muse appears. She is fleeing of late."

“The writing is not going well?” Edmund asked.

Kenneth shrugged and drank his own coffee. “Some days are good, others less so. I did have a poem published in *Grantham’s Repository of Poetry and Prose*. Did you see it?”

As Edmund had never even heard of *Grantham’s Repository of Poetry and Prose* and certainly didn’t subscribe to the magazine, he shook his head. “That’s wonderful news. If you have a spare copy, I will bring it home to share with Mama and Papa.”

Kenneth nodded. “If you aren’t here to goad me into military service, why are you here?”

“Matrimony.”

The shocked look on Kenneth’s face would have been comical if Edmund hadn’t been expecting such a reaction. At the mention of marriage, Kenneth’s friends excused themselves and fled. Apparently, the very idea of matrimony was enough to scare them away. Edmund supposed he had been the same at one and twenty.

“You are here for the Season?” Kenneth asked.

“Not exactly. I have a particular lady in mind. I wish to woo her and wed her.”

“Who is this fortunate miss?” Kenneth took a sip of coffee, his gaze fixed on Edmund.

“Kitty Featherswallow.”

Kenneth choked and began to cough. His pale face went quite red, and Edmund had to stand and pound him on the back. “I’m fine. I’m fine.” Kenneth waved his hands. “I’m sorry. I thought you said Kitty Featherswallow.”

“I did.”

Kenneth began coughing again, even though he hadn't sipped any more coffee.

“This seems a bit of an overreaction, Kenneth.”

“I do apologize, but you are my only brother, and I'm not ready to lose you so soon.”

Edmund frowned. “She's not that bad.”

“Oh, she's worse. She's not the girl you and I grew up with, Edmund, although I was dreadfully terrified of her when I was a child too. Her temper is the stuff of legends.”

“I witnessed it earlier today when I called on her and her father.”

“You called on her?” Kenneth looked at Edmund closely. “And you left in one piece?”

“Save these quips for your next play. I mean to marry her.”

“*Why?* Oh, God. Has Papa taken up gambling and lost everything in a game of whist? Are we desperate for money?”

“Not at all. I'm not after her dowry, though I wouldn't turn it away.”

“Neither would I, but even a fortune like that isn't worth your life. Marry Bianca if you're keen on that family.”

Edmund shook his head. “She's like Mary or Rose to me, a little sister. While Kitty...”

“Dear God. You love Kitty, don't you? Poor chap. We should adjourn to an establishment where they serve something stronger than coffee.”

“The viscount already gave me brandy. I don’t need a drink. I need your connections. If I’m to woo Kitty—stop laughing, Kenneth—I need to approach her away from her own territory. She’s too dug in at her townhouse, too defensive, and too quick to retreat to her bedchamber when things don’t go her way. But she can’t run away so easily at the theater or a garden party.”

“What you want is a ball,” Kenneth said. “Dance with her, sweep her off her feet.”

“Excellent idea. I need you to find out which she will attend.”

“That shouldn’t be difficult, as most of the sane men I know avoid her at all costs. Wouldn’t it be easier to ask her father for a copy of her social calendar? Surely he supports your suit.”

Edmund shook his head. “I don’t want either of them to expect me. I need the element of surprise.”

“You’ll need much more to win over a hellcat like that. But if Kitty is what you desire, I can certainly ascertain where the tiger is expected to prowl. Where are you staying? The Clarendon?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll send a list as soon as I have it. Just promise me one thing.”

“Of course.”

“Don’t invite me to the wedding.”

Kitty stared out of her bedchamber window and sighed. As usual, the day had begun with a muster of peacocks come to call on her. Terrorizing them had not been quite as enjoyable as usual, however. She hadn’t wanted to admit that she had been looking for Edmund to

make an appearance during her at-home hours, but when he had not deigned to call on her, she was forced to acknowledge, if only to herself, that she was disappointed. She'd thought he was made of stronger stuff. She'd thought he wouldn't be so easily scared away.

She'd wanted to kiss him again—not that she could do that with all the peacocks pecking around her. Still, she imagined him banishing all the preening poets, sweeping her into his arms, and kissing her senseless.

Ridiculous. No man would ever treat her like a flesh-and-blood woman. Men only wanted one thing from her—her dowry. And no man but Edmund had ever made her feel like she was more than the pile of blunt that came with her marriage contract. She hadn't thought he was afraid of her, though she had tested him much as she tested all her suitors. He was the first man who hadn't run away or cowered in fear. He was the first man in a long time who had been brave enough to kiss her.

But he hadn't come to see her today. He hadn't even sent a note or his card. She'd been staring out of her window for hours, hoping to see a hackney arrive, but dozens had passed and not even one stopped at her townhouse.

Kitty pushed away from the window. This was why she didn't allow herself to read lurid romances like her sister Bianca. No knight on a white steed would come to rescue her. That only happened in books and to women like Bianca. Edmund was probably on his way back to Hampshire by now. That or he had found some other woman

to court—some petite, pretty woman who smiled and fluttered her lashes and told him how big and strong and handsome he was.

