

LOVING LYDIA



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

CHAPTER 1



WEST SUSSEX, THE YEAR OF OUR LORD 1671...

Lydia Robins was cross. Decidedly so. Pursing her lips, she reached down for a pebble and threw it with all her might into the still waters of the lake. The loud impact startled one of the moorhens on the other side, and flapping its wings loudly, it quickly took cover amongst the rushes.

Lydia stared after it, wishing she could do the same. But no. That certainly wouldn't be allowed. She rolled her eyes and shook her head, causing her long blue-black hair to swish around her shoulders, the silky strands gleaming in the sunlight.

Why, oh why, did her mother always insist on inviting Cecily Walters to their soirées? Didn't she have enough acquaintances to choose from whom she could invite instead? Cecily was the most unreasonable person she knew and practically every time they met, they argued.

Her mother, of course, thought she was being difficult and that Cecily was merely a tad on the excitable side, declaring that Lydia should have more patience and try to curb her tongue a

little. Lydia narrowed her eyes and, huffing under her breath, threw another pebble.

"I was going to say good morning but judging from your obvious vexation, I would say it is not. Am I correct?"

A deep voice broke into her thoughts and Lydia spun around to find Lord Hugh Danbye watching her, a hint of amusement in his dark brown eyes. He was their closest neighbour and had been a friend of the family for years. He was a handsome fellow, with shoulder length brown hair and a neat cavalier moustache. He held the title of Earl of Barnham and was considered quite the eligible bachelor. If he wasn't so much older and in possession of such a domineering persona, she might fancy herself in love with him. But he had told her off one too many times for her liking so even the notion of marriage to such a man was pushed swiftly aside.

At thirty-six, he wasn't exactly old, but in her opinion, a man nearer her own age would be far more suitable. And by suitable, she meant someone more accommodating and docile than the foreboding earl. Heaven knew what it would be like to have such an overbearing husband.

Unfortunately, thus far, no other suitor had even come close to his handsome good looks, and at the ripe old age of nineteen, life was beginning to pass her by.

She placed her hands on her hips and retorted angrily, "In answer to your question, Lord Danbye, no, it is most definitely not a good morning! Mama has invited Cecily Walters to tonight's soiree and you know that I detest her."

He shot her a look of commiseration. "Yes, she can be rather irksome but surely, you can avoid direct contact with her," he suggested. "Perhaps sit at the other end of the table and converse with others?"

"On this occasion, I cannot. There are to be only our two families present." She pulled a face. "Apparently, her mama has something important to tell us. I expect it is something trivial as

usual but said in such a way that we should gasp with awe and pretend to be impressed." She flung her hand in the air dramatically, her eyes rolling with annoyance.

He chuckled. "Miss Robins, I am certain it will not be as bad as you portray it to be."

"Oh, I believe it will," Lydia muttered. She turned back to the lake and, concentrating hard, threw another pebble, wondering how the devil she was going to get through the evening with her faculties intact.



LORD DANBYE STUDIED Lydia's stiff little form as she took her frustration out on the pebbles she launched into the lake. She was a fiery little thing and possessed a wilful nature. One that he had, on occasion, had to curb by way of a verbal reprimand when her parents were not there to do so. But despite her precocious ways, she was a rare beauty. Her lustrous dark hair swept down her back, almost touching her pert little bottom and her striking blue eyes were enough to weaken the hardest of men. His thoughts took a deeper turn and he shifted uncomfortably as his manhood began to stir.

Clearing his throat, he said her name to gain her attention, "Miss Robins?"

She swung back around to face him, her brow lightly furrowed. "Hmmm?"

"The main reason I have come today is to tell you that I am returning to court for a few months. The king has requested a meeting with his officials."

She arched an enquiring eyebrow. "When do you leave?"

"In a few days. I have some affairs to get in order before I go."

"Do you know why the king wishes to see you?"

Lord Danbye stroked his moustache and for a moment his

face grew dark. "It would appear that the Dutch are being troublesome again."

"Oh. Think you there will be another war?"

"Mayhap. We shall see. But 'tis nothing for you to worry about. Will you walk with me to the house?" He held his arm out for her to take.

