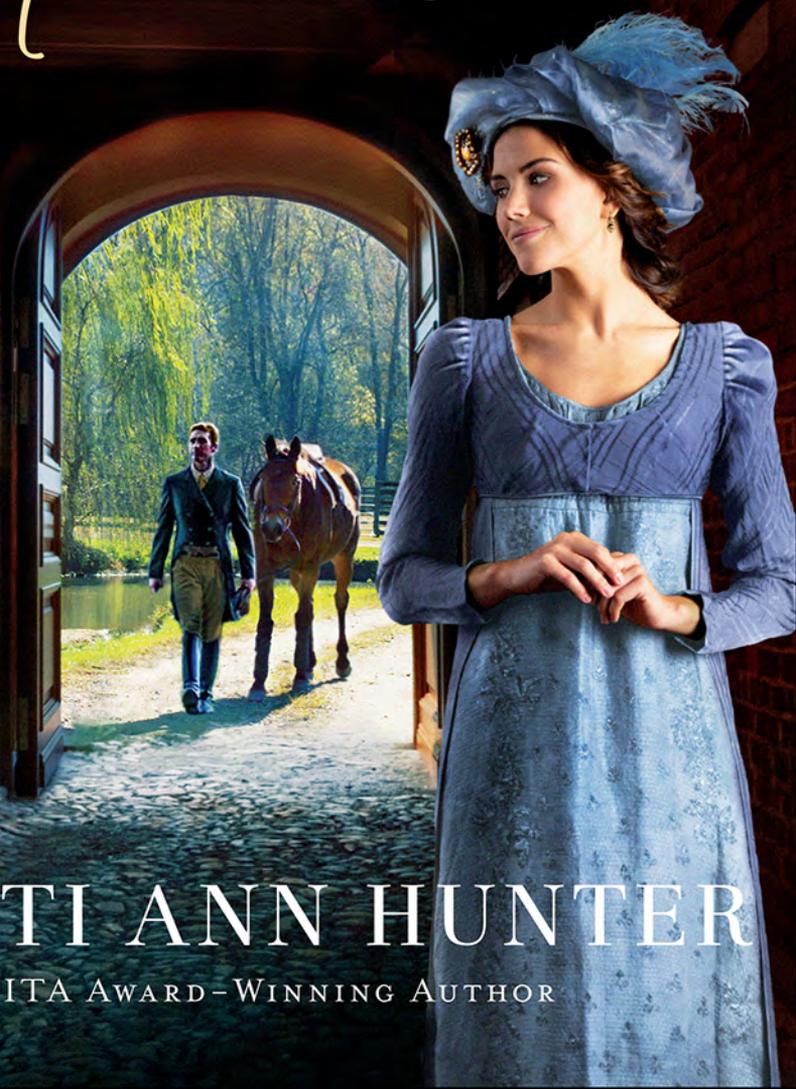


HEARTS *on the* HEATH

# Enchanting THE Heiress



KRISTI ANN HUNTER

RITA AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

HEARTS  on the HEATH

Enchanting  
THE  
Heiress

KRISTI ANN HUNTER



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*To the Ultimate Planner  
Ephesians 1:7–10*

*And to Jacob  
Thank you for teaching me the power  
of reading the Bible in context.*

## *Prologue*

DECEMBER 1817  
NEWMARKET, ENGLAND

**H**ow could Jonas Fitzroy possibly follow his twin sister's directive to stop watching over and protecting her, when she actually believed in the crazy plan she'd just laid out to him?

"Stop talking for a moment and let me think," he said as he set aside the cloth he'd been using to buff the saddles filling the Hawksworth tack room. He'd been working at the estate for only a handful of months, but it had been a refreshing change of pace from the traveling circus he and his sister, Sophia, had worked with the past few years.

The only downside had been how difficult it was to keep his sister out of the curfuffle she'd created when she'd brought them here in the first place. One dangerous pitfall had led to another, but at least she'd fallen into all of them with good intentions.

This time, however . . .

He crossed his arms. "Am I to understand that Miss Hancock is telling everyone that the two of you are embarking upon a grand tour, but you're really only going to London? Once there, she's going to write Lady Stildon about the change in plan. Then, because Lord and Lady Stildon are so deeply in love, she assumes

Lady Stildon will share the information with her husband. Am I correct so far?”

