

Fair Deception

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

London. February 1816

SUSANNA WAS HALFWAY through the Indian hunters' opening dance when she became aware of the flaxen-haired gentleman in the second tier of boxes. A moon-bright flash caught her eye as she pirouetted across the Sans Pareil stage and she glanced up to see one of the lanterns shining on his head. She would have looked away, *should* have looked away, but for two things. First, the young man was quite extraordinarily comely and secondly, he was smiling directly at her.

Susanna was so startled she nearly missed a step. There was nothing new in being ogled, the Indian hunters' gauze tunics, like the majority of the chorus costumes, left shamefully little to the imagination. But this gentleman was smiling warmly, not leering, and furthermore his eyes were on her face not her body.

Susanna traversed the front of the stage in a series of leaping stretches, whirled around, laid her hand on her costume dagger and glanced up again. This time there could be no doubt. He was smiling in admiration. Directly into her eyes. A most peculiar sensation fluttered in Susanna's breast. Just for a moment the shell of detachment she had learnt to cultivate in the thirteen weeks since the season opened cracked a little. She smiled back.

On stage, the Indian chiefs were setting the scene. Susanna sank respectfully to one knee as if to listen. Out of the corner of her eye she could see the flaxen-haired gentleman's profile. His countenance had an attractive openness. He wore a blue coat

and only moderate shirt points so he was certainly no dandy. His lively expression showed that he was following the dialogue between the chiefs and their wives. Another crack zig-zagged down Susanna's shell. In her experience a London theatregoer who payed attention to the play was quite a rarity. Most were more anxious to be seen themselves than to be entertained by the actors.

It was time to spring up for the spear dance. In the front row of the pit, a group of drunken Cits cheered and ogled lasciviously. Susanna masked a shudder of distaste. The brief glow engendered by the fair-haired gentleman's admiration died, swamped by the desolate reality of her situation. Why had she ever thought coming to London would prove the answer? All it had done was to swap one set of problems for another.

'... and so, Miss Fair, I would appreciate it if you did *not* use my melodrama as a vehicle for attracting a beau.'

'I beg your pardon, Miss Scott. It won't happen again.' It irked Susanna to apologize for merely smiling at a young man in the audience when some of her fellow actresses went to far greater lengths to advertise themselves, but she needed this job too badly to antagonize the Sans Pareil's star and *raison d'être*.

'I am glad to hear it. I should have thought you of all people would have learnt the danger of encouraging advances from admirers.'

Susanna gritted her teeth. 'I collect you are referring to the Honourable Rafe Warwick. I assure you, his pursuit of me is none of my doing.'

'Dishonourable, surely? No *honourable* gentleman would lay a wager on your virtue as he has done.' Miss Scott smiled at her own wit, her good humour restored. 'Well, well, go and change. You are singing tonight, are you not?'

Susanna inclined her head and went into the chorus-room to put on her blue muslin dress. The neckline was lower than she liked, but one of the first lessons she had assimilated at the Sans Pareil was that one did not earn repeat performances at a variety theatre on the purity of one's voice alone – and a song on the bill

was worth three shillings in her purse at the end of the week.

She had chosen a favourite ballad this evening, that of an innocent country lass led astray by a fine gentleman. It was better being on stage by herself. Calmer. More like it had been with the Chartwell Players. She took a deep breath, felt the persona of the wronged maiden settle around her and started to sing. When she looked up at the close of the final refrain, still in the grip of the girl's emotion, it gave her a piercing thrill to see the flaxen-haired young man on his feet applauding. His warmth was quite dazzling and Susanna found herself unable to resist it. For a full five seconds their eyes met and held. Ridiculous, said a sane corner of her mind. Ridiculous to read anything extraordinary into a smile and a pair of vivid eyes. But for that moment, it did not seem so absurd. The feeling filled her, clothed her in stardust. . . .

An irritated hiss from the wings recalled her. Flushing, she left the stage to make way for the spectacle of a man climbing a pole with no visible means of support.

The interval passed uneventfully. Susanna told herself she hadn't expected the young man to brave the crush of the green-room to meet her. He was a lively swell out for an enjoyable evening. There was no more to it than that. She changed into her Young Witch of the Woods costume for the pantomime and brushed out her hair in order to appear wild and untamed. She winced as she crossed in front of the glass. Her red-gold curls went almost indecently well with the bronze gauze. As had become her custom, she left her day clothes ready for a swift exit. She might deal in fantasies on stage, but her reality was rooted in common sense. It had been borne in on her that just because the unpleasant Mr Warwick was not in the audience, it didn't mean he would not be waiting outside as soon as the curtain fell.