"Of course." She placed her small hand on his sleeve and they walked sedately back to the large house that Lydia had the good fortune to call home. Named Haven Manor, it had been built over two hundred years ago by one of her forebears and had been in her family ever since.

The gardens were equally as beautiful as the house, tended to by two gardeners, Tom and Rigby. It was May, and in her opinion, one of the most beautiful times of year. The trees were full, with new green growth and the early flowers were intoxicating with their heady scent. Lydia's father, Sir Ralph, was an amiable man but a stickler for having things done to his satisfaction—woe betide anyone who failed to do so, his gardeners included. So at any time of year, one could take a walk and not fail to admire the gardens' beauty.

Reaching the house, Lord Danbye stood to one side to allow Lydia to enter first. She did so with poise, and he found himself once again admiring her trim form as he followed her into the parlour.

Sir Ralph was reading the London Gazette and lowered it when he saw him. "Hugh, my boy. How lovely to see you. Take a seat."

He obliged by seating himself opposite. Lydia, he noted, opted to stand over by the window, distractedly winding one of her silky strands of hair through her slim fingers. She was so pretty but didn't seem to realise it. Another thing he found most appealing about her.

"Would you like something to drink, Hugh? A glass of port? A coffee?" Sir Ralph asked him.

"A glass of port would be splendid."

Sir Ralph beckoned his servant over with a crook of his finger and told him to pour the beverage for Lord Danbye.

"How goes the king?" Sir Ralph asked him.

"Very well, or at least he was the last time I saw him. I will be attending court at the end of the week, which leads me to why I am here. I wondered if you wished to accompany me? I know you have oft asked about Whitehall, and this would be a perfect opportunity for you to see for yourself."

"Nay, lad. I am much obliged that you thought of me but my foot is still giving me problems." He tapped his left leg with his walking stick. "Doctor says 'tis gout. All I can do is rest it. Bothersome, but there is little else I can do." He shrugged his shoulders. "'Tis not the first time I have had it and I doubt 'twill be the last."

"It must be painful," Lord Danbye commiserated.

"Yes, it is, but enough talk of this damned foot—how are things over at Seven Oaks?"

"Very well. I had a new wing built on the eastern side. You will have to come and visit when you are recovered. It looks rather splendid."

"I should like that. So will my wife. She is oft lamenting the fact that I do not go out enough, even though I tell her I am quite happy as I am," he added gruffly.

Lord Danbye chuckled. Lydia's mother was quite an assertive woman and as pleasant as she was, one could find her a little overbearing on occasion.

"Will you have a party to celebrate your new extension?" Lydia asked him, walking over, her eyes alight with interest. She perched her bottom on the arm of her father's chair. "It would be the perfect way to show it off?"

Lord Danbye raised an eyebrow. "I am not certain people would be that impressed."

"Of course, they would!" Lydia expressed, warming to her

theme. "Everyone loves a party and they will also get to view the new building. Yes, they will be impressed."

"I shall think on it. Parties take a lot of planning, and at the moment, my main concern is returning to court."

Just then the door opened and Hortense, Lydia's mother, breezed in. Lord Danbye immediately stood up, his good manners coming to the fore.

"Lord Danbye! How lovely to see you," she exclaimed, smiling broadly. "I have only just learned of your visit, otherwise I would have joined you sooner." She held out her hand for him to kiss, which he did with decorum.

"Lady Robins."

"You look decidedly well if I may say so," she noted, sweeping her gaze over him.

"Thank you. And may I return the compliment?"

She accepted his remark gracefully. "How kind of you to say so. I wonder, are you free this evening? We have guests coming and I would love you to join us."

"I have no prior engagements. I would be honoured."

He glanced at Lydia who smiled impishly and retorted, "How delightful. You can also endure Cecily Walters' unbearable company."

"Lydia!" her mother sharply reprimanded her.

Lydia rolled her eyes and walked over to the window, leaving Lord Danbye to make small talk with her mother and father. The dinner promised to be entertaining if nothing else.