Sophia bit her lip and nodded.

Though that part of the plan seemed far more complicated than necessary, Jonas couldn't fault the logic. Working at Lord Stildon's stable had allowed Jonas to see firsthand how besotted the couple was with each other. There was likely truth to the idea that Lady Stildon told her husband practically everything.

It was the next step in the plan that gave Jonas pause.

“Then, because Lord Stildon wants everyone to be happy, and because Lady Stildon will prompt him to, the news will be shared with Aaron. Upon hearing that you are close at hand and not on a boat bound for Europe, he will speed to London, declare his love for you, ask you to marry him, and bring you back here so you can start your lives together.”

Sophia huffed and crossed her arms. “Well, when you put it like that, it sounds ridiculous.”

“That's because it is.” Jonas snagged the cloth and resumed working on the saddles. “How did you come up with such a scheme?”

“It was Harriet's idea.”

Jonas almost groaned. “Of course it was.”

“What do you mean by that?”

He shook his head. Couldn't she see it? “I'm very thankful Miss Hancock provided you a way to move back to Newmarket, but ever since you returned, she's been manipulating and maneuvering your life.”

“I am her companion. I go where she goes. That's called having a job, not manipulation.” Sophia rolled her eyes as she grabbed another cloth, then dipped it in the water and began cleaning the next saddle in line.

How much should Jonas push the subject? Miss Hancock was friends with Lady Stildon and a frequent visitor to Hawkesthorn,

so he heard things, saw things, knew things about the independent heiress.

Like how she'd never had a companion before hiring Sophia. And how even though she claimed to have interest in pursuing the type of complex riding at which Sophia was proficient, she'd made no moves forward in purchasing a trained horse for herself. Money wasn't the issue, because she'd bought a brand-new dining set on a whim the last time Jonas had escorted her and Lady Stildon into town.

She'd once stooped in the stable's doorway unhooking and refastening the top button on her boot eight times in a row to ensure an encounter with Aaron Whitworth, the stable's manager.

More than once, she made last-minute plans that forced an unsuspecting Sophia into the company of Aaron or women who had months prior shunned Sophia's existence. Oftentimes these plans didn't leave his sister time to return home to change. Fortunately, Miss Hancock always happened to have some suitable accessory at hand or was able to convince Lady Stildon to loan Sophia a proper dress.

A proper dress that always seemed to perfectly fit Sophia's tiny frame and never had to be returned.

Jonas could only imagine who else Miss Hancock considered her personal puppet.

It made him clench his teeth to hear Sophia speak about dinners she'd decided to attend or ideas she'd had or some *chance* encounter with Aaron or a potential riding client. The only balm—and the reason Jonas had kept his observations about Miss Hancock to himself—had been Sophia's smile as she and Aaron did, indeed, grow their relationship onto a firmer footing that would eventually get his sister away from that woman's influence.

Miss Hancock could not possibly have *known* that would happen, though. She'd risked Sophia's heart on a hunch, a game, a whim.

Now it seemed the slow success wasn't enough for her.

"Why can't you simply let Aaron propose when he's ready?"

Jonas slid the cloth along a stirrup strap and looked up to pin his sister with his gaze. "Why force him into it?"

"Because we don't know if he intends to ever propose."

Oh, how he wanted to pounce upon that *we*. Why did it matter what Miss Hancock knew or didn't know? What had happened to his optimistic, dreamy sister who always believed the best for her future?

"Why wouldn't he?" Everyone in the stable knew Aaron was enamored with Sophia, and his requesting her hand was only a matter of time.

Sophia sighed. "Because he hasn't yet."

"I'm fairly certain if you told him you didn't want to travel the world with Miss Harriet Hancock, he'd be down on one knee within the week." Jonas dipped his rag in the bucket and wet another section of saddle. Why couldn't people just say what they meant? This entire business could be solved by Aaron asking Sophia what she wanted in life and Sophia telling the man it was him.

Instead, they were both playing games, scared of what might happen if the other didn't want the same thing they did.

"But what if he doesn't?" Sophia whispered. "What if he says he doesn't love me, isn't ready to marry me, and considers me only a dear friend?"

