

Courtship and Curses

Chapter One

London, England
March 1815

Aunt Isabel was, as usual, exasperated. “Molly, I don’t know why I brought you shopping with us. While that color will do for a creeping plant on a blasted heath somewhere, it will not do for poor Sophie.” She motioned away the bolt of yellowish-green satin proffered by the dressmaker’s assistant.

“Ha!” Aunt Molly tilted her head and squinted at the rejected fabric. “I thought it reminded me of something. It’s just the color of toadflax leaves, y’know. But toadflax doesn’t grow on heaths. It’s a meadow and hedge-side plant.”

“I was not knowing that toads had the flax,” Madame Carswell observed. “Do they make linen from it too? English toads must be terribly clever.” She turned her head slightly and winked at the fourth member of the party seated in Mrs. James’s exclusive Bruton Street shop.

The young woman her aunt had called “poor Sophie” caught her wink and smiled down at her lap. Now Aunt Isabel would say something about not having time to examine what grew in the hedgerows, and then probably go on to say something about Aunt Molly’s botanical obsession destroying her fashion sense.

“Well, *really*, Molly. Some of us are far too occupied with *worthwhile* pursuits to spend our days poking about hedgerows. And I must say, your doing so might account for the shocking state of your hair.”

Ah, well. She’d been half right. Sophie smoothed the wrinkles out of the buttery-soft kidskin gloves in her lap and felt her smile fade. She’d been scrunching up her gloves again. But glove scrunching was the only way she could relieve her feelings, at least here. Shrieking into a pillow would have to wait until she was home, alone in her bedchamber.

Every one of these shopping trips had followed the same course, like the farces at Covent Garden: the shop-girls would end up red-faced with suppressed giggles while Papa’s sisters quarreled over nothing. Or else Aunt Isabel would examine fabric and designs and shake her head, murmuring how they would just not do for Sophie, what with the poor girl’s *limitations*. Either way they’d leave the shop empty-handed and

move onto the next one, where the same thing would happen. At this rate, she'd never have any gowns made in time for the season's round of parties and balls. If there were any, now that Napoleon was back on the throne in France and all of Europe in an uproar.

Maybe that would be for the best, said a hateful little voice in her head. *Cripples don't dance at balls. Even if they're the daughters of marquises with substantial fortunes.*

Thus the scrunched gloves. Sophie wished she could scrunch them small enough to stuff in her ears and drown that voice out.

Thank goodness Madame Carswell—Amélie, as she just yesterday asked Sophie to call her—had been staying with her and Papa and Aunt Molly for the last few days. Her company had made today's shopping trip with the Aunts much less odious. If only Mama...but she couldn't think about Mama now. Her nose turned red when she got the least bit teary, and sharp-eyed Aunt Isabel would notice at once.

Sharp-eyed Aunt Isabel was examining a bolt of cherry pink silk held by the other of Mrs. James's assistants. Sophie leaned forward, entranced. The color was beautiful, warm and vibrant, but Aunt Isabel's bushy eyebrows had shot up most of the way to her hairline. "That shade, for *Sophie*?" Her voice dropped. "Haven't you eyes to see with?" she hissed at the assistant. "She would stand out like a sore thumb in a color like that! Gray or snuff-brown is much more appropriate."

Sophie sat back. Of course. A color like that would draw attention to her...and to her infirmity. At least to her external one.

"*I think it would be perfect for Sophie.*" Amélie examined it, head to one side. "See how it would bring up the lovely color in her cheeks. I have a length of sarisilk just that shade. It is still in my box, I am thinking."

"*My dear Mrs. Carswell,*" Aunt Isabel began. Sophie braced herself. When Aunt Isabel my-deared someone, it was because she felt the person thus addressed anything but dear. "While India is doubtless full of very interesting things, I fear they are not quite, ah, *suitable* here, and certainly not suitable for poor, dear Sophie. I know you lived there many years, but you are in England now. Surely Mr. Carswell explained—"

"Oh, they don't make linen from it. Wrong sort of flax," Aunt Molly said in her botanical lecturer voice. "It's very good for chickens and keeps them from getting chicken gall, I am led to understand, so why it's not called chicken flax instead of toad flax is beyond me. Culpeper says it cures the dropsy and pimples, at least when used as a face wash. For the pimples, that is. I don't think a face wash will do much for dropsy. Do y'suppose chicken gall is the same as dropsy? Unless it's pimples, and how

would you tell if chickens get pimples under all those feathers, that's what I'd like to know."