THAT EVENING, dinner progressed surprisingly well. Cecily seemed slightly quieter than usual but it suited Lydia, for she had no desire to talk to her at all. She instead concentrated on conversing with Lord Danbye and her father.

At the end of the main course, Lydia's attention was

diverted by her mother asking, "Well, what is this news you wished to speak of, Lady Walters? I confess to be rather intrigued and simply cannot wait any longer to find out what it is."

Lady Walters dabbed the corners of her mouth delicately with her serviette and then her eyes sparkled with excitement as she said, "As you know, one of my dearest friends is the Duchess of Cleveland. She and I have been friends for many years now. Well, she has put in a good word or two and our fortunate daughters have been chosen to serve the queen. What do you say to that?" She sat back in her seat, a look of self-satisfaction on her face.

Lydia's jaw nearly dropped down onto the table. Serve the queen? Had she heard right?

Her mother was quick to reply. "It cannot be true? Surely?"

"Oh, it is, believe me." Lady Walters nodded her head emphatically. "They are expected at the end of this month. Is this news not exciting?"

"I confess, I had never envisaged Lydia going to court, but yes, 'tis most wondrous," Hortense replied.

Lydia raised her eyebrows, looking from one to the other before remarking, "Do I have a say in this?"

Lady Walters turned her head sharply and looked at her, aghast. "Surely, you have no objection?" The notion that anyone would reject such an offer was clearly unthinkable.

"Not as such," Lydia declared, "but it would have been nice to have been asked beforehand rather than just assuming I wish to go to Whitehall."

Lady Walters tutted loudly. "It is a great accolade not just for yourself, but for your family as well. Cecily has no such objection, do you, my darling?"

Cecily's eyes shone with excitement. "Not at all, Mama. I feel truly honoured to have been chosen to serve Queen Catherine." She quickly glanced at Lydia. "I confess, it will be a little

daunting at first, but you and I together can rely on one another to calm our nerves."

Lydia stared at her and raised an eyebrow. The last thing she wanted to do was rely on Cecily! But politeness meant she had to respond with something so she grudgingly offered, "I suppose."



THIS NEWS WASN'T WELCOMED by Lord Danbye, not at all. He had listened quietly to the interchange and felt compelled to speak out. "I do not wish to alarm you, but the king has a certain reputation," he interjected, trying to be as diplomatic as he could. "I am not certain it is a wise decision to send your daughters to court."

"All kings have a reputation, Hugh," countered Sir Ralph. "But both our daughters are virtuous and strong of mind. They would not be easily swayed."

"He is known to be very persuasive," Lord Danbye warned him, shooting Lydia a sideways glance.

"I think your worries are unfounded, Lord Danbye," stated Lady Walters. "I have no such fears. It will not only give them a step up in society but may even find them suitable husbands."

The thought of Lydia taking a husband sent a surge of jealousy through Lord Danbye so great that he wanted to slam his hand down on the table in anger. Instead, he had to make do with clenching his teeth. He had often fantasised about asking her to be his wife, but he was thirty-six, nearly double her age. Would she want a man so much older than herself? She had never shown any interest in him that way and he had had enough lovers to know the signs.

But the thought of her going to court filled him with dread. Lydia was young and, in his opinion, vulnerable, and to place her amongst the backbiting and often outwardly hostile

members of the court was akin to throwing Daniel to the lions.

But her parents seemed not in the least worried. Perhaps they would be of a different opinion if they had seen and heard what he had when walking through the corridors and halls at Whitehall. The torrid whispers, the malicious gossip. At least he would be there to watch over her. It gave him some comfort at least.

The meal continued with the women chattering over what dresses to take and which items the girls should pack. Sir Ralph looked at Lord Danbye over their heads and with a wink of his eye and a nod of his head, the two men left the table and retired to the sanctity of the study.



THE NEXT DAY, Lord Danbye returned to Haven Manor. His intention, to forewarn Lydia of the iniquitous den she would soon find herself in. His previous night's sleep had been most troublesome and he had awoken with a pressing need to speak with her. Without her parents present, he hoped to be able to speak to her plainly. In his opinion, forewarned would hopefully be forearmed. Even better, perhaps he could persuade her not to go at all.