Then Jonas's observation skills were more than a little lacking. Still, her concern was enough to weave the tiniest thread of doubt into his conviction. He'd spent all his life protecting his sister. She might be ten minutes older than he was, but that didn't matter. She was his responsibility, and since he didn't have the means to provide for her if she quit her job as Miss Hancock's companion, he was required to work within the parameters the position provided.

That didn't mean he had to like it.

“How is Miss Hancock’s scheme different?” He’d try one more time to get her to see reason.

“Because Aaron gets to declare his views in a way we can all pretend doesn’t hurt anyone.” She dropped the cloth atop the saddle before hugging her arms around her middle. The light Irish brogue that had traced her words moments before thickened as she fought back tears. “I like Newmarket, Jonas. It feels more like home than anywhere we’ve been since we lost the family house.”

Jonas understood her sentiment. In some ways, he felt it himself. The horses, the Heath . . . it was all like a little piece of Ireland. Except here people actually liked them and wanted them to stay around. At least, they liked Sophia. He was here because she was, and that didn’t bother him at all.

Sophia saw things differently, though, and he wanted her to have what she desired. “Are you sure this is what you want? A home with Aaron, working and living in one place?”

“It is. I had other dreams only because I didn’t know about this one.” Her expression softened, and she sighed. “If Aaron loves me, that would be everything. But if he doesn’t, I don’t want to have to move on and lose my home.”

Jonas groaned. For six years it had been just him and Sophia, and that isolation had nearly wrecked his people-loving sister. He couldn’t ruin her friendships she’d made since coming to Newmarket, not even the one with Miss Hancock.

That meant he had to allow this ridiculous scheme to continue. Maybe he could make it a little less convoluted, though. “I’ll give you and Miss Hancock time to get to London, and then I’ll tell Aaron where you are.”

Sophia blinked. “You’ll just come right out and tell him?”

“Regardless of what Miss Hancock has told you, men don’t think the same as women. Yes, I’m going to come right out and tell him. He’ll either make plans to follow you to London or he

won't. Either way, at least you'll *know* he's been informed instead of waiting to see if the gossip has traveled as far as you hoped."

Sophia frowned. "Aaron won't feel trapped?"

"I can promise you that whatever Aaron feels will be better than his trying to decipher what it means that you didn't tell him you were going to London yourself. This little gossip chain could make it appear you didn't want him coming after you at all."

All the color drained from Sophia's already-pale skin, making Jonas drop his cloth and circle the saddle rack to catch her should she suddenly faint. "Your plan," she scraped out before swallowing hard and licking her lips. "We'll go with your plan."

He felt no surge of triumph in her acquiescence. It meant he was now a part of this ridiculous manipulation. How could Miss Hancock think she could move people around like chess pieces? If she were wrong, this game held few consequences for her, but Sophia's happiness and dreams could be crushed. Did the woman see his sister as anything but an amusing toy?

FOR THE NEXT SEVERAL DAYS, Jonas's displeasure stewed until it resembled anger. What would have happened if Sophia hadn't come to him? How could he have protected her? It would have been his own fault, too, since he could have warned Sophia about her friend and employer earlier. He'd stayed silent only because there'd been no immediate danger and no one had asked him what he thought. Eventually, Aaron would have removed Sophia from the situation, so why should he push?

Apparently, because *someone* wouldn't allow the people involved to find their own way.

By the time the allotted number of days had passed, Aaron's dependency over Sophia's supposed trip had increased until his foul mood affected all his employees, including Jonas. Frustration with his sister, himself, the situation, and the aggravating Miss Hancock

pushed Jonas into an uncommonly emotional state. He threw a saddle onto a bench, the jangle of metal and *thunk* of leather on wood gaining the melancholy Aaron's attention. "London."

"What?" Aaron looked up at Jonas with a frown marred by confusion.

"London," Jonas repeated. "She's in London."

"What's going on in here?" Lord Stildon asked, poking his head around the corner from the stalls.

Jonas's irritation grew with his audience. There weren't a lot of secrets in this stable, but he'd thought no one was here but the other grooms. Preoccupation with Miss Hancock's schemes and Sophia's distress had impaired his observation skills, it would seem.

Aaron stood and looked down at Jonas. "Why is she in London?"

"Because that meddling woman thinks true love will make you run after her. She doesn't understand love doesn't demand what it wants. Instead, it will sacrifice itself to give the other person what they need."

