



An Excerpt from
UNDERCOVER DUKE
by Sabrina Jeffries

(1283 words)

Sheridan knew what he was doing was wrong, and he didn't care. Seeing her in Juncker's arms had unleashed an unholy hunger in him. He wanted to stamp out every trace of Juncker, to claim her for his own...even knowing such an attempt would be disastrous. Her mercurial nature, which kept him oddly entertained, would also make her a terrible duchess.

But damn, how she moved him. Her mouth, so tender and sweet. Her skin, soft as feather beds. And her bountiful breasts,

which he wanted to suck so desperately that he considered somehow getting them out of her gown and corset and shift. Here. In the half light of dusk. In a public garden.

God save him. His hands itched to lift her skirts. One had already begun doing so, inching them up slyly as if acting independently of his brain.

He wanted her so badly.

"Sheridan," she whispered, "we can't do such things here."

"I know," he said. "I just...can't seem to get enough of you."

He would do penance for saying that later, but for now he didn't care about anything but licking her silky skin, stroking and caressing her under her skirts to see if she was as hot for him as he was for her. Because if she was, then perhaps she had lost interest in Juncker. Perhaps he could step in.

Not that it mattered. Not that he cared. For him, it was only desire, nothing more. He was helping her make Juncker jealous. That was all.

Liar.

He lifted his head to kiss her throat. He wished he could take down her hair, but that was definitely unwise. Instead, he settled for tonguing the pulse that beat in her neck, while his hands roamed her body, taking shameless liberties. He memorized a curve here, a sensitive patch of skin there, finding her wildly responsive to his every touch. Between her gasps and his moans, they were making an unwise amount of noise. Perhaps they should—

“She’s here, I tell you,” came Lady Eustace’s voice. “Look, I see them. That scoundrel!”

Sheridan straightened and released Vanessa in one fluid motion, but it was too late. The unmistakable sound of a pistol being cocked disturbed the quiet of the garden square.

“Step away from my niece, sir. Or I swear you will not live beyond this moment.”

Vanessa’s uncle. Bloody hell. Nothing like the sound of a gun cocking to make one’s own cock stand down. Which was a small blessing, he supposed.

“Uncle Noah, you can’t—” Vanessa began.

“Be quiet now, my dear,” Sir Noah said in a deadly voice. “You and I will talk in a bit. Go with your mother.”

“Do as he says,” Sheridan ordered. “I will be along shortly.”

“If he doesn’t kill you first!” Vanessa cried.

Her concern for him was a balm to his wounded dignity. The dignity he had recklessly tossed aside for a taste of her.

Yet he did not regret it, fool that he was.

“Go on,” Sheridan ordered.

“Listen to Armitage,” Sir Noah said.

With a sigh, Sheridan faced Sir Noah.

Lady Eustace motioned to Vanessa. “Come with me, young lady. Your uncle will settle this.”

When Vanessa looked as if she might refuse to go, Sheridan said, “I promise I won’t be long. And there will be no dueling or any of that nonsense, if that’s what worries you.”

“Do you swear it?” Vanessa asked in an oddly panicked voice. As if she actually cared what happened to him.

Perhaps she did, at least a little. “I swear it.”

Reluctantly, Vanessa let her mother pull her away.

As soon as they were gone, Sir Noah said in a grim tone, “You sounded rather sure of me. How do you know I won’t call you out?”

“Because you and I are civilized gentlemen. We don’t allow women to suffer alone for our actions.”

That seemed to catch Sir Noah off guard.

But Sheridan meant it. He’d seen that happen already once in his own family, with his half sister, Gwyn. Because of the unwitting interference of her twin, Thorn, she’d nearly been publicly ruined. Sheridan knew only bits and pieces of the story, but he’d managed to put it together to determine most of it. He didn’t want that for Vanessa.

“I doubt we are both bad shots,” Sheridan went on, “so if I agreed to a duel, I’d either kill you or you’d kill me. If I didn’t agree, I’d be branded a coward. No matter which of those occurred, I’d be leaving Mother embroiled in another huge scandal, and I won’t do that. I certainly won’t do it to Vanessa.”

“How chivalrous of you,” Sir Noah said. “Too bad you weren’t so chivalrous when you were attempting to seduce her.”

The baldly spoken words made Sheridan wince. He could offer no justification for what he’d done. There wasn’t any. “Can we get on with this, sir? I will need to break the news of our impending wedding to Vanessa, and I’d rather do it sooner than later.” In hopes that she took it better the earlier he offered.

Sir Noah’s stony expression softened a fraction. “So you mean to do the right thing by my niece.”

“Of course,” Sheridan said. “My God, what sort of man do you take me for?”

“I didn’t take you for the sort to attempt seducing young ladies in public gardens, but clearly I was wrong. I could be wrong about this, too.”

Sheridan stiffened, not enjoying the dressing-down by a man he’d come to like. “I find Vanessa hard to resist, I’m afraid.”

“I suppose that’s just as well, since you’re about to be married rather hastily,” Sir Noah said. “I pray she, too, finds you hard to resist. Because if she reveals to me that you were forcing yourself on her, I *will* be calling you out, scandal or no. And there will never be a wedding between the two of you, no matter the outcome. Understood?”

“Understood. I would never force anything on Vanessa.” In a weak attempt at humor, he added, “Besides, I have a funny feeling if I ever attempted it, she would cut me up and eat me for breakfast.”

Sir Noah didn’t utter even a hint of a laugh. “I daresay I would help her.”

Good God, was the dressing-down ever going to end? Vanessa would likely be growing angrier by the moment over the fact she had to marry *him* rather than her precious Juncker.

The very thought of that made his blood curdle. This was a nightmare. In trying to impress upon her the wisdom of not being alone with Juncker, Sheridan had somehow managed to teach her the foolishness of being alone with *him*.

It was one thing to dally with her; it was quite another to ruin her life. And possibly his. He didn’t even know if they would suit, although if they didn’t, it was entirely his own fault. If he’d wanted her so badly, he should have courted her properly. Whether they could make a go of marriage was precisely the sort of thing one sought to discover during courtship.

Even *still* he had no regrets. He wanted to believe it was because he would finally be in a position to question Lady Eustace about the past to his heart’s content. He could finally determine if she’d had anything to do with the murders.

But the truth was, he didn’t care about that at present. Or rather, he cared far more about getting to have Vanessa in his bed at last. Assuming she agreed to marry him. At the moment, that was by no means certain.