

The Jewel and the Rogue: A *Jewels of the Ton* Prequel

by Shana Galen

Lily Dawson, the Countess of Charm, is one of London's Three Diamonds—a glittering trio of celebrated courtesans. She's been in love with the Earl of Darlington since she first met him, but the so-called Daring of the *Ton* only has eyes for her friend and fellow courtesan Juliette. What happens when Lily finds herself alone with this rogue on Christmas Eve?

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The countryside outside of London, two years before *When You Give a Duke a Diamond*

Laughing and still dizzy from the reel, Lily fell into the lap of the Duke of Athstone. He pulled her close, but she scampered away, waving a finger at him. "You are very naughty, Your Grace."

"Come and be naughty with me, Countess."

She blew him a kiss and skipped to where her friends Fallon and Juliette stood chatting with a trio of admirers. Fallon handed her a glass of champagne. Lily took it gratefully. She'd been dancing for hours and was parched. It was snowing madly outside and dancing was a sure way to keep warm. Fashion dictated she wear a thin silk gown that showcased her shoulders and bosom, and if she stopped dancing for too long she had to either stand near the fire, as Juliette and Fallon were, or she would begin shivering. Their party had been a merry one these last days, and she was quite happy to have been invited to the Duke of Athstone's estate so she might not have to while away the long holiday in gray, dreary London.

She had spent hours this week staring out the window at the snow-covered hills and trees. The ground seemed to sparkle and shimmer as though she were in fairyland. Tomorrow she and the other two Diamonds would depart to spend the holiday in Hampshire with the Earl and Countess of Sinclair at their country estate. Lord and Lady

Sinclair were like parents to her since her own had disowned her—not that she could blame her parents. It would not exactly elevate them to claim a courtesan as their daughter.

Fallon was entertaining the gentlemen with a risqué tale, and Lily leaned her head on Juliette’s shoulder. “Is it time for bed yet?”

Juliette rolled her eyes. “Not yet. I am so tired of smiling.”

“I am tired of being charming.”

“Why did the prince not give us Fallon’s sobriquet? If I was mysterious, I could keep quiet and no one would think anything of it.” It was in fact the prince regent who had given the three their “courtesy titles.” Fallon was the Marchioness of Mystery, Juliette the Duchess of Dalliance, and Lily the Countess of Charm.

“At least he has gone to spend the holiday with the King and Queen,” Lily said. “I have had to bar my door and pretend not to hear him knocking the last few nights.”

Juliette patted her shoulder. “You poor thing. The prince aside, it has been a lovely week.”

Lily smiled. “Yes, it has.” She eyed Juliette’s empty glass and then her own. “More champagne?”

“Please.”

Lily moved away, scooting past a marquess who liked to pinch, and found a footman with a tray of libations. She took two glasses of champagne and turned back toward her friends, when all of a sudden the skin on the back of her neck prickled. She rolled her shoulders to loosen them and dismiss the feeling, but it persisted. Her gaze roamed the ballroom, falling on gentleman in various states of inebriation and undress. There were a number of opera singers, mistresses, and other courtesans in attendance too. Lily knew better than to look too closely at the entwined pairs. Why was her neck prickling?

And then she saw him.

The Earl of Darlington.

He must have just come in from the night, for his dark hair was flecked with white snowflakes and his cheeks were flushed with the cold. His eyes were dark but bright with mischief and his mouth was turned up, as usual, in a roguish smile. Her gaze traveled from his dark blue coat to his buckskins to his shining Hessians. He was not dressed for a ball, but he looked magnificent anyway. In fact, those tight buckskins looked more than magnificent...

Lily averted her eyes and tried to take a deep breath. Her cheeks felt warm and her breath caught in her chest. She hadn't known he was invited. She hadn't expected to see him, hadn't wanted to see him. Now she would have to watch as he made doe eyes at Juliette, who didn't care a fig for him.

Lily watched as his gaze roamed the ballroom and landed on Juliette. Predictable, she thought as she swallowed half her champagne. He arched for Juliette, but not before Fallon saw him and tugged at Juliette's sleeve. Juliette rolled her eyes when she saw the earl approaching, and Lily had to swallow more champagne. Her glass was empty, so she drank Juliette's.

Darlington made a dashing bow to Juliette, took her hand, and kissed her knuckles. He gave Fallon the same courtesy but neither courtesan paid him much heed. Both ladies turned back to the group of gentleman to whom they'd been speaking. But even that did not deter Darlington. He smiled at his rivals easily and spoke, and soon the entire party was laughing.

Lily needed more champagne.

Even as she had the thought, a glass was placed in her hand. The Duke of Athstone smiled down at her. "You looked like you needed this."

"Thank you." Her gaze returned, quite against her will, to Darlington. The duke followed her gaze. He was not a handsome man, but he definitely had a regal air about him. He was in his late thirties or early forties and had not married yet. She did not know why, as he

certainly needed an heir, but perhaps he was not in as much of a rush as some of the other titled gentleman.

“So Darlington is the one you want.”

Lily blinked. “I don’t know what you mean.”

He laughed. “Yes, you do. This is my house, and I know what goes on in it. You have been under my roof for almost a week, and no man has come to your bed. Are you in love with Darlington? Is that it?”

Lily swallowed, alarmed at how close to the truth the duke had come. But she was not dubbed the Countess of Charm for nothing. She gave the duke a glittering smile and sipped her champagne again. “I wonder, Your Grace, why you are so interested in who does or does not come to my bed.” She fluttered her lashes in what she considered an inane manner, but gentleman seemed to like it.

“I should think that would be obvious. I’d like to come to your room tonight.”