"Tell me what you know." Aaron lost the forlorn look he'd worn since Sophia's departure and once more looked like the strong, capable, honest man to whom Jonas was willing to entrust his sister's future.

"They're staying at Clarendon Hotel."

A lively debate and growing excitement ensued as Lord Stildon was joined by the rest of Aaron's friends, men of a higher class than Aaron and a far higher class than Jonas. Plans were made, ideas tossed about. What was never even asked was whether or not Aaron was going after her, proving Jonas's interpretation of the situation far more accurate than Sophia's or Miss Hancock's.

Finally, Aaron turned back to Jonas. "I won't have anything but a one-room cottage for at least a year."

That was far more than the twins had been able to claim since

their father died, leaving behind a debt-ridden riding school and a family without means of support. “She spent two years sleeping under a wagon. I don’t think she’ll mind.”

“Am I to assume, then, that I have your blessing?”

Jonas looked up at the man who’d given him a job in a stable when he was too injured to ride, the man who’d honored an agreement with Sophia even though he’d been tricked into signing it, the man who’d been honest enough to know he couldn’t give Sophia what she claimed to want and so made a way that didn’t involve him.

It wasn’t his fault Sophia had changed her mind. Aaron had been honest and steady despite his faults and emotional issues. Jonas would never give up the job of protecting his sister to a less worthy man.

Especially since that man respected Jonas enough to ask for his blessing despite his lower station.

Jonas gave him a slight grin. “I wouldn’t have told you where she was if you didn’t. But if you think to marry her without me there, I’ll retract it.”

Within hours, Jonas found himself joining Aaron in a carriage bound for London, ready to save his sister from Miss Hancock’s scheming hands once and for all.

As a final act of brotherly protection, it wasn’t half bad.

# One

*“Please!”*

—Sophia, in seventeen notes shoved under Jonas’s door after her father said she could go for a ride only if her brother accompanied her.

He never received them, as he’d already been down at the stable, waiting for her.

## THREE MONTHS LATER

Jonas hadn’t participated in anything resembling school for many years, but he was certain that his sister’s definition of the word *simple* hadn’t come from the same dictionary the rest of the English-speaking world consulted.

He flicked a glance in her direction to acknowledge that he’d heard her speak, then turned his attention back to the horse he was grooming.

Sophia sighed and set her fists on her hips. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“I’m being ridiculous?” Jonas tilted his head, his expression conveying his disbelief plain enough that sisterly intuition would not be required to discern it.

Although perhaps he couldn't trust Sophia's ability to determine the unspoken. After six years of traveling the country, scraping out a living from amongst those who would just as soon take advantage of them as leave them to rot in a ditch, she shouldn't have trouble seeing potential manipulation and deceit.

Yet here she was, happily suggesting that he deliberately deepen his connection to a woman who nearly wrecked—or at least seriously delayed—Sophia's chance to marry the love of her life. Jonas tried to be a forgiving man, but Sophia had been married for three months now, and Miss Hancock was still sticking her nose into his sister's life. The clothing recommendations, societal guidance, and client referrals wouldn't be a problem on their own, but when they all hailed from the same source and were wrapped in subtlety, they became a picture of controlled manipulation.

And there was nothing Jonas could do about it.

His sister was married and building a life of her own, had a husband to watch over her and a group of friends she loved dearly. Since she needed and craved all those connections, he was glad she now had them. If only the good didn't bring a little bad along with it.

Jonas shook his head and ran a hand down the horse's leg so he could lift the hoof and clean it. "This is not a *simple* favor you're asking. You know that. Nothing involving that woman is simple."

"Don't say *that woman* in such a tone. Harriet is my friend." Sophia crossed her arms over her chest and stuck her nose in the air, a sure sign that she knew her request had been far too large and much too understated.

Whether Harriet Hancock truly was a friend was debatable, but Sophia was right that he shouldn't disparage the woman. At least not out loud. He was aware of plenty of people who lived as they shouldn't, and he had no trouble keeping their names out of his mouth. He likely wouldn't have an issue with Miss Hancock either if she nosed into any life other than Sophia's.

This happy world his sister had found was so new and fragile, though. Jonas didn't want to see her crushed beneath the rubble if it fell down.

Since he couldn't say something nice, he said nothing at all.