Kitty threw herself on her bed and blinked away the tears stinging behind her eyes. A sound downstairs made her bolt up again and run to the window. She hated herself for the way her heart pounded in her chest with hope. That hope was soon dashed again when she saw the sound had only been a delivery boy knocking on the door. She thought about opening the window and scolding the boy for not going to the back door, but she couldn't summon the strength.

She flopped back on her bed only to sit up again when her maid opened the door. "This came for you, miss," Brewton said.

Kitty stared at the basket in Brewton's arms. The basket was a common woven sort, but it had a checked cloth over the top, concealing the contents. She waved it away. "You may put it with the rest of the gifts," she said. The peacocks were always sending her gifts.

"Yes, miss. I thought you might want to see this one."

"Why?"

"The card says it's from Mr. Peters."

Kitty leapt off the bed and snatched the paper from Brewton's hand. The card, which was definitely written in Edmund's hand, read:

*For Kitty—
the apple of my eye,
sweet to the core.*

E

Kitty swept the cloth off the basket and gasped at the dozen gleaming red apples artfully arranged in the basket.

“No wonder this was so heavy,” Brewton said. “Those apples are enormous.”

They were, Kitty must admit, very fine apples—exceptionally large, red, and lovely. Of course, all of that would have meant nothing if Kitty had not cared for apples. But Edmund knew—he remembered—that she loved apples. She absolutely adored apples, apple cider, apple tart, apple sauce. This basket of apples meant more to her than all the vases of hothouse flowers crowding the dining room and drawing rooms below.

She plucked one from the tower. “You may bring this to the kitchens, Brewton. Perhaps Cook can make a tart or a pie.”

“Yes, miss.”

When Brewton had gone, Kitty unfolded the note again. “Sweet to the core.” She sniffed. She was not sweet at all—at least not in public. Was it possible Edmund saw beneath her coarse exterior to the soft parts underneath?

She bit into the apple, tasting the sweet and slightly tart burst of flavor. What game was Edmund playing? And how would she keep him from capturing her heart?

Chapter Three

Edmund spotted Kitty as soon as she entered the assembly hall. For the past three-quarters of an hour, he'd been standing against a wall, suffering accusatory stares from the mothers of the wallflowers. Despite the glares, Edmund hadn't asked any ladies to dance. Kenneth had reliable intelligence that Viscount Featherswallow had promised the hostesses that he and Miss Katherine Featherswallow would attend tonight. Accordingly, several impoverished sons of peers were also in attendance. As this hall in Cheapside was not Almack's or hosted by a duke or duchess, there was no reason for any peers to attend unless they hoped to catch an heiress. The hostesses, wives of wealthy merchants in Town, would now have the pleasure of boasting their ball had attracted one son of a marquess, two sons of earls, the son of a viscount, and a baronet.

None of those men were dancing either, and Edmund had been keeping an eye on them until the air in the hall shifted. His head jerked to the entrance of the room just as Viscount Featherswallow took the gloved hand of his eldest daughter and escorted her inside.

Kitty was an absolute vision tonight. Her usually severe coiffure had been softened by curls over her shoulder and a wave of honey-

blonde hair across her forehead and pinned behind her left ear. Her hair seemed to shimmer in the candlelight. She wore pale blue moonstones that matched her icy eyes and made her alabaster skin look almost iridescent. Her gown was a blush-rose color, which he would have thought might look too young on her. Instead, it gave her a pretty glow and softened her sometimes sharp expressions.

Other parts of her needed no softening. Her lips were full and luscious—when not pressed tightly in disapproval—and the gown revealed her rounded shoulders. The tight bodice also showcased her full breasts. Edmund supposed he was not the only man whose mouth went dry at the sight of her ample assets.

As he watched, one of the penniless peers stepped in front of her and bowed low. The music of the hired orchestra made it impossible to hear his words. Her father spoke, probably making introductions. Kitty did not offer her hand and did not speak. In fact, she swept right past the gentleman trying to make her acquaintance. Edmund winced, almost feeling sorry for the man. He watched the same scenario play out again before Kitty found a spot to stand against the wall near where he stood with the wallflowers. She patted her father's shoulder, and he moved toward the refreshment table. Edmund didn't think he would reach it, as a line of widows waited to intercept him. A handsome, wealthy man with all his teeth was a sought-after commodity.

Edmund moved along the wall until he stood beside Kitty, who was busying herself with folding and unfolding her fan.

“Did you enjoy the apples?” he asked.

She dropped her fan and jerked her head to face him. Edmund bowed, swept her fan off the floor, and presented it with a flourish. She took the item, snapped it open, and began to fan herself. Was he mistaken or did her cheeks look flushed?

“Mr. Peters, I did not expect to see you here.”

“I hope my presence is not unwelcome.”

She gave a delicate shrug. “It’s nothing to me either way.”

“I’m sure,” he said as she continued to work her fan frantically. “How have you been, Kitty?”

She narrowed her eyes. “You wouldn’t have to ask that question if you’d called on me these past days.”

Edmund couldn’t argue. What he didn’t say was that he’d very much *wanted* to call on her. However, he’d discussed the question with Kenneth *ad nauseum* and agreed with his brother that “distance made the heart grow fonder.” Edmund hadn’t wanted to be *too* distant, which was why he’d sent a basket of her favorite fruit one day and a bottle of claret the next. He was fortunate to have his brother, the writer, help him with the sentiments for the cards. Edmund was a man of action, not words. Fortunately, now was the time for action.