The show was done. Susanna pulled the hood of her cloak closer and inched out of the alley. A dozen steps would take her past the portals of the Sans Pareil. Another dozen and she would be safely in the midst of the departing crowd. She scanned the faces

for Rafe Warwick – and stopped, her feet stuck fast to the cobbles. Directly in her path, moon-bright head shining in the glow from a lantern, stood the flaxen-haired gentleman. He was tall, she hadn't realized that, and more finely dressed than he'd appeared in the box. An ache like an impossible dream swept through her as she took in his bright hair, vivid blue eyes and loose-limbed form. Even though every instinct was screaming that she must get away in case Warwick appeared, she found herself unable to move.

The gentleman was half-laughing, half-arguing with a dark-haired lady and another man into whose arm her hand was tucked. 'Why should I not?' he was saying. 'Deuce take it, Nell, it's devilish off-putting having you and Hugo smelling of April and May all day long. Why should I not find a little comfort for myself?'

'Because you have no money with which to buy it, brother of mine. Or do actresses now give away their favours as freely as their smiles? Come away, Kit, do. We are trying to *solve* your pecuniary problems, not compound them.'

They were talking about *her*! Susanna's cheeks burned with mortification. She made to withdraw into the shadows but her movement must have alerted him. Over his sister's head his eyes met hers. They widened with recognition and she felt her heart beat faster. Then, with the tiniest quirk of his lips, he returned some laughing answer and gestured to his companions to proceed along the Strand.

Susanna leant against the wall, weak with relief. For a devastating moment, she'd thought him another in the endless line of men who thought they had only to admire her hair and toss her a couple of guineas for her to be in their bed. He had transcended them though, and shown himself to be a true gentleman. It mattered not a whit that she would in all likelihood never see him again. Her feeling on stage had been vindicated. As she moved, her hood caught on the rough brickwork. Without any sense of danger, she fumbled to free it. And felt a vice-like grip on her shoulder.

'Well, well,' said a smooth voice. 'If it isn't my little songbird.

And there I was thinking you were avoiding me. Has nobody taught you it is impolite to spy upon your betters, wench? Or are you imagining that a pretty face is like to be looser in the pocket than an experienced man of the world such as myself?'

'Let go of me!' All thoughts of the flaxen-haired gentleman vanished. Susanna twisted out of her captor's grasp, cursing under her breath for letting herself be distracted.

'Let go of me, *sir*,' corrected the Honourable Rafe Warwick. His half-lidded eyes glinted. 'It is going to be such a pleasure to teach you manners, my dear.'

Susanna suppressed the nausea which rose in her throat. From the moment Rafe Warwick and his friends had strolled into the greenroom just after Christmas and his calculating gaze had rested on her unusual hair and gauze-clad figure, she had hated and feared him. She loathed his cold eyes, his dissipated countenance and his small, cruel smile. She detested the way his long fingers closed on her arm as if judging just how much pressure was needed to bruise the delicate skin. It hadn't needed company gossip to tell her he was rich and merciless and not accustomed to being crossed. She had known it from that first flesh-crawling inspection through his quizzing glass. Susanna swallowed. For over a month now she had managed to avoid him by hastening home as soon as she came offstage or else staying close to her fellow players on her way to and from her lodgings. Tonight it seemed her luck had run out.

A malicious smile played on Warwick's lips as he relished her dilemma. Susanna's eyes flicked desperately down the alley but there was no one in sight and he was cutting off the route back to the stage door. With a quick movement she gathered up her skirts in order to sprint along the open street.

'No you don't, jade.' Warwick's cane whipped out to strike hard at her ankle. Her thin shoes offered no protection at all. As she screamed and stumbled, he grabbed a handful of her cloak and dragged her towards him. 'I have been patient long enough. Tonight I'll have my reward.'

'Never!' Susanna struggled in his nightmare hold. He laughed, overpowering her easily, enjoying her fear. She smelt

spirits on his breath as his mouth came closer to hers. 'Help!' she shouted, really terrified now. 'Help me!'

