

Excerpt from "A Christmas Secret" by Gail Ranstrom

Charity Wardlow hurried through her fitting and then skipped down the back stairs and along the corridor toward the front of the manor, anxious to rejoin the festivities. There was talk of a skating party at the pond across the meadow tonight. She was a poor skater, but there would be an opportunity for her and Mr. Lingate to have a few minutes alone. Perhaps he would catch her if she contrived to fall.

But best of all, she just *knew* he would propose before they had all gone back to London from Olivia's wedding. She had seen the signs--damp palms when he held her hand or asked her to dance, tongue twisting nerves when he tried to talk to her, his inability to meet her gaze head on. Yes, he would blurt out his proposal very soon now. And when he did, she would be ready with her answer. Yes! She had been waiting earnestly to say that word for the past three years. Her father would have been so proud, and her mother would simply smile in that vaguely interested way that said she really didn't understand.

As she passed the library, her blue silk shawl slipped from her shoulders. She turned around and knelt to retrieve it. In that moment of hesitation a voice carried from the library. Lord Edward Mackay, Olivia's intended, was speaking in an angry tone. She was poised to rise and continue on her way when a single word stopped her.

". . . *baby!* What gall," Edward was saying.

"Unquestionably," Edward's brother, Lawrence, agreed. "But the problem remains. You will have to tell Olivia."

"Never!" Edward vowed.

"But the babe's mother is here in Great Tew for the wedding and--"

"Nothing must mar this wedding or--"

--and is threatening to--"

--or delay it," Edward finished. "I've waited too long for this. I will not tolerate any interference."

"Interference? Did you hear me, Edward? She is here, and threatening to cause a scandal. She gave me this as a token to prove her claim. I'd say that is more than mere interference."

Charity covered her mouth to stifle a gasp. A baby! Edward Mackay had an illegitimate child. And Olivia did not know. The man was an utter cad! She peeked through the crack of the door to see Edward accept a lace edged handkerchief from his brother. He glanced down at it, then opened his desk drawer and dropped it inside before turning

back to his brother.

"Pay her off," Edward said. "Give her what she wants."

"You know there'll never be an end to it if we submit to blackmail," Lawrence said. "Tell Olivia. She will understand, Edward. Surely you can trust her to understand?"

"I cannot risk it."

"It's the only way. Even illegitimate, this baby is the closest thing the Mackays have to an heir at the moment. Olivia is bound to find out."

"Later. After the wedding," Edward insisted.

"Would she cry off if she knew?"

"She is frayed at the edges from all the planning and arrangements, and now the activity and the guests. Who knows what might set her off?"

"If such a thing could change her mind, perhaps she is not the woman for us." Lawrence sighed.

"*Us?* Have ye gone daft, Lawrence? You are not the one standing

before the preacher, are ye? It isn't your heart she holds in her hand, is it? No, it's mine, and I'll be the one to make the decision. Olivia will not be troubled with this bit of ugliness. At least until our vows are said."

Oh, would she not? Charity thought. If the knowledge that her husband had an illegitimate child would make a difference in her decision to marry, then Olivia had a right to know before it was too late and, as her friend, Charity had an obligation to tell her if her fiancé would not.

She stood, her shawl trailing from her hand, and whirled toward the front hall. She nearly fainted when she found that disturbingly intense stranger from the music room leaning one shoulder against the corridor wall, his arms crossed over his chest. Obviously he'd been watching her the whole time.

He gave her a lazy, somewhat cynical, smile and said, "Your eavesdropping, Miss Wardlow--is it habitual or occasional?"

He knew her name? She was certain she didn't know *his*. She would have remembered that crooked smile, the sparkling eyes of such a dark blue they could be called midnight, the deep rich voice with a trace of a Scottish burr. And she certainly would have remembered the width of those shoulders and the dark chestnut hair. But that

insulting tone! How dare he speak to her in such a manner?

"I was not eavesdropping, sir," she whispered, glancing over her shoulder to the library door. "I dropped my shawl and stopped to retrieve it."

"And just thought you'd have a peak in the library? Or was it the sound of scandal that drew your interest?"

"Sh-h! I . . . I inadvertently heard something mentioned that could be of concern to someone dear to me." She couldn't for the life of her think why she was bothering to defend herself to this stranger.

"Concern, eh?" The man chuckled, a sound both suspicious and genuinely amused. "Now there's an excuse for meddling that I haven't heard before."

"I am *not* meddling," she sniffed.

"From where I am standing, Miss Wardlow, it looks very much as if you are a typical Englishwoman, always meddling in other people's business."