The orchestra finished the last few measures of the piece they played.

“I’ve missed you, Kitty. I do hope my gifts made up in some small way for my absence.”

She looked like she was about to argue that she hadn’t minded his absence at all, but Edmund took her hand in his. “Come and dance

with me,” he said as a new set of couples began to assemble on the floor.

“No, thank you.”

“You’d rather stand here and entertain that line of puppies waiting to speak to you?” He lifted his head toward the men gathering nearby. “If that is the case, I will leave you to your suitors—”

“No!” She tucked her hand in his arm. “Suddenly, a dance seems just the thing.”

Edmund escorted her onto the dance floor, where the couples had lined up with the men on one side and the women on the other. The music began, a country dance, and Edmund bowed to Kitty as the first couple made their way down the line of dancers. He’d been to dozens of dances like this over the years, but now he realized he’d never once danced with Kitty at any of them. He’d danced with daughters of the local gentry, his own sisters, and Kitty’s sister Bianca. Edmund remembered seeing Kitty dance many times, but he had never partnered her. Perhaps because he feared that once he took her by the hand, he wouldn’t be able to let go. He hadn’t been ready for marriage—not then. But he was now, and he realized it had always been Kitty he’d imagined as his wife.

He needed to convince her to see him as a husband.

The music changed, and he stepped forward and took Kitty’s hands in his, twirling her about then changing partners to dance with another young lady, and then taking Kitty’s hands again. The dance was quick and lively, and soon Kitty’s cheeks were pink from exertion. Edmund found that even when another couple danced down

the line or he partnered another lady briefly, he couldn't take his eyes from Kitty.

"Enjoying yourself?" he asked as they executed a step close together.

"I am, actually," she said. "I haven't danced since—"

He knew immediately what she was thinking. She hadn't danced since her mother's death. She stumbled, and he caught the shimmer of tears in her eyes. Without hesitating, Edmund took her hand and ferried her off the dance floor. The last thing she would want was for anyone to see her weeping. Clearly, even five years after her mother's passing, that wound was still raw.

Edmund looked about for a private space and, seeing none, slipped through a door a servant passed through. The sounds of the orchestra and the conversation were immediately muffled and replaced by the clink of silver and crystal as the servants on the floor below prepared dinner and trays of wine and champagne for the guests.

"We shouldn't be here," Kitty said, dabbing at her eyes with a silk handkerchief.

"The servants will tolerate us for a moment," he said. "I could see you needed to catch your breath. It was too warm in there."

She gave him a withering look. "You know as well as I that the heat had nothing to do with this." She indicated her face, which was slightly blotchy now.

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

She looked up at him then, her blue eyes darker than usual. “Why are you so kind to me?” she asked. “I don’t deserve it.”

“Of course you do.”

She shook her head. “I treated you horribly, and you sent me apples and claret. How did you even remember I liked those?”

“I remember everything about you, Kitty. I deserved poor treatment. I shouldn’t have allowed your father to assume our betrothal.”

“No, you shouldn’t have. I felt like a fool.”

Her words shocked him. He thought she’d simply been angry that he hadn’t asked if she wanted him before going to her father to ask for her hand. But perhaps he didn’t know her as well as he’d thought. “Why should you feel like a fool?”

“Because people might believe you wanted to marry me. We both know that’s not the case.”

“But it *is* the case,” he said.

“Don’t say things you don’t mean to protect my feelings.”

“I would never do that. Kitty, look at me.” Her gaze met his. “You know I would never lie to you. I do want to marry you. I should have made that clearer at your townhouse. I came from Hampshire as soon as I realized you were in London for the Season. I didn’t want to risk your marrying any man but me.”

She stared at him. “But you never...” She paused. “After that first kiss we shared, you never tried to kiss me again. You never spoke of it or paid me any particular attention.”

“I was seventeen and an idiot. But when I went back to school, I never forgot about you. And I would have made my intentions clear when I returned, but...”

She nodded. “My mother was ill, and then I was in mourning.”

“It never seemed the right time.”

“Is now the right time?”

“I hope so.” He lifted a hand and cupped her cheek. “You tell me, sweet.”

“I’m not sweet,” she whispered as he drew closer to her.

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

He bent his head and kissed her gently. He heard her breath hitch in her throat as he slid his hand to the back of her neck, tangling his fingers in her loose curls as he did so. Heat smoldered between them as their mouths met and her body melted into his. She was the perfect height, her lips the perfect softness, her body warm and supple as he put an arm about her waist and pulled her against him. His heart thudded in his ears, but he noted her pleased sighs as he slid his tongue inside her mouth and the way her hands clutched at his coat, indicating she wanted him closer, wanted him to continue.

“Oy!” came a voice. “Ye can’t be in ’ere.”

Kitty broke the kiss and ducked her head. Edmund gave the footman a sharp glare. “Thank you for that information,” he said quietly. “Go on your way now.”

The footman opened his mouth to protest then seemed to think better of it and marched away, muttering under his breath.