His eyes were distorted with lust. 'You delude yourself, my pretty. No one is like to interfere between a gentleman and his lightskirt.'

Susanna wrenched her face aside, the stabbing pain in her ankle hampering her efforts to escape. 'I am not a lightskirt. Nor will I ever be *yours*!'

An icy voice spoke from behind her. 'Which appears to make you wrong on three counts, sir. Four if you include the fact that you are assuredly no gentleman either. Be good enough to unhand the lady at once.'

In the instant of incredulity when Warwick's muscles stilled, Susanna broke from his grasp, falling against the opposite wall of the alley with a cry of agony as her injured ankle gave way. Looking up, her heart thumped with disbelief. The flaxen-haired young man from the audience stood there, breathing hard. Inside his well-cut evening clothes he was alert and tense. He flicked a quick glance at her, then trained his implacable gaze on Rafe Warwick.

'Lightskirt, actress, whore. Three words with but a single meaning,' drawled Warwick. 'Take your misplaced zeal elsewhere, puppy. The wench is mine.' He stretched out his gloved hand to seize Susanna's wrist in a grip of iron.

'The lady does not appear to think so.'

'The *lady*,' Warwick made the word an insult, 'is well aware of the strength of my feelings for her.' He twisted her wrist upwards without compunction, forcing a whimper from her lips. 'You see? She pants for me.'

Still the gentleman kept his steady, blue-eyed gaze on Warwick's face. 'I have not heard her say so.'

'Nor will you,' ground out Susanna. 'I would rather die!' The pain in her ankle and wrist was near making her faint; she had to bite her lip in an effort to remain upright.

The gentleman's friends had arrived by this time. His sister whispered something in her companion's ear. He nodded and disappeared.

'This really is too foolish,' said Warwick in a dangerous tone. His free hand caressed the top of his cane. 'Go home, boy, you are becoming tiresome.'

Susanna's champion smiled widely. 'My besetting fault,' he agreed, and cut upwards without warning to land a powerful blow on Rafe Warwick's chin, following it with a solid left-hand drive to the midriff.

Warwick collapsed onto the greasy cobbles of the alley. Susanna gaped at his insensible form, unable to take in her miraculous escape. She barely heard a horse clatter to a halt.

'It is well for you that Hugo has a talent for finding hackney drivers, Kit,' said the dark-haired lady with some asperity. She turned briskly to Susanna. 'You had best make haste and tell the jarvey your direction. I doubt your admirer will be incapacitated for long. My brother has always had more enthusiasm than science.'

Reaction was beginning to set in. Susanna felt her whole body start to shake. Her bruises throbbed. 'I thank you, ma'am,' she said in a thread of a voice, 'but I fear I am unable to—' And indeed, as she moved away from the support of the alley wall, the white-hot pain in her ankle pitched her forward.

Strong arms were instantly around her, taking the weight off her crippled foot with a gentleness that almost made her weep after the violence which had been buffeting her. She received a confused impression of dancing blue eyes and gleaming hair that feathered her face as her rescuer bent to hoist her up. 'Truly a maiden in distress,' he said, a laugh in his voice to match the irrepressible devilry in his gaze. 'The evening gets better and better. She had best come to Half Moon Street, Nell. So talented as Hugo is, I feel sure you will soon catch us up.'

Before Susanna could gather sufficient words to protest the impropriety of any such action, she was lifted into the hackney carriage and the driver given the off. The sudden lurching motion, coupled with the pain in her ankle, made her feel very sick indeed. She closed her eyes until the sensation receded, and upon opening them found herself being regarded with wry sympathy.

'I am afraid I do not commonly carry a bowl around with me, but if you wish I can ask the driver to pull over for a few minutes.'

Oh, good heavens, she hadn't imagined it. She was in a hackney carriage with a gentleman she had seen for the first time tonight! 'I . . . certainly not!' Susanna might be momentarily disoriented, but nothing would induce her to vomit in the street. 'I may be only an actress, sir, but I do have standards.'

'There is no 'only an actress' about it,' he said. 'I have never heard that song performed so well. Why did you not have any speaking roles?'

Susanna blinked at the unlikely question. 'By the time I joined the Sans Pareil they only had chorus parts to offer.' And after walking the streets for a week, she had been glad enough to accept.

'But you are a proper actress.' It was less a question than a statement of fact.