His sister changed tactics. "Are you truly attempting to convince me you're happy here?"

He placed the hoof back on the ground and straightened to squint at her. "I *am* happy."

At least he wasn't *unhappy*. His life was no longer filled with the stress of day-to-day survival, and the injury he'd sustained many months ago had healed enough that he barely noticed it unless he spent a long day in the saddle. Now he had a home with filling food and a real bed and enough money to purchase a sketchbook to draw in during his recently attained free time. All of that while staying in close proximity to his newly married sister.

What was there to be unhappy about?

She wrapped her arms around her middle and shifted her weight before pleading, "But couldn't you be happier?"

Could he? Probably. Life always held room for improvement, didn't it? He enjoyed working with the horses even if he didn't have Sophia's passion for it. Nothing else created a burning dream within him, so why walk away from a good thing?

He examined Sophia. *She* was happy, wasn't she? When she'd given up the dream she'd claimed for years in order to grab for a different future, she hadn't seemed to see it as a sacrifice. It had been a few months now, though. They'd lived in Newmarket longer than they'd lived anywhere since their parents died. Had his current contentment made him miss a change of heart in her?

"Could *you* be happier?"

"With my life? No." She sagged against the wall of the horse's stall, a dreamy smile flitting across her lips. "I'm married to the most wonderful man in the world." She coughed and glanced his way. "Aside from you, of course."

Jonas rolled his eyes and moved to the next hoof. It didn't bother him that his place in Sophia's life had shifted. A woman should love her husband more than her brother.

What *did* bother him was Sophia's growing obtrusiveness. This morning's suggestion might have been the craziest, but it wasn't the first. "Is it that I work for you now? Is that what's bothering you?"

"You don't work for *me*," she said, sticking her nose another notch in the air.

Where was the closest chair? She would have to sit down if she intended to tilt her head back any farther.

"But," she said, drawing the word out long and slow, "I can't help but wonder if you intend to work for Aaron forever."

"Forever is a long time. Who knows what God has planned for me?" Jonas shrugged and set the cleaned hoof back on the floor. "I can probably return to working for Lord Stildon, if that would make you feel better."

When Aaron had stopped being Lord Stildon's stable manager and instead become his racehorses' trainer, Jonas had made the change with him. Working with racehorses had sounded more interesting than maintaining a viscount's pleasure stable.

He could adjust if Sophia needed him to, though.

His sister sighed as her shoulders slumped. "You would still be a stable hand."

"The world needs stable hands." Who else would take care of the animals? Besides, horses were all he knew. They'd been raised on horses, spending as much of their childhood in the stable and riding rings as they had in the house.

"But you could be doing what you love." Sophia surged into the stall. "This could be your chance to spend your days drawing and learning new methods and perfecting your skills. You would have time and space and supplies to make art your life."

He had time and supplies to draw already, so what did Sophia

think his life lacked? True, his current living situation, while better than it had been in years, was nothing close to the comfortable home, servants, and promising future they'd had growing up. Aside from sharing a tiny room above the stable instead of sleeping in the manor house, though, his life was much as it was before their father died. Was that what this was really about?

Soon, Sophia would have all that back. Once Aaron finished the renovations on the old stable he'd purchased, he planned to build his new family a house. Until then, he and Sophia were living in his modest private cottage.

Jonas shared a small living space with a dozen other grooms, but Sophia had never seemed to grasp that he didn't care. He didn't care where he lived, though he did rather like having a bed under a roof instead of a pallet under a wagon. He didn't care what he did as long as he was good at it and it filled his day enough to let him feel he'd earned his keep. He didn't even care with whom he socialized or if he socialized at all, so it was easy enough to spend time with Sophia's new friends.

Now that she was happily married, he didn't even need to do that anymore. If he distanced himself from the aristocrats and gentry Sophia dined with weekly, though, would she feel even worse about their different life situations?

At some point she would have to accept the disparity.

"My life is fine, Soph. It's good."

She crossed her arms again. "And what do you intend to do today when you finish with Sweet Fleet? Volunteer to cover the duties of another groom?"

He probably would do that, but it wouldn't fill all his time. "I've been drawing and reading. Lord Stildon has offered me use of his library."