Edmund looked back at Kitty, whose head was still lowered. She was shaking, and a pang of fear struck him. Was she weeping again? Then she raised her face, and he saw she was laughing. “Thank you for that information,” she said in a low voice that sounded remarkably like his.

He grinned. “You have a better response?”

“No. My usual response when cornered is to throw something.”

Edmund chuckled. “I hardly think flinging your fan at him would have helped the situation.”

“I should go find my father,” she said. “He’ll be looking for me.”

Edmund thought it more likely he’d be surrounded by widows and enjoying the feminine attention. “Before you go, I need to do this properly.” He sank to one knee and took her hand.

“Edmund!”

“I want there to be no question between us. I have your father’s blessing, but do I have yours, Kitty? Do you love me? Will you be my wife?” He thought she might begin weeping again, and he wasn’t certain if that was good or bad. Instead, she nodded vigorously.

“Yes, I’ll marry you.”

Edmund jolted. He hadn’t really thought she would agree. He’d thought he’d have to send more apples—an entire cart—or grovel or beg or carry her over his shoulder to the church. But she *wanted* to marry him. She *wanted* to be his wife.

“You do,” he said, voice full of wonder. “You do want to marry me.”

“Kiss me again, and I’ll show you how much.”

Edmund was back on his feet in a blur. He pulled her into his arms, dipped her back, and kissed her.

“Oy! Not again!” came the voice of the footman.

Kitty giggled, and Edmund righted her. “We’re leaving,” he told the footman. To Kitty, he said, “I’ll call on you tomorrow to make it official.”

“I’ll see you then,” she said. “Now let me go before everyone wonders what we’ve been up to.”

“I don’t ’ave to wonder,” the footman grumbled.

Kitty slipped through the servants’ door, and Edmund leaned against the wall, smiling to himself.

It was only later that he’d realize she hadn’t said she loved him.

Edmund barely slept that night. He’d paced his hotel chamber until morning, then bathed, shaved, and dressed hours before he could call on Kitty or her father. He hoped she wanted a quick wedding. They could call the banns this Sunday and be married in just a few weeks. Next month, he could have her in his arms, in his bed, any time of the day or night.

He took a hackney to her townhouse and sat outside for a quarter hour until the time when he could finally knock on her door. He felt like he had when he’d been a child and heard his father’s coach on the drive after a trip to London. His father always brought gifts, and though Edmund had pretended to be uninterested, he’d always been the first to welcome his father home. Now he had that same sense of giddy anticipation. He’d been waiting to tell Kitty his feelings for so

long, and to know she reciprocated them and wanted to wed him was exhilarating.

He finally climbed out of the hackney and strolled to the door, tucked his hat under his arm, and reached for the knocker. Edmund frowned. The knocker was not there. He stepped back and looked at the townhouse. Yes, he was in the correct place. Why should the knocker be absent? That was a sign the family was away, and he'd just seen Kitty the night before. He'd held her in his arms.

Edmund lifted a fist and pounded on the door, his heart hammering with the rhythm of his knocking. He didn't cease until Jensen, the Featherswallows' butler, yanked the door open. The servant's scowl immediately disappeared when he spotted Edmund.

"Jensen, I'm here to see Miss Featherswallow and her father."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Peters, the viscount and Miss Featherswallow are not at home."

Edmund pushed past the butler and into the wide, bright foyer. "Jensen, Miss Featherswallow will want to see me. You can dispense with the formalities. Where is she?"

"Sir—"

"Kitty!" His voice echoed against the marble tile in the entryway.

"Sir, the viscount and Miss Featherswallow are not physically at home."

Edmund rounded on him. "Then I shall wait until they return. Where have they gone?"

“Godwin Priory, sir. A messenger came last night with news that Miss Bianca was injured and”—the servant’s voice hitched—“may not recover.”

Edmund stared at the butler as though he spoke gibberish. Bianca injured? At risk of death? His head spun even as he put a hand on Jensen’s shoulder. Of course the man was upset. The entire staff loved Bianca. She was so amiable and sweet, unlike her prickly sister, who was an acquired taste.

“When did they depart?” Edmund asked. Perhaps he might borrow a horse and catch them on the road.

“Just before dawn, sir.”

Edmund sighed. They’d been away for hours. He could not catch them.

But he could go after them. He could be there for Kitty in this difficult time. She would need him.

Kitty took the dinner tray the servant placed before her and hurled it at the wall. “I said I don’t need anything!” she yelled.

The man, one of the sons of the innkeeper near her home of Godwin Priory, shrank back. Kitty immediately regretted her actions. It was not his fault she was in a foul mood.

“I’m sorry, miss. Your father said we were to bring you—”

Kitty waved her hand. “All I want is news, understand?”

She stood at the window of the inn and stared out at the muddy streets of the little village. Linton was little more than a posting house, a few shops, and this inn, but she and Bianca had loved coming here

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when they were young. They'd spend hours in the millinery shop, examining ribbons and trying to decide which color suited them best. Then they'd stop by the apothecary and buy candied violets or a stick of peppermint. If Mama or Papa were with them, they might even dine at the Black Hare, which was the inn. She'd enjoyed many meals in this very public room.