'I . . . yes, I was formerly with a touring company in the west country.' The hackney lurched, knocking Susanna's foot against the side panel and bringing on a recurrence of her nausea. 'Sir, I am most grateful for your intervention, but I beg you will take me to my lodgings now.'

He frowned. 'Oh, I don't think so.'

Susanna's heart thumped in alarm. Had she jumped, or more correctly fallen, from the frying pan into the fire? To be sure, this gentleman was a thousand times more comely than Mr Warwick, but even so. . . . That overheard snippet of conversation about *finding a little comfort* drummed in her ears. She swallowed hard and looked at him directly, colouring to the roots of her hair. 'Sir, I must tell you that you may have mistaken my . . . that is, I am not in the habit of—'

'Lord, I could tell that,' he said, thrusting his long legs out as best he could in the cramped space. 'It is the Dishonourable Rafe's habits which concern me more. He doesn't have the reputation of letting sleeping dogs lie.'

The carriage jolted again, jarring Susanna's foot so badly that she could not suppress a gasp of pain.

'You really are in no condition to fight him off should he pursue you, you know.' Her companion inclined his head in a mock-formal bow. 'Christopher Kydd, at your service. My friends call me Kit.'

Reluctantly, Susanna shook his hand. Even though she could not see his face properly in the shadows, his presence filled the space between them with a terrifying potency. She was right to be wary. The mere touch of his fingers was enough to set a tingle of heat rushing through her veins. 'Miss Fair,' she said, jerking her hand away. 'And I assure you that my landlady is quite capable of —'

But the hackney had already stopped and a young footman was opening the door. His eyes widened as he took in Susanna's tumbled hair and dishevelled attire.

'It's not what you think, Tom, so stop catching flies and pay the driver,' said Mr Kydd, alighting from the other side. 'Miss Fair twisted her ankle outside the theatre. I'll need cold water and a bandage of some sort to make a compress.' He reached in at Susanna's door and lifted her in his arms without so much as a by your leave. 'As soon as you can manage,' he added.

'Mr Kydd!' said Susanna in outrage. 'Put me down at once. I am well able to walk.'

'Tosh, your foot is considerably swelled and will be worse if you rest any weight on it.' He carried her masterfully into the narrow hall, negotiated the staircase and shouldered open the door to a comfortable drawing room. 'There,' he said, depositing her on a sofa next to the fire. 'Let's take a look at the damage. This may be a trifle painful.'

Painful was an understatement. By the time he had eased away her shoe, Susanna had given up remonstrating. She felt so wrung out that she could have played any number of ghosts without recourse to the chalk box at all.

'Good girl,' he said. 'As well you were not wearing a boot. I should have had to cut it off. There is a worse ordeal to come, however.'

She looked at him in alarm. Surely her foot was not broken! Whatever would she do?

He gazed back, straight-faced. 'Your stocking. Either you must contrive to take it off yourself, or I shall have to do it for you.'

He was even more handsome at close quarters, with a disquieting imp at the back of his eyes. Susanna gathered up the shreds of her dignity. 'If you will turn your back, sir?'

Mr Kydd grinned. 'You're game to a fault. I'll give you that.' He moved to a side table. 'Would you care for a glass of Madeira?'

Instinct told Susanna to refuse but the manoeuvring she was obliged to do in order to roll her stocking down, and the ensuing sight of an angry weal running crosswise over a stretched, puffy prominence which this morning had been a perfectly sound ankle, tested her fortitude so highly that she said, 'I have never tried it before. It is a type of sherry-wine, is it not?'

'It is, and a very good one.' Mr Kydd brought two glasses across and handed one to her. 'To your recovery,' he said. His eyes really were quite remarkably blue.

Susanna gulped down a mouthful of the amber wine and nearly choked on the unexpectedly rich taste. It *was* good, much better than the thin stuff they drank in the greenroom, and a hundred times more flavourful than the small-ale which had been her travelling company's staple beverage. Mr Kydd was still watching her. She looked away hurriedly.

'Here you are, Mr Kit,' said the footman, entering with a tub of water. He deposited it by Susanna's foot and produced a roll of linen from his pocket. 'Nasty,' he said, inspecting the injury with cheerful interest. 'That'll need resting up, that will.'

'I am inclined to agree with you, Tom,' said Mr Kydd. He knelt next to the tub and before Susanna could divine his intent, lifted her leg and lowered her foot into the cold water.