He found her wandering around the gardens, a small basket in one hand and a pair of scissors in the other. She wore a pale-yellow dress with a white lace collar and matching lace cuffs. Her hair was neatly pinned up today, the dark brown ringlets framing her petite face.

She looked up on hearing his approach and smiled. "Why, Lord Danbye, you are here again."

"Yes, I wondered if we may speak in private."

She looked at him astutely. "I assume you mean without my parents present."

He nodded and motioned to a nearby bench. She walked over and, placing her basket on the gravel path, sat down as he did the same.

"This is about me going to court, is it not?" she asked, raising an eyebrow. "I noted you had reservations yesterday."

"Yes, indeed I do." He rubbed his forehead, wondering how to phrase his words. "I know your parents are honoured that you have been chosen to attend the queen, but life there is far removed from the life you live down here in Sussex." He settled his eyes on her, his expression worried.

Lydia shrugged her slim shoulders. "I am no fool, Lord Danbye. If I hear any rumours or any whispers falling from licentious lips, then I will pay them no heed. I intend to do my duties as will be expected of me, but apart from that, I will keep myself to myself." She stood up and stared at him, laying a calming hand on his sleeve. She was so petite that their eyes were almost on a level. "You need not worry on my behalf."

"Life is not as simple as that, Miss Robins. If it were, I would have no cause for worry, but the court can be a dangerous place."

"I am fully aware that people can show you one face yet hide another. I will be perfectly fine. Truly."

"I am merely concerned."

"Well, you have no need to be," she admonished him. "Besides, surely we will encounter one another on occasion, and if I have any difficulties, I will be certain to seek you out."

"Very well. But promise me that if you experience any problems, even if they seem trivial, that you will tell me or your parents. I will come to you immediately," he declared sincerely.

"I believe you will and I thank you for it." She bent down and picked up her basket, placing the small woven receptacle over her arm. "Will you walk with me whilst I collect some more flowers?"

"Yes." He stood up and, keeping in pace with her small steps, followed her to a long line of rose bushes.



LYDIA WAS BEGINNING to get a little irritated with Lord Danbye's concern about her going to court. Good lord, he was acting more overprotective than her parents!

After her initial reluctance to go, mainly influenced by having to be in such close proximity with Cecily, she had decided that, in fact, it might be quite exciting. After all, she was nineteen now and certainly old enough to know her own mind and stand up for herself when the occasion arose. She was no lily-livered weakling and would have no hesitation in putting someone in their place if need be. A small frown marred her brow. Although that would obviously not apply to the king, but His Majesty was their sovereign, so surely, she could place her trust in him?

No, Lord Danbye was being overly cautious in her mind. She leaned forward to snip off a rose stem and rolled her eyes when he told her to be careful of the thorns.

Placing one hand on her hip while with the other, she brandished her scissors at him. "Lord Danbye, I have been cutting flowers for years. Do you think me addle-brained?"

She watched his handsome features change as her words sank home. His eyes darkened imperceptibly. "There is no need to be rude, Miss Robins." He went to cover her hand with his own. "Please, allow me to do it for you or perhaps one of the gardeners can assist you."

"No, there is no need." She pulled her hand back, putting the scissors out of his reach.

"Do you ever do as you are told?" he queried, giving her a stern look.

"Of course, I do, but not when the person asking is worrying needlessly," she huffed.

He raised an eyebrow. "Your reaction is exactly the reason I do not wish you to go to court. You are far too independent and

headstrong." His mouth settled into a thin line of determination. "In fact, I am going to speak with your parents again right this minute."

Lydia gasped. "You cannot! I have already made up my mind to go and I will not have you impeding me." The devil in her quickly came to the fore and with a lightning-fast move, she reached up on tiptoe and promptly cut the feather off his hat. She watched with satisfaction as it floated down between them.

"You little madam!" Lord Danbye exclaimed, his eyes sparkling with anger. "I should spank you for that!"

Lydia's pretty mouth dropped open at his statement, her eyes wide. "You would never dare."

"Is that a challenge?"

