



THE UNTOUCHABLE BRIDE

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Chapter One

London, 24 April 1800

James Longhurst swirled the brandy in his glass. He'd been in White's for nearly three hours and was still to taste the liquid. All evening acquaintances when they entered the gentlemen's club, made their way over, hovering around, trying to engage him although eventually, when he'd been rude enough, people decided to leave the Duke alone; and Longhurst was glad, because he was in a fine gloom. Ravensdean always said he could manifest the perfect mood and who should know better than his lifelong friend.

Someone bellowed laughter and James looked up at a group of gentlemen sitting a few chairs away. At different intervals, one or two of them had vanished, presumably to make an appearance at the ball. On their return, they had jested about the latest incomparable but, unfortunately, James could tell some of them genuinely meant their praise.

Since his eyes had opened this morning, and he'd squinted in the April sunshine, James knew his normal good humour had deserted him; and it was Ravensdean's fault. Today was the twenty-fourth and that meant one thing; the debt was due. His destiny was inescapable, the wager lost and James had to attend a debutante's ball!

When he and Ravensdean had returned from the continent and began to mingle in society, it was clearly apparent they were both considered as quarry. His friend had found every hunting mama and daughter amusing, and jested about the latest ploy which was dreamt up to coerce, or compromise him, into marriage. James, however, had felt nothing except repugnance at their behaviour. Very quickly it had become the gossip that the Duke of Longhurst had stopped attending debutante events, and had scathingly declared he would never marry one of the creatures.

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Tonight, sadly, he would concede defeat and give-in to the demands of society; even though the idea was abhorrent. James knew his presence at the ball would cause enormous excitement amongst the mamas. They would take it as a sign that he was thinking about marriage and, like his friend, Matthew Farrington, the unrivalled eighth Duke of Ravensdean, he would become the object of every mothers' expectation. They would be throwing their daughters in his path. His life would never be the same again. He was dreading it!

Looking back, James should have realised his friend was about something. Ravensdean, despite how much Longhurst tried to deny it, had always been a better judge of horse flesh. Yet James's arrogant insistence that his new chestnut would beat anything had been misjudged. When the nag finished last past the post and the forfeit had been declared, Ravensdean had howled with laughter at the horrified expression, which James knew had taken hold of his face. His debt was to attend Sarah's ball and to dance with her.

The Dowager had finally decided that Ravensdean's little sister was at an age when it was right that she entered society and selected a husband. At nearly twenty, Sarah was older than most other debutantes, although if Ravensdean's mother thought that maturity added additional beauty to the girl, no one in society would dare disagree with her. It was already the gossip that the Queen had found her charming when she was presented at Court, and last night Beau Brummell had given Sarah the nod at Almack's; sealing her place as a sought after prospective wife.

James had always known that one day Sarah would re-enter his life. He'd listened impassively for weeks as Ravensdean had recounted amusing tales of how the Dowager had been torturing his sister, turning her into the latest society princess; and yet, despite their friendship, Matthew had never once asked him to be present at her debutante ball.

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The unintentional slight had pained him, although James deserved it as six years ago he'd cast Sarah and her mother out of his life. His sudden disregard had hurt Matthew terribly and his friend had never understood why, after nearly eight years of being a brother and a son in the Ravensdean household, James had shut out his adoptive family. And Longhurst knew he would never be able to tell the truth.

When he and Matthew were sixteen, had just left Eton and therefore stupidly considered themselves as men, they wickedly teased Sarah about the day when the whole of society would be watching her as she entered the world of sophistication and manners at her ball. Sarah had been utterly horrified at the idea. Witnessing her distress, they had spent hours comforting her, reassuring their little sister that her brothers would be standing, shoulder to shoulder, casting warnings glances at the approaching gentlemen, who were vying for her first dances. She would not be alone; they would always be present to protect her.