Lily handed the duke her glass and caught the eye of Mr. Heyward, who was the son of a baron. He started for her immediately. “You flatter me with your interest, Your Grace.” She curtsied and when Heyward approached and offered to escort her in a waltz, she took his hand and floated away.

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Andrew Booth-Payne, the Earl of Darlington, stumbled into Athstone’s library and sank onto the couch. He needed to find the butler and ascertain where his room was, but he was too tired at the moment. He’d been carousing late last night, and then he’d rode hell-for-leather to make it to the duke’s house party before the Duchess of Dalliance, the lovely Juliette, chose her bedmate for the night.

Unfortunately, Juliette had retired a quarter hour ago. Darlington did not know who she had chosen, but it had not been him. He didn’t know why he continued to hold out hope for her. She barely

acknowledged him. He had led her in one dance, not a waltz, but it had still been a half hour of her undivided attention.

Unfortunately, like a ninny, he had not been able to think of anything witty or interesting to say. No wonder she had chosen another man. "Damn it!" he said, thumping the couch with his hand.

"If you are determined to make noise," a feminine voice said, "please go elsewhere."

Andrew blinked and rose, walking around to peer down into a high-backed armchair. The Countess of Charm was curled into a ball in one corner, her auburn hair down about her shoulders. Her eyes were red and heavy-lidded.

"Miss Dawson, are you well?"

"Ha!" she said, waving a hand about carelessly. "As though you care."

His brows rose, and he lowered himself to one knee. "You look as though you might have had a wee bit too much punch."

"Champagne," she corrected him. Whatever she had drunk, she had drunk far too much of it. She looked almost ready to fall asleep. Should he offer to escort her to her room? But if he did and Juliette happened to see the two of them, what would she think?

Suddenly, Lily reached out and stroked his cheek with two fingers. The touch of her bare fingers surprised him. He glanced at her again, and she was staring at him with those big green eyes of hers.

"She is never going to love you," she whispered. "You must know that."

Darlington frowned. She made absolutely no sense, but then it was probably the champagne talking. He had better turn her over to her lady's maid. "Let me help you to your room," he said.

She started laughing, surprising him again. "Exactly how much did you drink?" he asked.

“Oh, far too much, especially if it I am dreaming of you taking me to bed.”

Andrew shook his head. Even when they were foxed the Three Diamonds managed to flirt. “Miss Dawson, let me help you.” He reached for her waist, pulling her forward in the chair. But before he could help her to rise, he found that she’d managed to wrap her arms around his neck. He peered down into her face, into those huge green eyes. Her lips were parted slightly, and her small pink tongue darted out to lick her bottom lip.

He felt a familiar tightening in his groin as her fingers threaded through his hair and pulled his mouth down to hers. Before he knew what had happened, her mouth was on his, her lips cool and soft. He’d never thought about kissing Lily before, and this was a pleasant surprise. When her mouth opened and he tasted her, he was again quite taken aback. Her mouth tasted slightly sweet from the champagne she’d drunk. Her tongue twined with his, and her body pressed against him. She was lushly rounded, and he felt his own body reacting, becoming aroused. He threaded a hand through her hair marveling at how soft it was, how soft she was, how sweet she sounded when she let out a small, satisfied sigh.

He could have kissed her all night. He would have enjoyed it immensely. *She* would have enjoyed it immensely.

But what was he thinking? This was Lily. She was like a sister to him. She was foxed and didn’t know what she was doing. He had better play the gentleman.

And so he disentangled himself from her arms and stood. “I’ll have one of the servants fetch your maid. She can help you to bed.”

Lily sighed. “I’d rather you took me to bed.”

He leaned down and she raised her lips to him, but he brushed her forehead with a chaste kiss instead. “You have no idea what you are saying, Countess. You’ll thank me in the morning.”

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When he was gone, presumably seeking a servant to see her to her chamber, Lily reached a trembling hand to her lips. She'd kissed him, and he'd kissed her back. It hadn't been a kiss of pity or a kiss of obligation. He'd kissed her willingly. His lips had been where her fingers grazed. His tongue had stroked hers. His arms had tightened around her. She could still smell his scent on her hands, and it made her dizzy with longing.

The library door opened again, and Lily raised her gaze, hoping it was Darlington returning. It was Fallon. "There you are. I was worried about you."

"Oh, I'm fine. I couldn't make a man debauch me if I wanted."

Fallon raised a dark eyebrow. "The duke seemed rather enamored of you. He is nothing to be scoffed at."

"Pish." Lily waved her hand. Fallon caught it and pulled her to her feet. "I don't want the duke."

"I don't blame you." Fallon pulled her close, giving Lily support as they walked the length of the library. Everything seemed to sway, and Lily wished she could simply close her eyes.

She did for a moment, and *his* face came into view. "I kissed him Fallon," Lily said.

"Who? Oh, you mean *Darlington*."

"You say his name as though you find it distasteful."

Fallon shook her head, leading Lily into the grand salon and toward the stairs. "I like him well enough. He's amusing and good-natured." She paused. "And loyal. He hasn't given up on Juliette."

Lily ignored her. "He kissed me, Fallon, and one day he will forget Juliette, and he'll kiss me again."

Fallon pressed her lips together and smiled. "If you say so." Somewhere deep in the house, a clock chimed two. "Oh, it's after midnight."

“You know what that means,” Lily said, pausing at the stairs. They seemed all but insurmountable at the moment.

“It’s Christmas.”

“Happy Christmas, Fallon.”

“Happy Christmas, Lily.”

The two friends started up the stairs, and Lily could not resist whispering, “Happy Christmas, Darlington.”

Read more about Lily and Andrew in Shana’s upcoming March release, *Sapphires are an Earl’s Best Friend*.