

Chapter One

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-blonde 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.