Her gasp was less for the icy temperature than for the fact that his grasp on her calf had been disturbingly sensuous.

'I beg your pardon, did I jar you?'

'No, I—'

But he was frowning and gently stroking the red weal. 'The ankle I saw you twist, but how did this happen?'

'Mr Warwick has a cane,' said Susanna, twitching at his touch and thanking God that her foot was already becoming numb. 'And an uncertain temper.'

Mr Kydd sat back on his heels. 'As well you did not provoke it further. I have heard that cane doubles as a swordstick.'

Susanna stared at him in horror. 'And you hit him with your bare fists? He might have drawn on both of us!'

'That's Mr Kit for you,' said the footman. 'Acts first and thinks later. Always has done.'

'Thank you, Tom. Don't let us keep you from your duties, will you?'

The footman grinned and withdrew. Mr Kydd divested himself of his coat and began to roll up his sleeves. He glanced at her, a little shamefaced. 'Think nothing of it. It is only what anyone would have done. Drink up now, this may hurt a bit.'

As he started to wind the wet linen around her ankle, Susanna did drink. Not to dull the pain, but as a distraction from the way his gently efficient hands were placing each turn of the bandage against her far too responsive skin. It was a relief when he at last lifted her foot clear of the tub and placed it on a low stool.

'All done,' he said, finishing his own drink just as footsteps were heard on the stairs and his sister's brisk tones sounded outside the door.

Susanna hastily scraped her hair back from her face in an attempt to appear more seemly, ruing that in her haste to leave the Sans Pareil she had not stopped to pin it up.

Mr Kydd grinned. 'Nell, allow me to present Miss Fair to you. Miss Fair, my sister and her husband, Captain and Mrs Derringer.'

'How do you do? No, pray don't get up. Oh, Kit, you have not bandaged Miss Fair's foot yourself? How terribly improper. I dread to think how you will get on by yourself when Hugo and I leave for Vienna next week.' Mrs Derringer turned to Susanna. 'I am surprised you are not half-dead from embarrassment.'

To her astonishment, Susanna found herself defending him. 'I am much too grateful to be embarrassed, ma'am.' The sight of her bare toes emerging from the folds of linen, however, did

cause her some unease. 'If I could just have my shoe back on. . . .'

'I hardly think it will fit.' Mrs Derringer took off a green velvet evening cloak that made Susanna's black wool look shabbier than ever. She handed it to the footman saying, 'Tom, ask Annie for my loose cream slippers, would you? Will you be able to walk?'

'I think she must stay here tonight,' said Mr Kydd. 'After overturning the Dishonourable Rafe's plans for this evening, the least I can do is ensure Miss Fair is protected from the consequences.'

To be safe, even for a day! Susanna felt light-headed with relief until reason reasserted itself. What was she thinking? These people were Quality – and wasn't she living proof that the gentry were not to be trusted?

'Who is this Rafe Warwick?' said Mrs Derringer, accepting a Madeira from her husband, who then went on to refill the other glasses. 'I have not heard of him.'

'I should hope not,' said her brother severely. 'Drinker, gambler, proud as the devil, more money than principles and more vices than either. The sort of man who whips his servants and rides a horse into the ground to win a bet simply because he can. Not a pleasant character. Miss Fair, was this an isolated incident? Do you have no one but your landlady to protect you?'

'I . . .' Susanna took refuge in her drink, at a loss as to how to answer. Telling gentry she had barely met that Rafe Warwick had wagered two thousand pounds on her being his mistress by the end of February was not to be thought of.

'Hush, Kit. Can you not see she is suffering from shock?'

Susanna was starting to feel scarily detached. Mrs Derringer must be correct; she was tired from the evening's performance, and it was the after-effect of Mr Warwick's brutal assault which had induced the unnerving lassitude in her body. Certainly this eccentric family who joked with their servants, knocked down strangers in the street and treated variety actresses as equals didn't help her confusion. Perhaps if she just sat here quietly until her head was clear she could decide what she ought to do. She moved her foot tentatively. Would it be better by tomorrow?

'Devilish nuisance that it's only Friday, not Saturday,' said Mr Kydd.

Surprised to find her own thoughts echoed, Susanna looked up. For some reason, the rest of the room took a while to follow. A crease was marring Mr Kydd's countenance as he absently regarded Susanna's foot.

