

A woman with blonde hair styled in waves, wearing a strapless red gown with a colorful, sequined bodice and a long, flowing skirt. She is holding a champagne flute and looking over her shoulder. The background is dark with golden fireworks and bokeh lights.

A Victorian
New Year
Short Story Set
in Tokyo

SWEETS AND SPIRITS BALL

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Unexpected desire can unravel even the best-laid plans.

American Civil War veteran Oliver Collingsworth has spent 1872 performing engineering feats in Tokyo's foreign quarter and biding his time to tell witty, captivating Lydia Wright of his longstanding affection.

Lydia has tasted blissful freedom since her missionary parents left Tokyo and has no intention of giving it up. The foreign quarter's matchmaker has found her the perfect candidate for a practical union that will ensure her continued independence.

But he's no Oliver.

She ought to be prudent and welcome in the new year alongside her betrothed. But freedom has gone to her head, and in Tokyo's foreign quarter, a heady sense of freedom can wreak havoc on even the best-laid plans.

Chapter One

Tokyo's foreign quarter of Tsukiji

December 30, 1872

“I wasn’t the one who insisted upon Hoppin’ John,” Oliver pointed out as he and Lydia passed a copse of leafless cherry trees, their spindly branches scoring the wintery sky. “That was you.”

Lydia straightened as though taken aback by a most preposterous suggestion. “But it was *you* who said it was an important New Year tradition in the American South.”

He and Lydia were talking. Not just talking, they were having a playful *tête-à-tête* while strolling the Grand Oriental Hotel gardens like any other young couple in Tsukiji.

How long had he wanted this?

“I did, and it is,” Oliver said with exaggerated obstinance. He doubted a dish of American beans and rice had ever been so thoroughly debated in the city of Tokyo by a Scottish woman and

a British man. Then again, they were in the foreign quarter, and anything was possible in the modern world.

Sharp winds off Tokyo Bay turned Lydia's cheeks crimson. Shoving her hands deeper into the dark fur muff at her neat waist, she nodded as though having reached a definitive conclusion. "Then we'll include Hoppin' John. The Americans ought to have one of their New Year traditions represented at the ball."

"That means eliminating one of the other late additions," he reminded her. "Chef Yamaguchi said he couldn't add any more dishes." The Grand Oriental chef had accommodated all the "urgent" menu requests Lydia had made over the past few days. With the ball scheduled for the following night, the esteemed chef had drawn the line at Hoppin' John.

Lydia came to a halt before the sea wall separating the hotel grounds from the bay. Her muff quaked. She must be rolling her hands inside. Her frustration was adorable.

Their gazes met, and the aching need that always strained him when she was near increased tenfold. He loved the color of her eyes. The hue reminded him of Scottish grasslands under a blanket of morning dew.

"How can we eliminate a dish?" she asked. "That would be unfair." Oliver wanted to swipe his thumb across her pleated brow and leave a kiss in its wake. "The Dutch are expecting their *oliebollen*. If they don't fill themselves to the gullet, the belly-slitting goddess' sword will go straight through them."

Yesterday, to a very perplexed Chef Yamaguchi, she'd explained how fried dough balls coated the Dutchmen's bellies in oil, so the goddess' sword slipped off. "The Voulgaropoulos family asked specifically for a cake with several coins baked inside that would bring luck to guests who discovered them on their plates. Then there's the Gunnarsson family. They've been residents since the Japanese gave us Tsukiji. They have three daughters of marriageable age. We must have

a pudding with a peeled almond inside. If one of them gets it, she's sure to find true love in the coming year. That's their country's tradition."

Gossip around Tsukiji was that Lydia needed to make a match in the coming year, or her grandparents would insist she return to Scotland. Fortunately, the gossip also indicated Lydia had no desire to leave Tsukiji.

Oliver could help her stay. That would mean courting, which would mean him proposing they court, and the prospect of proposing a courtship had left him paralyzed. Until today.

Probably owing to years spent negotiating wartime engineering crises, this afternoon's New Year's Eve ball crisis had kept his shyness in check. He was the seventh of ten siblings in a family headed by a father whose regimental style rivaled that of Oliver's more diligent superiors in the Union army. Most of the men in his family had gone to war. His grandfather had fought in the Napoleonic Wars. His father had fought in the Afghanistan war from '39 until '42. Oliver had gone to the United States to join the war effort because fighting wars in foreign places was what Collingsworth men did.

After the war, he and his mates—brothers by choice—among whom were fortune seekers, pleasure seekers, and a few lost souls like himself, had gone westward and hadn't stopped until they'd reached Japan. Away from the authority of his father and the military, Oliver's shyness had become less of an everyday affliction and more of an occasional problem that tended to strike whenever he attempted to deepen his friendship with Lydia.

But today, they'd finally bantered, and it'd been better than he'd imagined. It'd electrified him. He should take her hand and tell her how she made him smile when she entered a room, how her courage in the face of social convention awed him. He'd waited too long for the right moment to share how much he admired her for persuading her father to allow Oliver's best mate, a former slave, to be included in the lawn bowling tournament.

But before he confessed his feelings, he'd fulfill her wishes for the Sweets and Spirits' menu. "My cook will make the Hoppin' John," Oliver offered. "Then, I'll have the maid take it to the hotel."