They were enjoyable pastimes he'd been unable to indulge in for years, but neither activity inspired any great aspirations. Reading certainly wasn't going to create a sense of accomplishment, and

he rather doubted drawing all day could replace the satisfaction of seeing the results of physical labor.

Why was Sophia suddenly so concerned? He leveled his gaze at her. “What aren’t you telling me?”

She was small, but he wasn’t so much taller that his size could intimidate her. His steady regard might, though. He narrowed his eyes and continued to stare.

Sophia deflated with a long, deep sigh and ran her hand over the horse’s side, something she did whenever she was nervous and needed the calming strength of the powerful animals.

Concern replaced irritation as Jonas set the hoof-pick atop the stall divider and leaned against the stall door, blocking her exit while doing his best to appear as though he hadn’t a care in the world. Something was going on here, and he wasn’t moving until Sophia told him what it was. It was never a long wait for her to start, but the completion of her tale could be several minutes away.

“Harriet found the cottage,” Sophia mumbled.

Jonas frowned. “Pardon?”

“The cottage.” She ran one hand up under the horse’s mane and tangled her fingers in the hair. “The one you hid in while you were healing and I was racing horses. The one where you did all those engravings.”

Jonas rolled his shoulders. The week he’d stayed hidden among those crumbling walls had felt like the longest year of his life. He’d understood the desperation that had driven Sophia to take the job as a racehorse jockey, but he’d hated that her greatest chance at safely succeeding had been to go without him.

“I thought it was funny at first,” Sophia continued without taking a noticeable pause for breath. “Seeing that place through her eyes, imagining why someone would carve images into every wooden surface that hadn’t rotted away. It would be a fascinating mystery if I hadn’t known it was you filling your hours and trying to distract yourself from worry.”

As much as he wanted to deny her assessment, he couldn't. Hiding in that broken-down cottage while she went out and provided for them both had been nearly as painful as the injury that prevented him from taking her place.

The last thing he wanted to do was relive it for Miss Hancock's benefit.

"You're safe now," Jonas said, "and you've my permission to tell her the story. She knows your part anyway."

"Harriet was fascinated," Sophia said, without acknowledging what he'd said in the least. "The cottage is on her property, you know, and she's made us visit it on multiple riding sessions. She even attempted to do a print from some of the more complete engravings."

Now, that Jonas would like to see. That week had been his first attempt at the reverse carvings. Had some turned out well?

"I'm worried that simply explaining the origins of the carvings won't be enough."

Jonas frowned. "What do you mean? Does she intend to seek restitution?"

Sophia's eyes widened. "What? No. The opposite, in fact. She's been going on and on about how awful it is that some artist was desperate enough to live in that dilapidated building, and she's determined to find him and become his patron. It's an old idea, I know, but there's no other way for her to support someone while they find their style and perfect it. I'm afraid someone else will take advantage of this new fascination of hers. She has such a huge heart, and I don't want her hurt."

Jonas coughed to cover his snort of disbelief. Miss Hancock's elaborate machinations could certainly be the product of a wily mind, but a huge heart? No. That woman was the perfect example of what happened when people floated through life doing whatever they liked without applying themselves to any sort of endeavor.

"I'm sure Miss Hancock will soon find someone and something

else to obsess over.” Jonas pushed the stall door open and stepped out. As he headed toward the saddle room, he listened for the click that ensured Sophia had remembered to close the stall door behind her.

“This could be a brilliant opportunity for you,” Sophia said as she scurried after him.

“If those carvings inspired some sort of appreciation in her, she doesn’t have the correct taste for an art patron. They were horrible.”

“They were carved into rotting wood. Of course they’re horrible.” Sophia scampered around until she was blocking his path. “But there’s potential in them. Look.”

She pulled out a paper and unfolded it before shoving it at his chest.

Jonas took the paper and winced at the print. He’d attempted to depict a horse in the middle of a *piaffe*, but he dared anyone to identify it as such. The neck wasn’t properly aligned with the body, and the head was far too large. The eye looked like it belonged in a caricature. “This is awful.”

Sophia snatched it back. “Well, you did carve it with a hoof-pick.”

“She doesn’t know that.”

A blush rose to cover Sophia’s cheeks with enough speed that Jonas’s stomach clenched. What had she done?

“I might have mentioned that some of the grooves looked to be the width of a hoof-pick.”