Her stomach growled. She probably shouldn't have thrown that tray of food. She was hungry. But she couldn't think of eating until her father returned with news of Bianca.

"Miss, would you like some tea?" asked a feminine voice.

Kitty swung around, a harsh retort on her lips. But her words died when she spotted Edmund just behind the serving girl. Suddenly, the weight she'd been carrying fell away. Edmund was what she needed.

She almost ran into his arms...before she remembered she'd agreed to marry him. What had she been thinking? She must have been overheated or dizzy from champagne to agree to such a thing. She could see her wedding day now—she'd be at the church waiting alone, and he would send a note saying he reconsidered. Or worse, he'd stand at the altar and tell everyone in the pews that he'd made a mistake. He didn't love her. No one loved her once they came to know her.

"Why are you here?" she demanded.

His brows went up, but he didn't take a step back at her harsh tone. Instead, he murmured something to the serving girl, who bobbed a curtsey and retreated.

“Tired of London already?” Kitty said.

“I tire of any place if you are not there.”

She rolled her eyes, even though she wished his words were true.

“Jensen told you we had to leave,” she said.

“How is Bianca?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” She looked out the window again. “The rains took out the bridge, and we couldn’t cross in the coach. My father brought me here and left to try to cross the bridge on horseback.”

“How long have you been waiting for news?”

To Kitty, the wait had seemed like years. “What does it matter?” she asked. “Listen, Edmund, I am not good company right now. You should return to London or go to your own home and—”

“No.”

Kitty blinked at him. “Pardon?”

“No. I’m staying with you.”

She blew out a breath. “If this is some misguided act of loyalty because you think we are betrothed, I release you from that obligation.”

“I don’t want to be released,” he said. “And I don’t feel obligated. I want to be here.”

“Well, I don’t want you here. Furthermore, I don’t want to marry you. I drank too much champagne last night. That must be why I agreed.”

For an instant, she saw a flash of pain in his eyes, and then it was replaced by something else. She wasn’t sure how to characterize what she saw in those gray eyes now, but they’d gone hard and steely.

Kitty swallowed. Perhaps she had gone too far.

“You didn’t drink too much champagne,” he said, taking her arm and leading her to a table. He pulled out a chair and pushed her down and into it. Kitty was actually relieved to be off her feet. She’d felt unsteady ever since hearing the news of Bianca’s injury. “I see what you are doing, Katherine Featherswallow.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “And what’s that?”

“You’ve put on your armor. It’s what you always do when you’re scared. And you are terrified right now.”

“I’m not—”

“You are. You are afraid for your sister, which is understandable, but you’re also afraid for yourself.”

“I have nothing to be afraid of.”

“Exactly. I know that. And you know it in here.” He touched his chest then reached across the table and tapped her forehead. “But you don’t know it here.”

Kitty flicked his hand away. “You make no sense.”

“If I make no sense, blame yourself. I’ve made a study of you over the years, Kitty, and every time you feel vulnerable, you lash out. You’d rather hurt than be hurt yourself. You’d rather strike first than allow yourself to be open to a wound. Those qualities in you were only exacerbated by your mother’s death. You couldn’t protect yourself from the pain of losing her, and I think that pain made you more determined than ever to avoid more pain.”

Kitty felt her eyes sting, but she would not cry. “You are speaking nonsense,” she said, but her voice cracked. Edmund seemed

to see right into her soul. He understood her better than she understood herself. That didn't mean she could trust him. That only made him more dangerous.

“Am I?” he said. “Then tell me you have not been worrying that I proposed only to reject you at the altar or not show up to the wedding at all.”

Kitty stared at him. He raised his brows, daring her to tell him it wasn't true. She opened her mouth to argue, but the serving girl returned then with a tray of tea and a tureen with two bowls. “I said I didn't—” she began.

“Ah! The dinner I ordered. Thank you, Molly,” he said. The serving girl curtsied, set the tray down, and poured tea into two cups. The fragrant smell immediately comforted Kitty. Why had she said she didn't want tea? She was cold and thirsty, and tea seemed the perfect antidote. She supposed she should thank Edmund for ordering it.

“What is this?” he said, staring into his teacup.

“Sir?”

“You call this tea?” he asked. Kitty wasn't used to that tone from him. She bent to peer into her cup. The tea looked perfectly fine to her. She lifted the cup to drink, but Edmund swiped it away, so the cup clattered on the floor, spilling the tea everywhere.

“My love, do not drink this swill. It is not fit for consumption. Only the best for you. If this establishment cannot provide palatable tea, we shall have none.”

Kitty noted the other patrons in the public house were watching them now. What was Edmund about? He did not usually make a scene like this. “The tea was fine, Edmund. There’s no need—”

But he’d lifted the cover of the tureen now and was examining the stew. The heady scents of meat, potatoes, leeks, carrots, and spices wafted toward Kitty, making her lightheaded from hunger. She had forgotten how skilled the cook at the Black Hare was in the kitchen. Kitty must have been hungrier than she’d thought, because she suddenly wanted nothing more than to fill her bowl with the fragrant stew.

Edmund lifted the ladle and dipped it into the stew. Kitty watched as he lifted her bowl, her mouth watering. But then Edmund dropped it and turned an accusing look on Molly. “You call this stew?”