Lydia loosened her shoulders. Her quaking muff stilled. Bringing her relief made him feel like he was seven feet tall. She resumed their stroll along the pathway running parallel to Tokyo Bay. "You are truly kind, Oliver." She said his name with a slight upturn of her mouth. He'd noticed that small smile before. It'd never failed to make his heart soar. They'd long used one another's Christian names. Tsukiji residents of similar ages were quick to dispense with formalities.

"I've always known I could count on you," she continued. "Everyone in Tsukiji holds you in the highest regard for your brave service in the American war and your generous work in Japan. Without your skillful engineering, the foreign quarter would've sunk into the marshlands."

In fact, the Japanese people had skillfully established Tsukiji on the swamps of Tokyo Bay using their native expertise. The islands of Japan, comprising an abundance of angry, meandering rivers, had endowed inhabitants with a wealth of knowledge when it came to keeping neighborhoods afloat. He could tell her all this, but he liked her interpretation, too.

Lydia slowed to a stop. Beside her, fishing boats swayed on dark, choppy waters. Oliver met the gaze of a Japanese fisherman dressed in a heavy blue tunic covered by a straw skirt. A few dozen feet separated them. Yet, they existed in very different worlds.

Lydia gazed up at him with a shy smile. "When Helen left and turned responsibility for the New Year's Eve ball over to me, all the young ladies in Tsukiji were jealous."

Oliver very much doubted Lydia partnering with him had made her acquaintances jealous. It'd thrilled him, but he was half in love with her. "It's been a pleasure working with you. The Sweets and Spirits theme was a stroke of genius."

Violets on the front of Lydia's bonnet fluttered in the bay's gusts. Oliver noted how her

irises turned a rich forest green beneath the deep purple flowers. She waved her hand as though to dismiss his suggestion. “There are ball themes far more creative than asking guests to dress as their favorite beverages and desserts. You and Helen would’ve come up with something spectacular, I’m sure.”

Originally, the Tsukiji Women’s Society’s New Year’s Eve Costume Ball Preparation Committee had asked him to represent the foreign quarter’s young men and Helen, Lydia’s sister, to represent the women. He’d been eager to help. The occasion gave him a sense of connection to his mother, who he missed terribly. She held New Year’s Eve balls every year, as was the tradition in her family for centuries.

His mates had thought his pairing with Helen was an attempt to match him with Tsukiji’s fair-haired beauty. But she’d never held his interest. “We hadn’t even spoken to a great extent about the ball before she left.”

Lydia furrowed her brow. “I told Helen she ought to be more sincere with you. The truth is, Helen will never marry. I’ve told her she’s a temptress, if pure-hearted angels of goodness can be called such. Her beauty is world renowned. Men on multiple continents have fawned over her. They refuse to believe she’s completely and utterly devoted to bringing souls to Christ. But I can assure you, that is her life’s purpose, and she should share it more readily, so that men like you don’t uselessly pledge their troths.”

He’d befriended Lydia’s sister partly because she was a lovely person he found easy to talk to, but mostly because doing so had put him in Lydia’s orbit. He couldn’t set the record straight fast enough. “I’ve never wanted to marry Helen. Your sister is a saint, but...”.

Oliver’s heart raced. The words were there for the taking. So was the resistance. It gripped the places he needed most. His lips, his mouth, his throat. *Speaking meant trouble.* It meant shame for failing to voice the response his father expected. It meant titters at the inarticulate,

awkward soldier who couldn't speak his mind. It meant risking the precious hope that he and Lydia could be more than partners in planning a ball, more than fellow young residents of the foreign quarter.

Winds carried a thick layer of clouds across the sky. Oliver gazed into the green depths of Lydia's eyes and saw the kindness, openness, and daring spirit that were her essence. "Your sister isn't the woman I desire." He glanced to the side, gathering his words. "There's someone whose company I've been sharing, who I've come to regard as the finest woman I've ever met."

Lydia inhaled a delicate gasp. "I'd been wondering whether you might find *me* ..."

Words fell from her lips: "pleasing," "considerate," "attractive enough."

His head spun.

Lydia was declaring herself.

Without heed to his behavior, unable—unwilling—to take gentlemanly action and stop himself, Oliver stepped forward, cupped Lydia's face, and lowered his lips. Her words cascaded against his mouth in a fall of sounds. He breathed them in, then placed a gentle kiss on her precious, aching lovely mouth.

The world went silent.

The contact between them was so intimate, so sudden, and even, God help him, a bit oafish, that he felt compelled to ease back to see if he'd offended. There was no speech, but he read the question in her wide-eyed gaze. *What just happened?*

"Lydia," he began in a rumbling, desirous voice. His thoughts scattered, whether from shyness or the unexpected, and all too brief, fulfillment of his constant need for her, he couldn't tell. But he was incapable of giving any explanation for what had just passed. "May I kiss you again?"

She nodded. The sight of her half-lidded eyes and moist lips sent a storm of desire through

him. Restraining himself so as not to seem the boor, he nudged her lips with short, soft brushes.

Lydia moaned in a rush of breath that sounded like the passion stirring his veins. Pressing and gliding, she kissed exactly the way he'd expected. Fearless, fluent, comfortable with the shifting terrain of affection.

Then, she let her mouth fall open. Oliver swept inside her soft lusciousness. She tasted of sweet tea and biscuits.

Lydia took up the swirling rhythm of their tongues. Light sounds from her throat made Oliver see stars on the gray horizon. His body tightened. Heat tore across his skin despite the late afternoon chill. In his wildest dreams, they'd never kissed in broad daylight in the hotel garden. Perhaps at midnight to celebrate the new year, which might be the best year of his life.

