

The Matchmaker's Surrender Chapter One

England 1817

“I pronounce that they be man and wife...”

Miss Jane Dalton glanced around the quaint church into the sea of muslin Empire gowns and black tailcoats and smiled.

It had turned out to be a perfect day, with the sun's light filtering in through the Gothic tracery windows. The mahogany pews were filled with people ready to witness her brother and best friend's official wedding. For Henry and Lily, however, their happily-ever-after had not come easily.

Since officiating a fake wedding ceremony between Lily and Henry when they were all very young, Jane always imagined them together. One might say it was the moment that began her matchmaking endeavors. With numerous parties and gatherings, she'd succeeded in bringing together over a dozen couples. To date, she'd attended most of their weddings.

This wedding was her favorite by far. She supposed she could not have done it without the help of Henry's best friend, Mr. Waverley. By nudging fate, they had both colluded on one of the most romantic reunions in recent history.

“When will it be your turn?”

Jane glanced to find Lily and Henry walking down the aisle and the local busybody, Mrs. Abram, tugging at her elbow. Jane's mother, who stood up to leave behind the newly married couple, turned back to send Jane a regretful glance. Her father, on the other hand, tried to linger

to catch her answer, but was dragged away by Mrs. Dalton. The other witness to Mrs. Abram question was none other than Mr. Waverley himself, who stood a few feet away.

At a loss for words, Jane brushed a wisp of light brown hair from her eyes and forced a smile. What could she say? *The thought of falling in love gives me the vapors?* Not that she'd ever had her heart broken. If she had, she might understand her anxiety more. No, her aversion to falling in love was more existential. She believed it was better to have never loved than to have loved and lost. In her opinion, it was what made her a good matchmaker. Her heart was pure, unscarred, and unbroken. With her entire being, she meant to keep it that way.

Besides, the only gentleman with whom she'd had any interesting conversation these last eight months was Mr. Waverley.

Bothered by her thoughts, she stole a glance in his direction and swallowed a sigh. Dressed in a pair of tan breeches, a black tailcoat, and gold waistcoat, he stood as tall as she remembered. Not towering, but the perfect height for a dance partner. She did remember him being thinner than Henry, but today, his shoulders appeared broader and more muscular.

His dark blond hair had grown longer since they'd last spoken as well, so it touched the collar of his waistcoat. The one thing that hadn't changed was his glinting blue eyes.

Although he was very handsome, he seemed to exude a placatory personality that did not appeal to Jane in any way. She supposed when a man possessed both handsomeness and wealth, he wasn't required to work on doing more than bowing, smiling, and sometimes flirting to gain the affection of her fairer sex. At least, that is what she told herself.

As if reading her mind, Mr. Waverley turned and sent her a slight bow and a breathtaking smile. Jane's heart bounced unexpectedly. Her quick intake of breath was not lost on him. His smile deepened, causing the dimple on his right cheek to become more pronounced. *Oh dear.*

She glanced away and squeezed her eyes closed for a brief moment. She didn't want to give

Nicholas the impression she was trying to gain his attention.

"Shall we?"

Jane shifted her gaze back to him and then around the church to find it almost empty. She supposed she'd hesitated too long when Mr. Waverley cleared his throat and presented her with an amused grin. "I'm not known to bite, Miss Dalton, if that's your concern."

She clicked her tongue and pressed her gloved palm against his forearm.

"But you are certainly known for other things," she mumbled, recalling the rumors of his sometimes immoral behavior.

When he cocked his head and arched an eyebrow, she wished she'd kept her comment to herself. Then his strong muscles flexed under her hand, surprising her. For as long as she'd known him, she'd never thought of him as strong or even dominant. Now, she wondered if he possessed some other attractive feature that might cause her to blush or falter her step?

Anxious of what she might discover, she withdrew her hand and paused just outside the open doorway. "I...believe, I should go and assist Lily on...something."