Aunt Isabel had begun to turn a color remarkably similar to the rejected silk. She opened her reticule, pulled out a tiny silver box, flipped open its hinged lid, and sniffed at it. "My head—you've no idea how I suffer. Molly, will you *please* stop prattling about plants for at least a few moments and attend to the matter at hand?"

Aunt Molly's brow wrinkled. "I was. You were just saying that satin was the same color as toadflax, and I—"

"Sophie." Amélie Carswell's soft, French-inflected voice insinuated itself under Aunt Molly's protest. "Come and look at the ribbons with me. They are very fine, I think." She rose—gracefully for such a small, plump person—and held out her arm.

Sophie stared up at her proffered arm. Just because she limped like a drunken sailor on shore leave, it didn't mean she couldn't rise from her chair by herself and walk a few paces across the shop to—

But no. Mrs. Carswell—er, Amélie—wasn't the aunts. Her gesture was meant to be a friendly one. It wasn't always easy not to jump to conclusions. Besides, she was tired, and Amélie's arm *would* be a welcome support. Let her heavy, ugly, dull brown cane stay where it was, looped over the back of her chair.

She struggled to her feet and took Amélie's arm. The flow of the aunts' bickering didn't cease as she and Amélie made their way to the display of ribbons and laces on the wall.

"You looked as though you had had enough of that." Amélie ended her sentence with an expressive lift of her eyebrows. "Your *tantes*—they mean well, I think, but they are so busy being themselves that it is difficult for them to pay much attention to you."

"Oh, they pay me plenty of attention. It's just...." Sophie fell silent. Aunt Isabel frequently reminded her that a cripple should always show the world a patient, forbearing face. "Papa says they've always been that way, even when they were small. They mean well, and I'm...used to it."

"But that doesn't mean you must like it, eh?" Amélie said, running her finger over a length of pale blue ribbon and glancing sideways at Sophie. "Tell me, do they often remind you that you cannot walk as others do?"

Sophie felt her chin rise defensively and hated herself for it. "Well, I cannot."

"But that does not mean it must rule your life. Will you tell me how it happened? Or were you born with it?"

Amélie's voice was gentle but matter-of-fact, and it defused her defensiveness far more effectively than pity would have. "No. It happened two years ago this summer, at

Lanselling—that’s my family’s seat. There was influenza in the neighborhood, and I came down with it. I nearly died, but mother brought me through it. Then one morning I woke up and found I couldn’t turn over in bed because my legs ached and wouldn’t work. The doctors said I would never walk again, but she was determined to prove them wrong. She wrapped my legs in hot towels and stretched them and massaged them, but one still stayed weak and began to shrivel.” That wasn’t the whole story; Mama had done considerably more than wrap her legs when the doctors weren’t present. But she couldn’t tell Amélie—or anyone—about *that*. Nor about what else she’d lost after her illness. “Then my—my little sister—” she paused to steady her voice. “My little sister Harriet came down with it as well. Mama was nearly frantic caring for her, but she couldn’t save her. And then Mama fell ill too and...and died. I think it was exhausting herself nursing us, and then losing Harry.” Sweet little Harry, with her gold curls and soft, round baby face, had been only five.

“She died of grief as well as sickness,” Amélie said softly. “And your leg?”

“It mostly works, but it is shorter than my left leg and the foot turns in oddly. It makes me walk with a most noticeable limp. It always will,” she couldn’t help adding bitterly. Two years ago she’d been looking forward to her come-out just as any girl of her age and birth did. She’d longed for the London season, for sweeping through minuets and country dances at balls...and maybe, if she were allowed, dancing the scandalous, delightful new waltz. Mama had seen to it that she learned well, even hiring a dancing master to stay at Lanselling for a month each summer to teach her and other neighboring girls when she was fourteen and fifteen. She still dreamed of what it felt like to dance.

Amélie touched her arm. “Yes, you always will limp. But you *can* walk. It is better than not walking, *n’est-ce pas?*”

“Not if you listen to the Aunts. I sometimes think Aunt Isabel would prefer it if I was a complete invalid. Bringing a cripple out into society is rather trying, though she assures me that we ought to be able to find a younger son, maybe, or a half-pay officer who might be willing to overlook my deformity in light of my family and marriage portion.” Sophie glanced over her shoulder back toward the Aunts. Behind Aunt Molly one of the shop assistants was hiding her face in her handkerchief, her shoulders shaking with laughter. That meant they’d probably be leaving soon. She turned back to Amélie and saw that she was frowning ferociously, as if angry. The frown vanished as Sophie met her eyes.