She placed her hands on his shoulders as though needing his strength and sturdiness to stay upright. He took the hint and moved his hands from her face to her back. Their bodies were so close. Her thick cloak and his felted wool jacket kept them apart inch by safe inch. Given the opportunity, he'd mold her to him and keep her there until winter winds gave way to spring breezes.

He readied to play his teeth against her kiss-swollen lips when Lydia twisted from his embrace. "I'm sorry. I must think about my future."

There was much he wanted to say about their future. Words ricocheted through his head. Discussing marriage was out of the question, at least for now. Courtship came first.

Oliver reached for her hand at the same moment she stepped away.

"I have to go," she said and turned from him.

Stunned, Oliver watched her hurry down the garden pathway to the hotel entrance. Chasing her would cause a scene neither of them wanted. When she was ready to talk about the future, he had plenty to say.

Chapter Two

Wishing to spare the Grand Oriental footmen the sight of her fiery cheeks, Lydia left the hotel without her usual bits of conversation and friendly farewells. Not only did her cheeks bear the mark of that unexpected and unexpectedly passionate garden embrace, but her whole body trembled with feverish sensations. A pulsing thrill danced on her lips.

Oh, those kisses.

She wouldn't dwell on any part of it. Each step across the packed-earth road to the homes spread along the orderly hillside of the foreign quarter took Lydia one step closer to Signora Romano's and one step closer to her destination. Marriage to a man who favored a practical union.

It was the only way to ensure she maintained her newfound, precious freedoms.

Since Mother, Father, and Helen had departed for the India mission, life had been glorious. Lydia hadn't fretted about Mother forbidding her the highly fashionable, sumptuous gown she'd chosen for the Sweets and Spirits Ball. She hadn't worried about Father thinking her impious for glazing over with boredom during church services. She'd even ceased comparing her

immodest and sinfully materialistic soul to the incomparable paragon of goodness and piety that was Helen. Well, she wasn't comparing herself to Helen *all the time*.

Lydia spent her days visiting with foreign friends in Tsukiji and Japanese friends outside the foreign quarter. She studied the arts of flower arrangement and tea ceremony. She attended balloon launches, concerts, and the theater. She purchased new bonnets and parasols. She dined at the Grand Oriental and planned the ball with Oliver. She'd found an independence she'd never known existed and fully intended to keep.

Unfortunately, life on her own in the house Grandfather had purchased for the family's Japan mission wasn't an option.

"He's already made arrangements," Mother had said when explaining the situation. "Grandfather is donating our home to the Edinburgh Missionary Society. A missionary family will arrive next spring." Grandfather was a deeply religious and very wealthy earl.

"Then I can stay until the spring?" Lydia asked despairingly.

"Why don't you come with us to India?" Mother suggested *again*. Her heathery eyes brimmed with tears. "You'll be doing God's work."

Guilt wormed its way through Lydia. She wished she could bring herself to do God's work among the world's heathens. She wished she had her parents' and Helen's devotion. "I don't believe it's God's will for my life." This was the only excuse her family would accept.

"Then we'll reunite in Scotland after the India mission," Mother said with a sigh that compounded Lydia's guilt.

Such a reunion would be many years hence. By then, Lydia would be married to the minister of her grandparents' choosing, the sort of man who'd squirm when she wanted a new pair of gloves and recoil in horror at a Wright daughter taking interest in activities other than spreading God's word.

Lydia couldn't do it. She had to stay in Tsukiji. Marriage was the only way her parents and grandparents would permit it, which gave her two months to find a husband. Fortunately, she had Signora Romano's excellent matchmaking skills working on her behalf. Also, Grandfather had set aside a sizable sum for the occasion of Lydia's marriage. This might entice the practically minded husband.

She was even willing to consider having a baby, or two, as most men seemed to expect children. On the other hand, if her practically minded husband was uninterested in intimacy, she'd gladly forgo marital relations and accept a lifetime of celibacy like saintly Helen.

After all, a young woman who'd never tasted *pain au chocolate* couldn't know whether she'd enjoy that sort of thing. When there was little agreement about whether flakey pastry and chocolate were the most sublime pairing known to mankind, or whether the sweet bread was too rich, too bitter, or with nothing to recommend it, why bother when one could be sharing a laugh with friends at the Grand Oriental over shortbread biscuits and tea?

Which was why Lydia was going to banish all thoughts of kisses in hotel gardens.

She rang the bell beside the Romanos' ornate wrought iron gate. Beyond it stood their golden hued, Italian-style home with arches along the first floor, spires gracing the roof, and a tall, rectangular tower that seemed to pin the house to the ground. Much to her surprise, rather than a maid walking across the front garden, Richard Haffelaw, chemistry professor at Tsukiji's school of higher education, was ambling straight toward her.

Despite a rather irksome habit of pushing a large set of spectacles up the bridge of his thin nose, he was a nice enough fellow.

"Miss Wright." He sounded congested. Wintertime must be difficult for the narrow-nosed. "What a pleasant surprise." A reddish hue sprang to the tops of his cheeks.

Was astonishingly pale, lanky Richard the practical match Signora Romano had chosen for

her?

Lydia crinkled her nose at the medicinal odor wafting off him. Marriage to the busy academic would mean separate lives. He ensconced in a laboratory surrounded by colorful vials while she devoted herself to mastering Japanese stringed instruments and choosing fur muffs. Exactly what she wanted.