Jane shifted away when Mr. Waverley's fingertips grasped hers. The sudden and scandalous intimacy sent a ripple of excitement through her. "Sir, I—"

"I'm determined to have a ball soon. I would like very much if you could attend," he leaned down to say into her ear, the warmth of his touch seeping through the thin fabric of her glove. She tried to pull away, to put some distance between herself and these rather abrupt and confusing feelings.

Whether it was tomorrow or a year from now, she didn't want him to believe she thought more of him than as a friend. Alternatively, she didn't want to think of him as more than a friend.

"That would be lovely," she found herself saying after a long pause.

He smiled, the brilliant color in his blue eyes holding her hostage for a second or two. Had they always been so blue?

"Mr. Waverley," she said, curtsying.

"Miss Dalton," he replied, sending her a quick bow. When he nodded a farewell, Jane stifled a sense of disappointment. When he rotated toward a crowd of mothers and blushing daughters, she suppressed a wave of jealousy.

"Ridiculous flirt," she mumbled before striding away at a brisk pace. She followed the wedding party down the dirt path that led to Hadley Manor. It was a short stroll, but too long to mull over her feelings. To occupy her mind on anything or anyone other than Mr. Waverley, she tried to concentrate on the gregarious chattering of a few sparrows nearby. Today, their noisy songs only seemed to mock her.

Flustered, she descended the stone steps near the garden in the back of the house. She searched for Lily, finding her friend standing near a water fountain. Jane believed her to be the loveliest of brides. Her beige Empire dress accentuated her flowing dark hair, olive complexion, and emerald green eyes.

Out of breath, Jane reached her friend.

"What's the matter, Jane?" Lily asked. "You're blushing. Who has you so ruffled?"

Jane brought her hands to her face. "It's from the exercise, surely you must see that," she replied, mortified Lily might guess her tangled thoughts regarding Mr. Waverley.

A slow smile lifted the corner of Lily's mouth. "Oh, Jane. It's Mr. Waverley. You like him!"

"No! Goodness, no," Jane answered, perhaps with a little too much emphasis. She cleared her throat and swatted a piece of hair from her face. "Mr. Waverley, indeed. Why, I've...never met a more...a more—" "Handsome?"

Jane clicked her tongue. "Unpretentious man," she corrected her friend.

Lily drew back, and they both twisted in Mr. Waverley's direction. He stood speaking to several ladies, a few of them waving their fans as if performing some mating ritual.

"Well, Jane, they certainly don't think your Mr. Waverley is...unpretentious."

"Oh, stop it, Lily," Jane scolded, "He's not *my* Mr. Waverley." Of course, Jane couldn't help but stare after him and his group of admirers. She remembered how her brother often spoke about Mr. Waverley's libertine ways. She didn't doubt he could be quite devilish; however, Jane wondered, as she gazed upon him now, if her brother had exaggerated his friend's indiscretions.

Unfortunately, he seemed to sense them looking and shifted his eyes squarely to Jane's.

He smiled and bowed.

Embarrassed she'd been caught staring at him, Jane twirled, showing him her back. "He does seem to like the attention, doesn't he?" she said, trying to keep the bite out of her tone.

"Perhaps not as much as you find it vexing," Lily giggled.

"You're wrong. I don't like Mr. Waverley in the least. I believe he is so accommodating and unassuming; I almost wish he would say or do something so shocking, it would make me faint straight away."

Lily smashed her lips together, but the shudder in her slight shoulders told Jane she was trying not to give in to a fit of laughter. Jane scoffed and started to walk away when her friend grasped her hand and hauled her back in front of her.

“You would never let me get away with such a comment. Now, what sort of thing would you wish Mr. Waverley to do, Jane?” I must know.”

Jane opened and closed her mouth a few times before realizing the scandalizing truth. For several months, her mind had kept wandering back to the play he and Lily had performed at the party months before. It was the same play that had fanned her curiosity about Mr. Waverley’s lips.

“What? What is it?” Lily prodded, bending closer.

“Who are we discussing so huddled close together?”

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