“Soph.” Jonas drew out the name on a groan.

“I wanted her to realize the genius of your ability.”

“It’s hardly genius.”

She crossed her arms. “Says you. What do you know about it, anyway?”

“Not a thing, which is likely a sight more than Miss Hancock knows.” Though Jonas wasn’t tall, a lifetime of working with

horses had made him strong, and it was a simple matter to lift his sister out of the way and continue down the line of tack.

“Jonas, this is your chance to study what you love.” Sophia chased after him.

“I don’t love it, Soph.”

“Fine. Something you enjoy, then.”

He couldn’t refute that statement, so he ignored it instead, focusing on ensuring buckles were securely attached to saddles and none of the leather showed signs of cracking. Sophia sighed and moved to the other end of the rack, doing the same as she worked toward him so they would meet in the middle.

“This isn’t only about you,” Sophia said quietly. “I’m concerned about Harriet. She’s determined to do this, and you’re right, it might be a fleeting idea, but that’s even more reason for you to accept it.”

Jonas waited, but of all the times for his sister not to prattle on incessantly it was when he wanted more information. He sighed. “Explain.”

“If she sponsors someone unscrupulous, it wouldn’t take long for him to damage her irreparably. And if she found someone suitable but then lost interest, the poor artist would be devastated. She would feel awful and might do something foolish because of that.”

“So your *simple* request that I uproot my life and become her latest project is for her benefit and not mine?”

She bit her lip, once again blushing until her cheeks matched the flaming red of her hair. “Yes,” she said in a small voice.

To anyone else it would be offensive and preposterous. For Jonas it was the only thing that made the idea even partially palatable.

He shoved a hand through his own red locks. As irritating as he found Miss Hancock, she was Sophia’s friend. She would likely claim him as one as well, since he’d allowed himself to be pulled into that group’s gatherings more than once.

All those people, with their aristocratic blood and high-born

connections, had accepted Sophia. They'd supported her, helped her, made this new life possible. Gratitude inspired him to offer something in exchange.

Even if *he* didn't believe Miss Hancock was in danger of landing herself in an untenable position, Sophia did. That concern, at least, Jonas could alleviate, though not in the way his sister seemed to want.

"I'll go see your friend tomorrow."

Sophia jumped up and down and clapped. "Oh, this is going to be fun. Promise me I can go shopping with you. I'm discovering I vastly enjoy the activity but only when I'm helping other people purchase things." She paused. "I still can't bring myself to spend money on anything for me."

Since he had no intention of shopping for art supplies or anything else, it was safe to promise, "You may shop with me."

She squealed and gave him a quick hug. "This is so exciting. Are you coming to dinner tonight?" She frowned. "Maybe you should go tell her today. I don't know if I can keep my mouth shut all evening."

"The practice of restraint will do you good."

She rolled her eyes. "Aaron finds my lack of restraint endearing."

"You could smile at Aaron and convince him mucking out stalls was a delightful chore, so I don't find that a ringing endorsement."

She waved his comment away. "What tasks do you have remaining? I'll finish them so you can get cleaned up and call on Harriet."

Jonas narrowed his eyes. "I'm not calling on Miss Hancock. It is, at most, a business meeting."

Finding the buckle on the saddle fascinating, she avoided his gaze. "Yes, yes, but either way you don't want to go covered in sweat and mud."

Checking the tack was his final chore for the day, so putting Sophia off would only be out of spite. He might as well get this

over with. He moved toward the door. “Don’t forget to check the bridles too.”

“Be sure to wash beneath your fingernails,” Sophia called. “And put on a clean shirt.”

Did she think he didn’t know how to wash simply because he lived above a stable? Jonas rolled his eyes as he pumped a bucket half full of water and hauled it up the stairs at the end of the building.

As he washed in his small room, he said a prayer of appreciation for the ready access to water and privacy. Then taking a clean shirt from its peg, he relished the fact that his clothing was neatly hung and folded into drawers instead of shoved into a satchel. As he saddled the horse he’d been loaned, he thanked God the tragedies he’d endured hadn’t robbed him of his enjoyment of the graceful animals.

In truth, though his life had taken some hard and unexpected turns, things hadn’t washed out that badly.

Hopefully, he’d soon be saying the same for this ridiculous errand his sister had sent him on.