Lydia gave Richard her brightest smile. “Professor Haffelaw, it’s a pleasure seeing you here.”

“I feel much the same,” he replied with a firm push of spectacles up the nose.

Silence followed, too long by Lydia’s standards. “I have to—”

“—your cloak is a very fetching red,” Richard said over her words.

Her cloak was burgundy, not that it mattered. “I have a meeting with Signora Romano.”

“As did I,” he said with another push of his spectacles. Was that a knowing twinkle in his eyes? A bead of moisture on his spectacles’ lens? “I’m on my way to the laboratory. Experiments never end.” He shrugged his impressively scant shoulders. “Will I see you at the Sweets and Spirits Ball? I’m going to transform myself into a bottle of gin.”

That wouldn’t be difficult. Transparent was the best way to describe his skin. “Actually, I’ve been planning the event with Oliver Collingsworth.” Her face grew warm.

Why had she said his name?

Richard puffed out his chest, making his abdominal region even less significant. “I’m looking forward to our dance.”

Lydia swallowed hard at picturing herself dancing with a bottle of gin while Oliver twirled a scrumptious buttercream cake around the hotel ballroom. More than a few of Tsukiji’s unmarried—and rather unimaginative—women had declared “cake” their costume of choice, and every one of them wanted a dance with Oliver.

“Likewise,” she said with the most eager expression she could muster. “I don’t wish to take any more time from your ... uh, experiments.” She stepped past him into Signora Romano’s front garden.

Richard bid her farewell with a head bow that accentuated the length of his neck, followed by a salute—although, clearly, she wasn’t his military superior—and then a backwards trip over a rocky patch outside the gate.

Lydia sighed. Kind and thoughtful, he’d make an ideal husband. Yet she felt no relief at the prospect of marrying him to stay in Tsukiji.

All because she’d given into her romantic impulses and kissed Oliver.

Shame descended on Lydia as she walked through the Romanos’ hardy garden of evergreens, holly bushes, flowering camellias, and glossy leafed plants. She was going to hurt Oliver. Since the day they’d been introduced at the cherry blossom viewing picnic, she’d been infatuated. Everything about him appealed, from his whiskey-colored eyes and golden wavy hair to his endearingly earnest manner of choosing his words.

She’d understood he desired her, too. During their preparations for the Sweets and Spirits Ball, she’d caught him gazing at her hair, her dress, her mouth and stilling when she strolled toward him across the Grand Oriental lobby. Even so, a little voice in her head kept cautioning that while he might desire her, he was desperately in love with Helen. Lydia was just a poor substitute.

Then he’d kissed her under dove gray skies like he’d been waiting his whole life for that moment.

She’d been so foolish to question their attraction.

How different her prospects might be had they confessed their feelings sooner. They would’ve had months of courting, of walks through Tsukiji’s parks, of nights at the theater. They

would've come to understand one another's character and humor. They would've uncovered shared interests and points of disagreement. They would've learned if they could offer one another the life they desired.

To marry for mutual affection—for *love*—was a risky proposition. It took time to make certain passionate feelings hadn't induced blindness to the unsuitability of a prospective mate. Time, she no longer had. She'd wasted days, weeks, months questioning Oliver's regard when she should've been kissing him in every garden in Tokyo.

She shuddered an exhale. She wouldn't think about Oliver. Or his hungry kisses. Or his calloused, yet tender, hands. She was going to spend her life with the disinterested, undemanding husband Signora Romano chose for her. Probably Richard. And life with a very skinny professor wouldn't be bad.

Signora Romano opened the door just as Lydia was poised to ring the bronze bell.

"*Mia cara,*" the Japanese widow said and clasped Lydia to the lacy bodice of her periwinkle day dress.

Signora Romano had enjoyed half a decade of marital bliss with an opera-singing Italian merchant who'd arrived in Tokyo shortly after Japan opened its borders to foreigners. Following his passing, Signora became Tsukiji's foremost matchmaker as much for her connections to elite, Christian Japanese as for her firm, maternal disposition, which gave even the wariest couples confidence in the lifetime unions she arranged.

Releasing Lydia, Signora examined her face in the same manner she used when suggesting a potential husband. "I saw you exchanging words with *Professore* Haffelaw. How do you find him?"

"He's very kind," Lydia said evenly. She removed her shoes and put on slippers Signora had laid on the foyer's parquet floor.

Signora muttered something that sounded like displeasure while she picked up petals that had fallen from the pink peonies unfurling on a round table. “We must do better for you.”

“Professor Haffelaw will do just fine,” Lydia replied as though she had no qualms about skinny Richard’s ability to provide a lifetime of marital delights. “As long as he understands my expectations for our union.”

Signora deposited the petals into a neat pile and tsked. “Let’s have tea while I talk sense into you.”

She led Lydia to a high-ceilinged parlor furnished with plush aubergine sofas and high-back chairs upholstered in floral patterns of pink and gray. A marble-topped table in the corner overlooked the Romanos’ back garden. Signora gestured for Lydia to take a seat on one of the velvet-cushioned chairs.

A maid brought a tea service along with custard-filled buns and small almond tortes, the sight of which would’ve made Lydia ravenous had her stomach not been in knots.

Signora sat across from Lydia and poured them cups of tea with sugar and milk. “Before I attempt once again to convince you to abandon the pursuit of a loveless marriage, why don’t you tell me what brought you here today, *mia cara*?”