Charity couldn't decide which insult to reply to--the general one to meddling Englishwomen or the more specific one to her. Instead she

lifted her nose in the air. He caught her arm as she brushed past him and a frisson of excitement raced through her at the unaccustomed familiarity of his strong fingers circling her forearm. Not even Mr. Lingate took such liberties without her consent.

"If you are not meddling, Miss Wardlow, what do you intend to do with the information you have just acquired?"

"Why, as distasteful as it is, there is only one thing I can do. Tell Olivia, of course."

"I wouldn't, were I you."

Something in the dark tone held a warning, and she was in no mood to let such a thing pass. "Is that a threat?"

"If it were a threat, you would not have to ask." The man leaned closer, intensity in his eyes. "I would simply caution you to consider the consequences of your disclosure before you make it. It could be far-reaching and life altering."

"The same could be said of keeping the secret, sir. Olivia Fletcher is my friend. What sort of friend would I be if I allowed her to wander into a disastrous circumstance which she had every right to know, but which I had kept from her?"

"You may not know anything. You chanced to overhear a few words that may possibly have sounded worse than--"

"May *possibly*?" she asked. The man was infuriating! "Are you asking me to disregard the evidence of my eyes and ears?"

"Things are not always what they seem, Miss Wardlow. Your eyes and ears can deceive you."

"Things are usually exactly what they seem, sir. Lord Edward has lied."

He dropped his voice and glanced toward the library door. "If you do not want to jeopardize your friend's future, keep your silence."

"If you knew what I overheard, you would not ask that."

"I have excellent hearing. I know precisely what you heard."

"Yet you'd have me betray my friend?"

"I know *my* friend. Edward Mackay would never build his life on a lie. Whatever is afoot, he is blameless."

She shrugged, finding his loyalty admirable if a little naive.

"Nevertheless, my obligation is to *my* friend." She glanced down at his restraining grip on her arm.

He released her and stepped back, raising one dark eyebrow in a challenge. "Would you consider a wager, Miss Wardlow?"

Charity frowned. "A wager?"

"Aye. I will give you odds that my friend is not guilty of what you think. My judgment against yours."

Tilting her head to one side, Charity narrowed her eyes and said, "How would you prove such a thing, sir? You cannot simply ask him. He has already damned himself as a liar by keeping the truth from his intended."

"I see your point, although I do not agree that omission constitutes a lie. Very well, then. We shall not ask Mackay. Have you any suggestions for proving your case, Miss Wardlow?"

Charity gave it a moment's thought. "I could investigate the circumstances," she mused. After all, investigations were her forte with her bluestocking friends, the Wednesday League, and they hadn't had a good puzzle for months. "Yes," she said, "a little investigation should get right to the bottom of this."

“Do you swear you will not tell anyone what you’ve overheard until you can verify it?”

“No. If we have not uncovered proof, one way or the other, by the wedding, we must tell Olivia before she says her vows. That is only fair.”

“We?” he said, raising a disbelieving eyebrow. “Am I to understand that you expect my assistance in this . . . this investigation?”

“Of course. We only have five days, and the next is the wedding, and it was your idea.”

“How was it my idea?”

“You are the one suggesting the wager and requiring more proof than my eyes and ears. Were it not for you, I would be telling Olivia this very moment.”

The stranger heaved a long-suffering sigh. “You could show a little charity in view of the season, Miss Wardlow.”

Charity. That was amusing. She smiled. “It’s a bargain, then. Five days, sir. We had best get busy. I shall catch up to you later this afternoon and we shall plan our strategy.”

Strategy? Who was this nosy little English miss? Drew watched her walk away, the sway of her blue gown hinting at the curve of her hips. What a delectable morsel she was, all haughty principle and moral high ground. As distasteful as the idea of nosing around Mackay's business was, keeping Miss Wardlow's company could be worth the price.

This gathering had just become more interesting. Yes, indeed. Miss Wardlow had a lot to learn about the 'gray' world most of society inhabited, and he was just the man to teach her. Who was more familiar with moral ambiguity than he?

And, if what he suspected was true, Miss Wardlow was about to learn a more devastating lesson than any he could teach her. Her Mr. Lingate *would*, evidently, lie to her--well, mislead her, at the very least. There was trouble brewing there, but damn if he'd interfere--it was none of his business.

As the hem of Miss Wardlow's skirt disappeared around the corner, he had the sudden premonition that he should have made a strategic retreat and allowed Edward Mackay to handle his own business. Good Lord! Had he just become a meddler?