“Never mind. I will tell you what we shall do, you and I,” she said briskly. “We will nod and smile and let your aunt not buy that cherry silk, and then I will make a present

of my sari fabric to you for a dress.”

Sophie stifled the exclamation of pleasure that rose to her lips. “Oh, I couldn’t possibly—”

“Ah, *ma chère*, you gave yourself away when you looked at it and I shall not permit you to say no. You and your Papa have been so kind that it is the least I can do. Besides, it is not a color I shall ever wear again.” She glanced at the mourning ring on her hand.

Sophie reached out and covered it with her own. Drat it, she should stop being so selfish and remember that she wasn’t the only unhappy person in London. “I’m so sorry Mr. Carswell...never reached home. Papa was looking forward to seeing him after all these years. He said they were very close at school.”

“Ah, I too regret it.” Amélie sighed. “And my Jean was so looking forward to coming home to England again. Over twenty years in India he stayed, all for my sake.”

Sophie nodded. Papa had been so pleased when he received a letter from his old Harrow friend last autumn. John Carswell had been the younger son of an earl and had gone into the East India Company because of his lack of prospects in England. Papa had sometimes spoken of him regretfully, though Sophie had never been sure if that regret was due to missing his friend or wishing that he, too, had been a younger son able to adventure in India instead of being ninth Marquis of Lansell.

Mr. Carswell had evidently surprised everyone by marrying in India instead of returning to England on leave to woo and wed a bride...and surprised them further by marrying the daughter of a French military advisor to the ruler of one of the Indian princely states. The long years of war between England and France had made him decide to remain in India and not visit home, lest his wife be snubbed or worse by her English in-laws because of her nationality. But last summer he had written to Papa that he was coming at long last to see his home and old friends and in hopes of regain his health, worn down by the climate.

Then, just two weeks ago, another letter arrived from Portsmouth bearing sad news. It was from Mrs. Carswell, reporting that Mr. Carswell had died from a bleeding ulcer shortly after setting sail from India. It enclosed a brief, shakily-penned note from Mr. Carswell himself, saying that he knew his death was imminent and asking Papa to help his widow on her arrival in England. Papa had at once sent his secretary to find Mrs. Carswell at Portsmouth and to accompany her to her husband’s ancestral home to bury his heart there, as he had wished. That sad task accomplished, Mrs. Carswell had come to London to thank Papa. They’d all been charmed by the small, plump, bright-eyed woman in her soft gray pelisse and black gloves and hat, devastated by the loss of her beloved “Jean” but obviously interested in London and in them. It hadn’t been hard

to convince her to stay with them for a few weeks while she decided what to do.

“Well, I’m glad you are here,” Sophie said staunchly. “If it weren’t for you, I’d—” She glanced at the aunts.

“You need not explain, Sophie. Lady Isabel has no daughters, no? So she cannot resist busying herself with her only niece’s *entrée* to society...but she is not sure how to present a niece who is out of the ordinary. And Lady Mary—or should I say Molly, as you do? She is a dear, but if you have not leaves or roots or stems, she doesn’t quite see you, I think. And as for you—” Amélie tilted her head to one side— “you are excited for the season yet fearful because of your legs that do not walk gracefully.”

“How do you know all that?” Sophie blinked back sudden tears.

“It is not hard to know things if your eyes are open and you use them. Remember that, Sophie. Your eyes are your best tool.” She made a small humming sound under her breath as she fingered the ribbons. “How old are you, *ma petite*?”

“Eighteen. I might have come out last year, but I was not strong enough. And we— we did not have the heart for it.” Not that she was sure Papa did, even now. After Mama had died he had withdrawn into his work on the war like a hermit crab crawling inside a discarded shell. With Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte back in power, would he ever emerge?

“Eh, not a child at all. Then *les tantes* should not treat you as one. Come, let us choose the dresses you would like. No, do not look back. They are quite happy as they are, so we shall not disturb them.” Amélie took her arm and led her across the shop, beckoning to Mrs. James who hovered behind the aunts, looking anxious. “I shall give you my sari length. That would be lovely for a dinner dress, no? Ah, Madame James, as you see, the other ladies are busy, so we shall choose some pretty dresses for my friend here. What will the *jeunes filles* be wearing at your Almack’s this spring?”

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