Lydia savored the tea’s floral scent. After a fortifying sip, she set the porcelain cup back on its saucer. “I was hoping you’d made progress in finding me a practical match.”

Signora eyed her with the mild amusement of an indulgent mother. “You can find love, Lydia. Someone who will cater to your heart’s desires. Someone whose skin you wish to touch and whose kisses make your knees go weak. You’ll—” Signora sat back in her chair. “*Mia cara*, is there something you’d like to share with me? Your face has gone bright red, I believe at the mention of touches and kisses.”

Lydia squirmed like a bug trapped in the tendrils of a well-placed web. The word “kiss”

had sent shameless heat across her body. Naturally, she'd raised Signora's suspicions. But she didn't have to confirm them.

Signora would offer to act as go-between for Lydia and Oliver. And where would that leave them? Courting toward a love match. Careful to the point of wariness, Oliver wasn't the sort to appreciate having a mere two months to determine whether their feelings and dispositions provided adequate basis for a lifetime of happiness. Less hesitant than Oliver, she nevertheless needed to know if he was cold, aloof, and sensitive to the point of being easily offended. She had suspicions he might be all those things. Only time would tell.

Then there was the question of her independence. Would Oliver be amenable to granting her the freedoms she needed?

A decent, hard-working chemistry professor was willing to pledge himself to a marriage of her design. Forgoing this opportunity would be utter foolishness.

Rather than concoct a tale for Signora, who could sniff out false motives a mile away, Lydia decided on a limited version of events. "Recently, I had an intimate moment, which never should've happened and won't happen again."

Signora sipped her tea, her gaze remaining on Lydia's face, then replaced the teacup with a faint clink. "I hate that you'd deprive yourself of a happy life. Why don't you let me approach this man on your behalf? I can present your requirements for a husband. Nothing will bring you as much happiness as life with the man you desire."

Lydia knew what would make her happy. Independence, freedom, and a life of her own. Desire for a husband who could make that happen would be ideal, and she desired Oliver.

Marital intimacies would be...

No words came to mind, only an image of her and Oliver in the Grand Oriental gardens, knowing they'd marry, their kisses reaching wild, passionate heights. His embrace would be

uncompromising. The whole of her body pressed against his would be nothing short of ... divine.

Lydia curled her toes in the Romanos' soft slippers. She must perish such thoughts. She had Richard. "Was Professor Haffelaw amenable to the terms of marriage?"

Signora waved her elegant hand as though to illustrate the question's insignificance. A light, rosy scent drifted across the table. "As you are curious, the professor wishes to marry soon. If you'd agree to share his bed, he'd marry you this evening. He'd like children, and he's nearly forty years old. Did you know that? I'd thought him much younger."

Richard had the plain face of a man as young as eighteen or as old as thirty-eight. Lydia had thought him closer to eighteen. Then again, he was an important professor. "I'm willing to consider having children soon, once Professor Haffelaw proves himself gentle." Father had treated her, Helen, and their three older brothers with an easy touch. Lydia wanted the same for her children.

"Then I should tell the professor you're interested in his suit?"

Lydia worried her lower lip.

Why did she hesitate? What woman in her right mind balked at a calm, staid, and very skinny husband? If worst came to worst, and he possessed some yet unknown, irredeemable fault, at least he'd be easy to ignore. "Please do."

Now that she'd committed to Richard, there'd be no more dreamy thoughts of Oliver. Henceforth, she was as good as married.

Lydia finished her tea and stood. "I'm afraid I must return home. I have a costume fitting for the ball."

Signora met Lydia in the center of the parlor. "May I ask what you'll be?"

"Raspberries and cream." During each fitting, she'd wondered what Oliver would make of the costume. After today, she had no doubt he'd like it very much. Too much. "How about you?"

“Lemon liqueur.”

Lydia imagined Signora in a bright yellow dress. It’d suit her black hair and fair coloring.

“You’ll look marvelous.”

“As will you. Richard will be pleased.”

“I hope so,” Lydia replied with a strained smile.

She did hope to please him. Really, she did.

Chapter Three

Bells from the Grand Oriental chimed seven o'clock when Lydia stepped into the lobby. The expansive space had been divided into intimate clusters of damask-covered sofas and wingchairs around marble-topped cherrywood tables. She scanned the hotel guests, all of them men, smoking from pipes and sipping drinks, presumably while their female companions readied for the ball.

Then she found him.

Dressed in a light gray suit and bright blue cravat, Oliver leaned against a laurel-leaf column.

A mint julep.

That was what the beverage looked like. She couldn't imagine a more appealing concoction.

Against all reason, she wished they were the only two people attending the ball. She wished Signora Romano had forgotten to tell Richard that tonight he'd be making his debut as Lydia's suitor. She wished she had a year left in Tsukiji for her and Oliver to reach an understanding.

He walked toward her, his gaze unrelenting, his tender, awed expression never wavering. Likewise, Lydia couldn't tear herself away from dashing Oliver. Reaching her, he held out his hand. By some miracle, her fingers didn't tremble as fervently as her heart beat when she rested them in his palm. He brushed her knuckles with his lips.

Electricity pulsed through her at the contact between his mouth and her glove. How she didn't swoon on the spot was yet another miracle.

"Good evening, Lydia." Finally, he released her hand.

"Good evening, Oliver." For reasons beyond her understanding, each word sounded as though she'd caressed it with a gentle kiss.