Except, two years later, James had discovered he did not have the morals, nor was he a good enough man to be around Ravensdean's little sister; and certainly he had no right to behave as her guardian. Shame and abhorrence had fed his change of mind and he'd quickly disassociated himself from the Ravensdean females. It had been easy to find excuses to stay away. He was beginning to manage his inheritance, as well as studying at Cambridge. Time was precious and Matthew swiftly learnt not to invite him to family events. Instead, gradually the two Dukes had grown into their future together; they travelled, they lived sumptuously in London, they became sought after members of society; and James had tried to forget that one day he would again face the woman who secretly tortured his dreams.

When the tall clock in the corner at White's chimed for eleven-thirty, James woke from his reflections. The sound meant his dawdling was over. So, with a silent nod to fate, bad luck and any other demon he could think of, Longhurst cursed his

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friend again for his scheming and downed the brandy in one. As the smooth liquid slid down his throat, in the corner of his eye, James spotted the door open again and the Earl of Billingdean entered the club.

Billingdean really was a pompous peacock. His latest fancily tied cravat was so ornate that it always arrived before he did. Tonight was no exception; although it was almost hidden by the huge sapphire pin the Earl had obviously worn to impress the assembled crowds. Ravensdean and James always favoured less sparkling outfits, yet recently, to their amusement, Billingdean had started to curl his bone straight locks a little to mimic the waves in Matthew's hair.

James made to stand, but he was too late as the Earl spotted the Duke and steered towards him. "Longhurst," he called and James tried not to grind his teeth. The sycophant always assumed they were friends and sat down uninvited, unaware the Duke could barely tolerate him.

"Avoiding Ravensdean's ball," Billingdean cooed using the tone of fawning the Earl saved for his betters. Longhurst instinctively smiled, he did have manners after all, and was able to hide his displeasure as he ground out, "Actually, I'm on my way there now."

Billingdean's reaction was unflattering; at first he looked stunned at the news and then the peacock released a peal of laughter causing several gentlemen sat behind to smirk at his tittering. There was well-pleased glee in his voice when the Earl giggled, "This has been such a week; first Ravensdean is at Almack's, then you attend a debutante's ball. I shall be devouring the Morning Post tomorrow to discover how you fared."

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Longhurst leant forward and put his glass down, which enabled him to hide his annoyance. When he sat back, the Duke had composed himself and was able to reply with politeness and a little dry humour, “Ravensdean will do anything for his sister, even exposing himself to the horrors of the debutante cattle market!”

Billingdean tittered again, this time at James’s wit. “And I will do anything for my friend, which is why I am on my way to Grosvenor Square to dance with his sister.”

A look of conceit appeared on Billingdean’s face and naturally James felt like cuffing it off. He guessed the direction of the Earl’s thoughts. Billingdean was no doubt gloating at the snippet of gossip, the very tantalising news that the legendary Duke of Longhurst suddenly seemed to be as ordinary as the hundreds of other gentlemen in society. It appeared the Duke was mortal after all! And, seemingly bound by the same rules, conventions and expectations despite how much his Grace tried to deny it.

The Earl, however, was too self-absorbed to recognise how much he had annoyed his companion and chuckled as he condescendingly proclaimed, “Longhurst, despite your title and family connections you’ll be lucky to get near Lady Farrington. I’ve just left and the rooms throughout the mansion are packed. Everyone wants to examine her. I must admit though she is a diamond; a pretty little thing and might be worthy of further inspection. I’m sure Ravensdean will give her a handsome dowry.”

Perhaps it was fortunate, on this occasion that Billingdean did not know the Duke more intimately. If he had recognised the quickly blanked fury in Longhurst’s eyes, caused by his indelicate words, the man might have fled London knowing he had made such a powerful foe. James was too close to the family to hear the base realities of the criteria men like Billingdean might use when deciding to marry.

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For Longhurst to hear Sarah described as an attractive financial investment was completely insulting and distasteful; and, more frustratingly, there was not a single thing he could do about it. He was unable to set the man down, it was not his place. Instead, all James could do as he rose to his feet, was smile while he corrected, "I'm sure Billingdean, if you ever describe his sister in those terms again, Ravensdean will make sure you are never invited to another ball at his mansion, and you will certainly not be welcome within a hundred yards of her."