“Yes, sir,” she said quietly.

“What are these lumps?”

“Edmund,” Kitty said, “those are potatoes. The soup smells delicious.” She lifted her bowl and held it out to him. “If you please.”

“This smells rancid,” he said. He took her bowl and hurled it across the room. “I would not feed this to my pigs. I would not feed this to my worst enemy.” He indicated the tray. “Take it back, Molly! I’d rather starve than eat this slop. Only the best for my love, my Kitty.”

Molly lifted the tray, and Kitty wanted to grab it back. She was ravenous now. She turned an angry gaze on Edmund. “What are

you...” Her words died when she saw the smile on his lips. “You did this on purpose,” she said.

“Does any of it seem familiar?”

Kitty had to admit that, unfortunately, just now he’d given a very good impression of her own behavior on several occasions. She’d been angry, striking out, and finding fault with anything and everything. In the process, she’d made herself and everyone around her miserable. And Edmund was right. She used her anger and fear to protect herself. If those around her were afraid of her, no one could get close to her.

“I take your point,” she said.

Edmund’s brows shot up. “What is this? Kitty, are you being agreeable?”

“Not for long if this is your reaction,” she muttered.

“Darling!” he said, standing up so everyone who hadn’t been staring at them was certainly doing so now. “As you are so amenable, so amiable a woman, I wish to announce to everyone that we are betrothed.”

“Edmund!”

“It’s true, is it not?”

She opened her mouth to argue, but then caught his gaze. He had hope in his eyes, and behind that fragile hope, Kitty saw love. Did she dare to trust him with her heart? Did she dare to open herself to being hurt once again?

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In that moment, she couldn't look at him and deny him. The truth was, she loved him with her whole heart, small and cold as it might be. "It's true," she whispered.

He bent on one knee and made a show of taking her hand and kissing it. The entire room erupted in cheers, and Edmund looked up at her and winked.

"You had better not make me regret this," she said under her breath.

"My love, you would only have regretted it if you hadn't agreed. I would have sent back every offering from the cook for the next week if that was what it took to convince you."

"Does this mean we can eat now?"

He rose. "It means we have the rest of our lives together." And he kissed her, making her forget all about dinner, the cheering townspeople, and even her sister.

Chapter Four

Bianca's wedding breakfast was a small, private affair. As Kitty's intended, Edmund should have been invited. Kitty had not wanted to take attention from Bianca and asked to wait to announce the betrothal until after the wedding, which meant Edmund was not supposed to attend the wedding breakfast.

Edmund rather thought his betrothed was pleasantly surprised when they'd been told Bianca was to marry the man who had been charged with protecting her while she hid from fortune hunters in the countryside. With the attention on Bianca's wedding, Kitty could put off all the celebration of her own impending nuptials. She'd told Edmund she wanted the marriage, just not the wedding. He could hardly blame her. His parents' reaction when he'd told them he was marrying Katherine Featherswallow was likely to be mild compared to Society's at large.

His mother had looked up from her embroidery. "Kitty?" she'd asked. "Not Bianca? Isn't Bianca the sweet one?"

His father had lowered his paper. "Why would you choose the shrew, Edmund?"

Edmund had defended his betrothed, and received support from his sisters, who had known Kitty since childhood and wrote with congratulations. Mary said, “Kitty is much kinder than she seems.” Rose wrote, *Kitty is lovely...underneath it all.*

Edmund supposed that was the best he might hope for. He had no doubt that once his parents knew Kitty better and she felt comfortable enough to drop her prickly defenses, they would love her as much as he.

Edmund loved her a great deal, which was why he’d made his way to Godwin Priory hours after he assumed the wedding was completed. He’d thought the wedding breakfast would be concluded, but a few guests were still celebrating. No matter. He’d asked Mrs. Port, the housekeeper, to deliver a message to Kitty to meet him in the garden. She’d come out a few minutes later, looking lovely in a gown of palest blue with a wreath of pink roses in her hair.

“Why do you look like that?” She slowed her approach and eyed him warily.

“Why am I smiling?” he asked, taking her hands in his. “Because I am the luckiest man alive.”

She rolled her eyes but smiled back at him when he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Though it had been only a couple of days since he’d held her, his body reacted as though he were starving and the feel of her was the first sustenance he’d had in days. What he’d intended as a light kiss turned into pulling her hard against him and devouring her lips. He’d thought having her once again in his arms might cool his ardor, but the more he touched her, the more he wanted.

Kitty seemed to agree. She moaned and wrapped her arms about him, pressing herself closer. The press of her body against his sent a strange and exhilarating sensation through him. He felt his need for her keenly, but even more than that, he felt the sense of rightness when he held her.

She pulled back. “I don’t ever want to stop kissing you,” she said. Edmund’s heart swelled at her words. A few days ago, she might have been too afraid to express her feelings. Now she trusted him enough to be more vulnerable.

“I feel exactly the same.” He brushed a thumb over her swollen lips. “Soon we’ll be married, and I’ll show you a few things even better than kissing.”