A hotel attendant in a simple, dark kimono requested Lydia's cape. She undid the raspberry satin ribbon at her neck and shrugged off the velvet mass. Arms overflowing with the garment, the attendant scurried away.

Oliver's expression upon seeing Lydia's costume reminded her of the *raison d'être* of costume balls. The events gave attendees an excuse to openly appraise one another from head to toe. As though considering a Renaissance masterpiece, Oliver perused her diaphanous layers of raspberry silk from the curve of her shoulder where the fabric draped sparingly to the crisp bow at her waist. He took in the shimmering skirts she'd had bustled to fashionable heights, then returned to her chest, where profusions of lace represented a creamy topping.

"I had no idea something as simple as raspberries and cream would end up being so ... fascinating," he said without a hint of shame.

Every part of Lydia swelled. Her hot cheeks, her tingling breasts, her most intimate places bloomed. Never had she felt so undone by a man's gaze. Never had she wanted so badly to know what it'd feel like to have that gaze on her bare skin.

It was foolishness.

Richard was a good match. He understood her needs. He accepted her ideas about marriage. Rejecting his suit would be a terrific mistake. Romantic tendencies toward Oliver would fade, she told herself for the thousandth time, because all her chiding had yet to break his mesmerizing spell.

Once she and Oliver had finished checking the table arrangements, making certain the orchestra had no complaints, and thanking Chef Yamaguchi for his last-minute efforts, she'd pull Oliver aside and explain her situation with Richard. That way they wouldn't be staring at one another like they were the most enticing dishes at the Sweets and Spirits Ball while her future husband stood there like a bottle of gin waiting for a waltz.

"Are you well?" Oliver asked. "You seem ... upset."

Lydia hadn't realized she'd been clenching her jaw with such obvious fervor. She forced an amiable grin. "I'm quite well, thank you."

A man beside Lydia cleared his throat.

"Kaneda-san," she remarked in acknowledging the Grand Oriental's owner. A middle-aged Japanese man with a warm, welcoming smile, he was always ready for lengthy conversation over multiple bottles of Prosecco. He was also Signora Romano's lover.

"I'm glad you arrived early," he said to Lydia and Oliver. "Uehara-san, your conductor, is fretting about the order of tonight's music. He's particularly troubled about the timing of Auld Lang Syne. Do you wish to hear it before, during, or after the turn of the new year?"

"During," Lydia and Oliver replied in unison.

"Hmm, hmm," Kaneda-san said. "I believe he has additional questions. He might appreciate speaking with you. Shall I lead you to his rooms?"

"If you please—" Lydia said.

"Please do," Oliver said at the same time.

Kaneda-san regarded them as he might a curious circus performance.

Oliver held out his arm. Lydia stared at his silver sleeve a beat too long, then rested her hand on the fine wool. He stiffened at her touch. Still, he placed a hand securely over hers, and they walked across the lobby toward the grand staircase.

Hesitating in taking his arm had been impolite. But the effect of being beside him was as head-spinning as she'd feared. There was no way to avoid his woodsy, spicy scent. It brought back the passion that had rippled through her in the hotel garden when she'd grasped his thick shoulders and felt the solid breadth of him.

One of the many moments she was going to banish from memory.

She couldn't look in his direction. At the foot of the staircase, she focused on the elaborate floral carvings atop the newel post. Then the banister. It was made from such a firm-looking wood. Perhaps maple?

On the first landing, hung a rendering of Japanese and foreign statesmen signing important-looking papers. She noted their tense postures and eager expressions, both sides anticipating gains they'd accrue when East met West in the Japanese islands.

Kaneda-san led them down the second-floor hallway. As they neared the end, Lydia spied a flash of lemony yellow silk and a perfectly set coiffure disappearing around the corner.

Signora Romano?

Kaneda-san rapped on a door. A Japanese man in Western dress answered and welcomed them into the sitting room. Lydia gathered from the rapid exchange between the man and Kaneda-san that he was Uehara-san's secretary, and the conductor wasn't present.

"Uehara-san's secretary invites you to wait here in the sitting room," Kaneda-san said. "He's going to locate his employer. He believes Uehara-san is inspecting the instruments."

The secretary joined Kaneda-san in edging backward toward the door. "Please stay here,"

Kaneda-san called out as he and the secretary disappeared into the hallway. One of them shut the door with a definitive twist of the knob, leaving Lydia and Oliver alone.

She glanced at the broad settee, then over at the wingback chairs covered in an intricate navy and ivory pattern. The fire crackled. She watched steam burst from a log, then rested her gaze on the velvet drapes keeping the bay's bitter winds from the cozy space. Anything to avoid looking at Oliver, because if she looked at him, and his eyes flared with that bold desire he'd adopted of late, she'd be lost to Richard.

"We should return downstairs," Oliver said, his voice hard. "Clearly, you're uncomfortable with this situation."

"Wait," she called to his back. He was already halfway to the door. "I need to tell you something."

He let his shoulders fall but didn't face her. "What is it, Lydia?" The question contained a gentleness she didn't deserve.

I've decided to marry Richard Haffelaw was on the tip of her tongue.

But she hadn't *decided* to marry Richard. Her family had left her with several undesirable choices, and she'd chosen the one least likely to make her miserable. A practical marriage to someone neither evil nor ignorant, someone polite—exceedingly polite—and even attractive in a skeletal sort of way. She'd get a union that would preserve her independence. In exchange, Richard would get a first-rate wife. The perfect arrangement. Provided she could become Richard's first-rate wife.