Maybe it was the tone of warning that made the Earl finally recognise he had spoken in error, at least in this company, and had sense enough to heed his luck. There was a little colour on his cheeks as he said, "Perhaps you are right Longhurst. I will describe her instead as a lovely young lady who will bring warmth and colour to the season." James's terse reply, "Yes, I think that is very wise," was given as he walked away from the man.

It was a warm night for April when Longhurst stepped out onto St James's. Dismissing his carriage, the Duke welcomed the occasional flurry of breeze as he marched along the streets. The pounding of his feet on the pavements helped reduce his inner rage. He'd hidden his feelings for so long that perceived indifference had become a natural camouflage. Yet somehow, James knew he was going to have to adjust to talk of Sarah, especially now she had entered his world as a marriageable object. She had grown into a woman; she was no longer Matthew's baby sister.

Despite his on-going emotional weakness, since the wager Longhurst had spent much time considering and preparing for this night. A columnist in the Morning Post had today described the Duke as "the most dissolute gentleman to hit London this year". Wagers, drinking parties and nights spent in his mistress's opera box had been tedious but cultivating a perfectly awful reputation had required some effort. The gossips were delighted, and society clearly understood the entertainment, and

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company, he currently favoured; and none of it was fit for a young unmarried lady, especially the newly launched Lady Farrington.

With this part of his plan achieved, the next was more difficult to predict. A public face to face encounter like this was risky, but all Longhurst could do was hope Sarah would be guided by his behaviour tonight. All of society knew his connection to the family, and they were, after all, friends from their childhood. No one would expect anything but warmth and cordiality; a meeting of two old acquaintances. He hoped by greeting her in such a way Sarah might reciprocate, as manners and etiquette dictated; despite how they might truly feel about each other.

Despite all this planning and reasoning a dreaded feeling of nervous sickness had hounded the Duke all day. Without consciously realising his direction James walked into Berkeley Square. For a moment he almost had to stop himself from going home. Longhurst House stood beckoning him from across the shadows of the gardens which dominated the centre of the square. But he didn't stop. The outcome of this evening had been decided the minute he'd lost the wager. If James did not attend tonight, Ravensdean would crow about his weak constitution. More importantly though, he felt his friend wanted, for one night, to have the people he loved together again. Matthew wanted his family back; united like they used to be before James had ruined everything.

For the hour, the streets were surprisingly empty, although when the Duke turned into Grosvenor Square he understood why; there were carriages everywhere waiting to be called by their owners. Once the Dowager had issued her invitations for the ball all the other sensible hostesses must have abandoned their entertainment for this evening. No one could compete with Louisa Farrington's carefully orchestrated masterpiece.

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He saw Louisa's handiwork immediately. Even from the corner Ravensdean House dominated the square. It was sparkling as thousands of candles, which lit the mansion, shone out from rows and rows of windows including the bedrooms upstairs. The Dowager was clearly ensuring everyone knew where the power in society rested tonight. Last year, Matthew had invested in new, opulent chandeliers which each carried over a hundred candles casting more light and the effect, even from a distance, was stunning.

Still feeling disinclined, Longhurst crossed the square and sought out the shadows. He stood opposite the mansion leaning on the railings which surrounded Grosvenor Square's central gardens and watched the crowds.

The servants had not permitted any coaches to wait on this side of the square and *Le Beau Monde* were swarming in and around Ravensdean House. A rainbow of colours flashed across the front salon windows as ladies passed by, smiling invitingly at the groups of gentlemen who had retreated from the ballroom. He even spotted a few peers who hadn't been in town for years. No doubt the Dowager had some connection to the gentlemen. The ancient family name was clearly still a beacon; everyone would want to boast tomorrow that they had been to the debut ball for the Duke of Ravensdean's sister.

As he watched a group of debutantes burst through the door. They giggled and gossiped and waited on the steps whilst their parents ordered Ravensdean's servants to fetch their carriages. When they finally departed James pushed away from the railings, stepped onto the road and entered the fray.