“Why not show me now? There’s a bench behind those bushes—”

Edmund smiled and took her hand, pulling her toward the hidden bench. But just then Bianca’s dog Astra scampered around a corner of the house and gave Edmund a happy greeting. She bounded up to him, and he was forced to pet her lest she knock him over with her enthusiasm. A moment later, the viscount’s sister and her daughter strode around the house. They must have taken the dog out, and now they were staring at Edmund and Kitty with matching curious expressions.

“Aunt Florence. Cousin Amelia,” Kitty said, giving them cool nods and shallow curtses. “May I present our neighbor Edmund Peters.”

Edmund bowed.

“We have met before,” Aunt Florence said before Kitty could even finish the introductions. “I did not realize you were a scoundrel, sir.”

Edmund raised his brows. “A scoundrel?”

She pointed a finger at him. “Do not think I do not see what is occurring here. You were about to lure my niece into a secluded part of the garden and have your wicked way with her.”

Edmund couldn’t quite stop a smile. “I assure you, madam, I would never disrespect Miss Featherswallow. Indeed, she is my betrothed.”

“Pardon?” Kitty’s cousin said. The child couldn’t have been older than thirteen or fourteen. “What did you say?”

“We are betrothed,” Kitty said. “We were waiting to announce it until after Bianca’s wedding.”

“But why would you marry...*her*?” Amelia said, pointing to Kitty.

“Amelia!” Aunt Florence said.

Edmund felt Kitty tense beside him, all the joy seeping out of her.

“Mama, you always say she is a termagant she-devil who will never marry.”

Kitty’s aunt had the grace to look sheepish. “I... Amelia, I would never—”

But Edmund would not allow this to go on. He would never again allow anyone to disparage Kitty or make her feel less than. He loved her exactly as she was.

“There are some people,” he began, “who view a strong woman as a threat. Not I. I love Kitty’s temper, her spirit, her—”

“Amiability,” Kitty said.

Edmund raised his brows. “Your amiability, my love?”

She scowled at him. “I am quite amenable, am I not?”

Edmund opened his mouth and then thought better of it. “You are the most amiable woman I know.”

Her aunt made a sound of disbelief, and Edmund quite suddenly wished she’d been a man so he might say the words he liked. Instead, he had another idea. If Kitty wanted to prove there was more to her than people saw—that she could be genial and accommodating—then he would help her.

“My love, how lovely the moon shines tonight.”

Kitty looked at him then at the sky, where the sun was shining. Her aunt and cousin also looked up.

“You are mistaken, my dear,” Kitty said. “It is the sun in the sky.”

Edmund looked up again, keenly aware of the gazes of Kitty’s aunt and cousin. “Look again, my sweet. It is the moon that shines o’er us this day.”

She pretended to look again then gave him a beatific smile. “I see now it is the moon. And what a lovely moon it is.” She turned her smile on her relatives. “Do you not think the moon lovely, Aunt Florence?” Her aunt sniffed and excused herself, taking the dog with her.

As they departed, Amelia said, “Is she mad, Mama? That is not the moon!”

“They will go back and tell everyone how changed you are,” Edmund said, pulling her into his arms again.

“Either that or that I have gone completely daft. You do realize that is the sun in the sky,” she said, eyes narrowed.

“I will call it whatever you desire. If you say it is the sun, then it is the glorious sun. But if you say it is the moon, then blessed be the moon. I don’t care, as long as you love me.”

She threw her arms about him. “I *do* love you, Edmund.”

“Then kiss me, Kitty.”

She shook her head. “Kiss *me*, Edmund.”

“You’ll never need to ask again.” And he kissed her, swept her into his arms, and carried her to that hidden bench where he kissed her again, quite thoroughly, under the pale rays of the sun—or the moon...whichever Kitty said it was.

Author's Note

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed “Kiss Me, Kitty.” Those of you who have studied Shakespeare must have noted that Katherine/Kitty and her sister Bianca share the same names as the sisters in *The Taming of the Shrew*—the play this story is based on. This story is a companion piece to my novella *Twenty-One Days with the Lyon*, which is part of the Lyon’s Den series. If you’re wondering what happened to Kitty’s “perfect” sister Bianca, read *Twenty-One Days with the Lyon* and find out!

Sincerely,
Shana

Want more of Kitty and curious about Bianca's story? Read Shana's novella [21 Days with the Lyon](#). Enjoy an excerpt below.

She was being abducted.

Again.

Bianca Featherswallow had done everything she'd been told. She had not gone out in public in weeks. She had not visited her mother's grave in months. She'd turned down all her friends' invitations to balls, the theater, and country house parties. She locked and barred her door at night and kept clear of open windows. Her life had been reduced to the three floors of her father's London townhouse and the company of her dog (welcome), her sister (challenging), and her father (tiresome). At this point, Bianca saw no reason to stay in London for the Season. Yes, Kitty was supposed to be securing a husband, but every man who met Bianca's sister was scared to death of her. Her reputation as a termagant hellcat was well known by now.

Bianca had begged her father to send her back to Godwin Priory, but he had so far refused. Then, not wanting to spend the evening confronted by Bianca's tear-stained face, he'd gone to his club, leaving her alone with Kitty, who had stomped around and blown out annoyed breaths all evening.