Lydia had been certain that in meeting the obligations laid out in their marriage contract, she'd eventually grow into the role of loyal, devoted wife. But how could she fulfill those obligations when she regarded her husband as a barely tolerable nuisance? When she dreaded the thought of him visiting her bed? When she continued to pine away for a man whose presence

made her thrum with joy? A man who, over the past few months of planning a ball, had become her first thought upon waking and her last thought before falling asleep?

Richard deserved better than a bride on a feckless mission to find her way into a role for which she was entirely unsuited. Signora Romano would have to offer him another arrangement.

That left a future in Edinburgh. India was out of the question as she'd never find a decent fur muff there. Once her time in Tokyo had reached its conclusion, she'd return home. With Oliver on the other side of the world, she'd eventually cease her pining and start praying for her grandparents to choose her a reasonable, understanding husband. Maybe, by then, she'd be ready to become the loyal, devoted wife her husband deserved.

In the meantime, for her remaining time in Tokyo, she'd salvage what she could of Oliver's friendship and respect. "I'm sorry. I was ... surprised by our kiss the other day."

Oliver turned and faced her. "As was I." His eyes shifted to the side, a movement she'd noticed when he'd seemed at a loss for words. On those occasions, the words he'd finally spoken had been like precious gems. Lover of shiny things that she was, Lydia wanted more.

"I didn't mean to kiss you in such a straightforward manner," he continued. "You were speaking so eloquently about how you'd come to regard me. I wanted to tell you how much those words, and ... *you*, how much you, and everything about you, mean to me."

He took her hands and used his thumbs to stroke the tops of her palms. Waves of hot desire, exactly the kind Lydia wished to feel toward her eventual husband, cascaded up her arms, and into her neck and chest, and down the length of her. "Planning the Sweets and Spirits Ball with you has made me the happiest man in Tsukiji. It gave me an excuse to spend time with the spirited, brilliant woman I so admire." Oliver spoke with conviction unlike she'd ever heard. It was the perfect expression of the innate strength that drew her to him.

He weaved his fingers through hers, then raised one of their joined hands to his lips.

Placing a kiss on her gloved fingers, he gazed at her with poignancy that made her throat swell. “I want to court you, Lydia.”

Those words. Months ago, had she heard them, she would’ve been overjoyed. She and Oliver would’ve started courting. He would’ve spoken to Father. They might be readying to wed.

Tears stung the back of Lydia’s eyes. She released his hands. “Our courting is im—” A wall of emotion blocked her from voicing their fate. “It’s impossible. I must return to Edinburgh this spring. My grandparents won’t allow me to remain in Tokyo as an unmarried woman, and I have no desire to join my parents and Helen in India.”

Oliver nodded at the settee. “Shall we sit?”

They might as well sit. Lydia had to tell him she’d agreed to Richard’s suit. He was about to arrive at the Sweets and Spirits Ball thinking tonight was his courtship’s debut. Signora was supposed to have informed him this afternoon.

Had she really? Lydia was fairly certain she’d seen Signora scampering down the hallway before Kaneda-san, her lover, had left Lydia and Oliver alone in the conductor’s hotel rooms. Maybe Signora hadn’t told Richard. Maybe she’d caught wind of the garden kiss from one of the busybody hotel footmen and spied an opportunity to prove Lydia wrong about the importance of a loving union.

Still, Lydia didn’t know for certain if Richard was expecting their debut.

She sank into the cushions on one end of the settee. Oliver sat beside her so closely the length of him landed flush against her body. He was behaving as though he had no comprehension of her inner torment, which Lydia found surprising because Oliver usually had a good sense of her mood.

Her bare shoulder brushed his sleeve. The muscles beneath were full, hard, unrelenting. She could almost believe his arms were a bulwark for her protection alone. Not only his arms, but

the whole of him seemed to exist for the sole purpose of making her feel as though she belonged beside him, always.

The swish of her skirts against the sleek fabric of his trousers filled the air. How on earth could she possibly utter Richard's name with her leg nestled against Oliver's substantial thigh?

He moved his hand to her lap. It was the kind of gesture one made toward a woman who'd given her assent to courting. Not one who was at sixes and sevens over having to confess her decidedly unwise decision to entertain the suit of a very thin man right after sharing indecent garden kisses with a far more substantial fellow. He weaved his fingers through hers.

Plainly, Oliver no longer grasped her moods.

Then again, his fingers through hers felt heavenly.

"When we first got reclaimed land for the foreign quarter, everyone thought the Japanese people were trying to kill us," Oliver said. "No one believed they had the skills to build on swampland. In fact, they do a splendid job of land reclamation. They can take down a hill in the west of Tokyo and transfer all the dirt to Tokyo Bay in a matter of weeks. But that escaped the foreign community's notice. They thought we'd end up under water after the first rainy season."

His honey baritone, the smooth cadence of his speech, and the pressure of his fingers entwined with hers made her wish this story, wherever it was headed, had no end.

"So, I suggested we give Tsukiji some additional protection from high tides and floods. I borrowed inspiration from Bazalgette and Driver, who a few years before had embanked the Thames. Now, Tsukiji has an inlet embankment and walkway, and everyone worries about earthquakes, not floods. So, tell me, Lydia, what is impossible about our courting that I cannot fix?"