"No, it most certainly is not." Lydia took a step backwards, realising that he was deadly serious. Her stomach roiled nervously. His expression was stern and Lydia realised she may have just made a critical error. She took another step back, her heart beginning to race. "It is only a feather. I merely played a little prank on you and I believe you are overreacting."

He folded his arms across his broad chest and looked at her astutely. "You see, this is the very reason I worry about you going to court. Your impudent nature will undoubtedly land you in trouble."

"Fie, not everyone will be as tiresome as you," she said rudely, glaring at him.

"You will apologise."

"No, I shall not!"

They stared at each other for a long moment, neither moving until Lord Danbye reached out to take her arm. It was Lydia's cue to skeddaddle.

Dropping her basket and the offending scissors, she lifted up her skirts and ran for all she was worth. She could feel her heart hammering in her chest and her breathing become laboured as she tried to outrun him. But Lord Danbye was much quicker and

she soon found herself captured. She struggled and kicked out, but his massive arms had her well and truly immobilised.

"Let me go! *Let me go!*" she shrieked, angry at having so easily been overpowered.

"No, my bad-tempered vixen. You are in need of a sound spanking and I intend to make sure you receive one," he said sternly.

"Unhand me!" she squealed, doing her utmost to break free of his vise-like grip.

Lord Danbye ignored her and she soon found herself upended over his knee, her bottom high up in the air. "This is undignified. You cannot treat me like this!" she objected through gritted teeth.

"You should have thought about that before acting like a child."

"'Tis not my fault if you cannot take a... *oh!*"

She gasped when she felt a rush of cold air on her buttocks, realising he had just exposed her bottom by throwing her skirts over her back.

"What are you doing? *Aooow!*"

She shrieked when his hand made contact with her bottom, leaving a painful sting. Before she had time to recover, it fell again, and again. She felt her body jolt forward with each spank and cried out indignantly, "Stop! It hurts! *Stop, I say!*"

He continued, despite her shrieks of outrage. It would seem he was hellbent on giving her a sound punishment regardless of anything she had to say. Her slim legs kicked uselessly into the air, her hands scrabbling around in front of her, trying to pull herself away from his punishing hand.

"You need a lesson in manners, Miss Robins. You seem to be under the illusion that there are no consequences for your naughty behaviour. I hope you will act with more decorum when you are at court."

Her bottom was on fire and each smack of his large, iron-like

hand made her writhe in pain. There seemed to be no escape from the torturous onslaught. "You are mean, my lord. Please... *stop!*"

With a final swat to each buttock, he finally ceased, letting his hand lie still on her tender, heated flesh. She went to rise, but he kept her firmly pinned down. "An apology if you will?" he demanded, his deep voice filling the air.

Lydia huffed under her breath but had a feeling that if she failed to repent, then she would get more of the same. Reluctantly, she gave in. "I am sorry."

Finally, he allowed her to rise, which she did swiftly, hopping from foot to foot in front of him, whilst rubbing furiously at the backside. Her cheeks felt hot with embarrassment. God's bones—he had just seen her naked bottom! She let her skirts fall down into place and looked at him petulantly, her bottom lip thrust out in indignation.

Lord Danbye pointed his finger at her. "I hope you will learn from this. It is not how a lady behaves, do you understand?" he chided her.

She nodded sullenly.

"Now, I suggest you go inside and think upon your behaviour. When you attend court, I shall come to see you, to make sure all is well. Until then, my mischievous Miss Robins, I bid you adieu." He turned on his heel and made to leave.

"You are not going to dissuade my parents?" she asked him hesitantly.

He stopped mid-stride and looked at her over his shoulder. "Nay, Miss Robins. On reflection, I believe you have made up your mind to go, so I will not stop you. I simply take solace in the knowledge that I will be there to watch over you and keep you safe." He looked at her meaningfully before turning around and taking his leave.

Lydia watched him walk away, her bottom still smarting from his firm hand. He might warn her of the unscrupulous

people at court, but the one she would have to truly watch out for was him. And it seemed he would be watching her very closely indeed.

Her mouth made a little moue and she placed a hand over her bottom protectively, wondering what she was truly letting herself in for.