Finally, Bianca had fled to the garden with Astra. Usually, a footman took the dog for her nightly stroll about the garden, but Bianca needed some air not perfumed by her sister's malice.

Astra visited her favorite set of bushes then returned, looking up at Bianca with large, brown, adoring eyes. The black Labrador had a single white spot on her forehead that looked like a star to Bianca, which was why she'd named her Astra. She stroked the star and said, "It's not my fault no one likes Kitty. She could try to be agreeable, but she argues about everything. Why, if I said the day was sunny, she'd argue that was the moon in the sky."

Astra lifted her head and looked about.

"She'll never find a husband, and I'll be locked away forever."

Astra barked, and Bianca jumped. Astra rarely barked, and the sound startled Bianca. "Shh. Sit, Astra."

But the normally obedient dog raced into the garden, barking furiously. Bianca stood, peering into the darkness to see what Astra was chasing. A hedgehog or a fox, perhaps? Suddenly, she was hauled back by an arm around her neck, a gloved hand pressed over her mouth.

"Good evening, Miss Featherswallow. I hate that we must meet like this, but there's no time for introductions." He dragged her away from the bench where she'd been sitting and toward the garden gate. The gate led to the alley behind the townhouses, where the mews were located. Presumably, this man had a carriage waiting.

Bianca struggled, but the man held firmly. “Come willingly, miss, and we won’t hurt your dog.”

Bianca ceased struggling now. Astra’s staccato barks echoed in her ears. Did one of this man’s accomplices have the dog? She couldn’t allow anything to happen to Astra.

The gate was coming nearer and nearer, and Bianca was torn. Should she fight or go willingly? She’d fought the last two kidnapping attempts, and it hadn’t seemed to matter. The men were always stronger and unmoved by her attempts at defense. Her abductor reached out his free hand and unlatched the gate. It should have swung out and open, but it opened only a fraction before it slammed closed again.

Kitty stepped in front of it. “Just what do you think you are doing?” she asked. Her voice was cold and angry. The man holding Bianca began to quake. Bianca didn’t blame him. She was a little afraid of her sister in that moment. Kitty was a tall woman at five feet, ten inches. She had thick, honey-blond hair in a severe knot at the nape of her neck and ice-blue eyes. She was full-figured and what most men would call a handsome woman, if they were brave enough to refer to her at all.

Bianca, in contrast, was five feet, two inches on tiptoes, had dark brown hair, brown eyes, was thin and delicate, and was often called pretty. The sisters looked nothing alike, and most would have assumed they were not blood relatives—until one noted they had the same nose, the same mouth, and the same wrinkle between their brows when they were annoyed (Kitty) or confused (Bianca).

“M-Miss Katherine,” Bianca’s captor stuttered. “This needn’t involve you.”

“You are abducting my sister. Of course it involves me.”

“Just allow us to pass, and— Ahh! Not so close.”

Kitty opened the gate, stepped inside, and slammed it closed. Bianca’s abductor was pulling her back toward the bench now.

“I know you,” Kitty said. “You are Lord Danvers’s youngest son. He has six others, yes? No wonder you need to marry an heiress.”

“S-step back, Miss Featherswallow,” he said.

“If you need an heiress, you could always marry me,” Kitty said. “I am an heiress too, you know.”

“I’d prefer to marry Miss Bianca Featherswallow,” Danvers’s son said.

“Well, you can’t!” Kitty yelled. “You marry me or no one.”

“No one, then!” The young man released Bianca so suddenly that she stumbled and almost fell backward. She righted herself just as he raced past her, swerving to avoid Kitty and crashing through a pair of hedges to climb over the fence. His accomplice must have followed, because a moment later Astra raced back to Bianca’s side, sniffed her, and issued one last yip at the escaping men.

Kitty looked at her sister and heaved out a sigh. “Can you not go even one week without a kidnapping attempt?”

“It’s not my fault.”

“*It’s not my fault,*” Kitty said in a mocking tone. “Just wait until Papa hears about this.”

Bianca opened her mouth to argue that perhaps Papa shouldn't be informed of this latest attempt. Then she realized perhaps it would be the catalyst she needed for him to allow her to return to the countryside.

"Come inside before some other impoverished lord tries to steal you away," Kitty ordered her.

Bianca obeyed, calling for Astra to follow. She had the beginnings of a megrim. Once inside, she turned to her sister. "I don't want to be here any more than you want me here, Kitty."

"That's doubtful."

"I've asked Papa a dozen times to send me back to Godwin Priory," she said to Kitty's back as her sister stalked away. "I'd do anything to go home," she said to herself. "Anything."

In less than twenty-four hours, she would regret those words.

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About Shana Galen

Shana Galen is three-time Rita award nominee and the bestselling author of passionate Regency romps. Kirkus said of her books: "The road to happily-ever-after is intense, conflicted, suspenseful and fun." *RT Bookreviews* described her writing as "lighthearted yet poignant, humorous yet touching." She taught English at the middle and high school level for eleven years. Most of those years were spent working in Houston's inner city. Now she writes full time, surrounded by three cats and one spoiled dog. She's married and has a daughter who is most definitely a romance heroine in the making.

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