'Why so?' said Mrs Derringer.

'Because there are no performances on a Sunday. As it is, Miss Fair will be forced to miss tomorrow's show.'

There was such a frown on his face that Susanna hastened to reassure him. 'It is of no consequence,' she said. The words jammed in her mouth. Puzzled, she took another sip of Madeira and enunciated more carefully. 'The Sans Pareil has a large cast. They will put another song on instead of mine and play with one fewer Indian hunter and one less witch for the night.' She prayed that it *would* only be for one night. If she was forced to miss more, the management might replace her – and then where would she be? She had some money saved against emergencies, but her landlady would never let her keep the room once performance fees dried up.

She bit her lip and drank again. She knew a moment's fluttering alarm when Mr Kydd joined her on the sofa, but all he did was to poke up the fire and engage his brother-in-law in conversation. It seemed rude to interrupt them by asking whether a hackney carriage could be called. Her eyelids began to droop as she listened to the jumble of talk. Phrases like 'spring sowing', 'crop-rotation, and 'six-mile acre' washed across her consciousness. It took her back to earlier days when Mr Masterson would discuss farm matters with his bailiff whilst she pulled the drapes or brought in refreshments. Susanna jerked suddenly. Heavens, she was falling asleep! She took another mouthful of Madeira in an effort to seem alert, reflecting that she now understood why her erstwhile employer had kept this wine strictly for his own consumption and marked his bottles into the bargain. What a long time ago that seemed, a lifetime almost, yet it was only four years since she had left Cheltenham. She hummed a few notes of 'The Miser of Maidenhead' to herself.

Mrs Derringer stood, in a rustle of silk. 'Tom,' Susanna heard her say, 'lay a fire in the back bedchamber, if you please, and ask Annie for a spare nightgown. You may bring in the tea tray as soon as it is convenient.'

A whole tea tray. Not a single screw of leaves, saved up for and then used over and over until the taste was long departed. Susanna tried to remember how long her current twist had lasted. Was it a week yet? Her hair was drifting around her face again. She put up strangely leaden hands to tidy it before remembering that her hairpins were still in the Sans Pareil chorus-room.

'I beg your pardon,' said Mr Kydd's voice. 'I hope we have not been boring you. Won't you have some tea before retiring?'

Susanna blinked in confusion. She hadn't heard the footman enter. She took the cup and saucer Mr Kydd was handing her. 'Oh, the Sèvres star design!' she cried without thinking. 'How beautiful! I never thought to see it outside a catalogue.'

There was an odd pause. 'It is striking, isn't it?' said Mr Kydd. 'Grandmama was a great frequenter of china warehouses. The pride of our collection are a few pieces of Kakeimon.'

'The Japanese porcelain? I should love to see that!' Susanna sipped her tea reverently, half-closing her eyes and making every fragrant mouthful last. She was only peripherally aware of a whispered conversation between the others.

'Did you hear that? She could be the answer!'

'Kit, she is an *actress*.'

'No ordinary actress. And you know it would aid my case considerably if—'

'It is a preposterous idea! Are you finished, Miss Fair? I will call Tom Olivant to give you a hand up the stairs.'

'The devil you will,' said Mr Kydd. Before Susanna could anticipate his intention, he had scooped her up in his arms. Again! She felt the warmth of his body through his coat and waistcoat, smelt the faint masculine scent coming off him. Even as her treacherous senses registered how pleasant it was to be held by someone this comely and this strong, the overheard conversation outside the theatre came rushing back again with a vengeance.

'No!' The protest was as instinctive as her struggle to get free. Through the worn muslin of her gown, she was aware of his arm muscles bunching under her thighs in order not to drop her. Abruptly she stopped moving. 'Sir, I beg you, please do not—'

He smiled, just a flicker of wickedness at the back of those devastating eyes. 'Be easy, I am delivering you to my sister's maid. We have had this conversation, if you remember. Not *all* men are cut from the same cloth as Mr Warwick.'

Oh, now she had offended him when he was simply being considerate. What would he think of her? 'I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to imply that your morals were . . . That is, you are so very good looking, you see, that any lady might . . . It is simply that I was not brought up to . . .' She floundered to a halt, hearing her tongue tie itself up in knots.

His eyes danced. 'No apologies necessary, Miss Fair. It is my pleasure. After all, playing St George must warrant *some* reward . . .'