Perspiration dampened Lydia's décolletage. Removing her hand from his, she pulled a handkerchief from her reticule and patted the skin from the top of her neck to the swell of her

breasts. Oliver followed the motion, his whiskey eyes darkening. Another rush of heat flooded her. Conversing with Oliver was going to leave her in a puddle.

She released a ragged breath. "I must return to Edinburgh."

"Is that what you want?"

What she wanted?

She wanted the freedom of a practical union. As for the man involved, she was feeling increasingly inclined to concede Signora Romano's point about the benefits of marriage to a man she desired. A practical union with someone who left her in a puddle, as Oliver did, would be ideal. As for Oliver himself, a hasty union on her terms wasn't something she could fathom him agreeing to. Even to suggest such an arrangement would be an insult to his character.

But he'd only asked about Edinburgh. "I'd prefer to stay."

Oliver took her hand again. His persistence was ... overwhelming. It made every inch of her clamor to be overwhelmed by him. "I'd like that." His voice was like pears drizzled in vanilla sauce, soft, smoky, and pleasing to the tongue. "Might you find employment as a governess or teacher at the mission school while we court?"

Lydia grimaced at the endearing, and endearingly naïve, suggestion. "Grandfather wouldn't approve. He's an earl, a very religious earl. He doesn't want anyone in the family to work for income." She looked down at their hands on her lap. "The truth is, in order to stay in Tsukiji, I was going to marry Richard Haffelaw."

"The professor?"

"I asked Signora Romano to find me a husband who wanted a practical union, someone who'd be happy with our leading separate lives. Professor Haffelaw is deeply invested in his experiments. He seemed a good fit. Even so, I recently decided not to marry him."

"How recently?"

Lydia smiled shyly. “A few minutes ago,” she admitted and shrugged. “Professor Haffelaw deserves a loving wife, and I could never love him that way.”

Oliver tightened his hand around hers. “What about you, Lydia? What do you deserve?”

She quirked the edges of her mouth for a teasing effect. “A disinterested husband who cares so little about our union that he lets me behave as I wish and retain control over the marriage settlement from Grandfather.”

Oliver narrowed his eyes as though discerning an impressive challenge. “How about courting with a man who doesn’t give a fig about marriage settlements and who thinks your behavior is impeccable already? Disinterest, however, isn’t possible. He’s very interested in you.” Oliver’s gaze softened. “Even when he was quiet, he was always interested.”

Lydia shifted on the cushion to better face him. “I love that you’re no longer quiet.”

“Then I suppose you don’t mind my asking again, will you let me court you?”

Her mind rolled over the prospect of spending her remaining days in Tokyo with Oliver, linking her arm with his on bayside walks, stopping ever so often to kiss him in gardens. They’d have nights together, too, for dinners at the Grand Oriental and soirees given by Tsukiji’s esteemed hostesses. And more kisses.

Fretting over practical unions would be out of the question. Nor would she worry about Edinburgh and pious husbands. She’d just be content with Oliver, strong, gentle, thoughtful Oliver, the man she’d been enamored with almost from the day she’d set foot in Tsukiji, the man whose faith in their connection had thrown her marriage plans into disarray. “That would be perfect.”

“Lydia, you’ve made me—”

So badly she wanted his words—wanted him—that she consumed them in a hungry kiss. Oliver twitched his full lips. Was he amused? Surprised? She opened her eyes and met his gaze. Something raw and potent passed between them.

A lover's pledge.

Oliver returned the kiss, treating her mouth like the most delicious morsel he'd ever consumed. "Happy ..." he said between languid stretches of kisses, of joining and exploring, of discovering what made one another loosen and tighten and gasp with pleasure. "You make me happy. And needy ... I need you, Lydia."

Dizziness overcame her, like she'd drunk a glass of champagne, or a mint julep. If the one before her was any indication, it was a deliriously intoxicating beverage.

Lydia clasped his silver lapels, drawing him into her profusions of raspberry silk. No matter what the rest of 1873 brought, she'd cherish its beginning.

THE END

About the Author

Heather Hallman writes witty, sensual, contest-winning romances set in Meiji-era Japan (1868-1912). She is the author of the *Tokyo Whispers* series that includes *Scandals of Tokyo*, *Talk of Tokyo*, and *Toast of Tokyo*. Fluent in Japanese language, history, and culture, Heather earned a doctoral degree in cultural anthropology based on fieldwork research in Japan.

She lives in Tokyo with her professor husband and two daughters. In her free time, she can be found translating ancient Japanese poetry and observing the passing of seasons while sipping green tea. *Just kidding*, she has no free time. But she does watch something that makes her laugh while she does the dishes. Perennial obsessions include the weather forecast (she checks three different apps at least three times a day), Baltimore Ravens football (hometown obsession), and making smoothies that taste like candy bars.

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(She posts almost daily on Instagram. 😊)

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Author Notes

In the 1850s, after two-hundred and fifty years of isolation, Japan opened its borders and began an engagement with Western modernity. Tokyo's foreign quarter of Tsukiji was established in 1869 as a concession to foreigners demanding residence in the capital city. With its schools, hospitals, hotels, churches, museums, and lively shopping streets, contemporary observers compared Tsukiji to the suburban towns of London and Boston. Set in 1872, *Sweets and Spirits Ball* takes place in the early years of Tsukiji when the foreign community was yet establishing itself and the Japanese people were yet wary of the new faces and the monumental changes foreigners had introduced to their nation.