

He stood there, waiting for Kat to appear, curious what her chosen costume – hidden until tonight – would be.

He heard the sound of steps on the nearby staircase leading down from the upstairs rooms.

He turned to see Maggie, their housekeeper – and the person Harry had known longest in his life – as she came into the room, broad smile on her face.

“You all set, Sir Harry?”

“Now don’t scare me, Maggie. Will I be able to recognise my—”

Then, only steps behind, her black carnival mask already on, dark hair pulled back, he saw Kat.

*That is my wife in that absolutely stupendous outfit.*

“Well, well, well.” Without a word, Kat glided over to his side. “I do believe you have me speechless, Lady Mortimer.”

“Like it?”

“Love it.”

The long velvet dress – with a low-cut bodice, hugging her frame tight till it spread to a V that went to the floor – fit perfectly. No doubt helped by a stitch here and there by Maggie.

And the shimmering black material seemed to absorb all the light – and then some – in the room.

“You look,” he searched for the *mot juste*, “absolutely stunning. But who are you supposed to be? Not that I mind, because whoever it is, well... wow.”

Kat laughed. “Your aunt sent over some wonderful designs weeks ago. Picked this one. It’s called ‘courtesan’.”

“Is it? Remind me now, what exactly do courtesans do?”

Kat gave a little twirl, obviously enjoying the effect her outfit was having on him.

“Well who knows, Sir Harry. I imagine we will find out tonight.”

Harry turned to their housekeeper. “And I suppose you helped this along, eh, Maggie? I do believe you missed your calling.”

Maggie grinned broadly. “You better be ready for a lot of eyes taking the two of you in!”

“So, Harry,” Kat said, “any clue for me who *you*’re supposed to be?”

Harry’s outfit nearly matched Kat’s in sumptuous material, but the comparison ended there: a waist-length cape, open to show a ruffled white shirt, unbuttoned at the top; trousers that fit more like dancer’s leggings; and all of it topped with a cap that he could only describe as “rakish”, complete with an iridescent feather shooting out the back.

“I’d better just tell you. I... am a pirate.”

Harry grinned as he stuck one leg out, and did a half bow.

“I’ve met some pirates in my time, but that...”

“Not *exactly* what I expected either. But apparently, back in the days of Walter Raleigh, and other sea-faring rascallions, the commanders of ships that did the looting also had a keen sartorial sense.”

“And that?” said Kat, nodding to the cutlass that swung from a belt around his waist.

Harry stepped back a safe distance, and, with a swish of steel, drew the long blade and adopted a duelling pose.

“Courtesy of great-great-uncle William, renowned swordsman of the 16th The Queen’s Lancers, and hero of the Battle of Aliwal back in ’46, don’t you know!”

He carved the historic sabre through the air a few times, as if parrying unseen attackers, then returned it to its scabbard.

“Normally lives in the ballroom up at the manor. Lavinia said I can hang onto it. Thought I

might stick it on my study wall.”

“Well – I know who to come to if my honour needs defending,” said Kat.

“Don’t count on it,” said Harry. “Last time I had a sword fight I was at school.”

“You know, Harry, that’s not something you hear people say much back home in Brooklyn.”

“Fencing! Good God, woman! All part of an English gentleman’s education.”

She took a step closer to him. “You have not forgotten a *mask*, have you?”

Harry reached into a side pocket on the inside of the cape, pulled out a bright red mask, and slid it on.

And for a moment he stood there, looking at his suddenly serious wife while she gazed at him, the masks working their magic.

Thinking... *maybe let’s just forget about the party.*

“Time you two were going. I’ll do any clearing up. Things will be nice and tidy