



BARBARA BLYTHE

FIRE DRAGON'S

ANGEL

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Dedication

To my mother who urged me to write, to my grandmother who taught me to dream, to my husband who's always there for me, and to God with whom all things are possible.

1

London—March 1676

“The problem, *cherie*, is that your father is determined to marry you off to some ghastly, gouty nobleman whom he deems safe and fatherly. How positively abhorrent.”

Had it not been the declaration of the flamboyant and outspoken Reva Kirkleigh, Ceresa Quarles would have been angered by the comment. As it was, she had to laugh at her godfather’s sister, renowned for her uncontrollable tongue and opinions. It was also well known that Reva possessed an insatiable wanderlust, though somehow she’d managed to remain in London for nearly a month, a record to the best of Ceresa’s knowledge. “Lady Kirkleigh, you know how protective Father is.”

The two walked arm in arm toward the glittering ballroom of Sir Geoffrey Kirkleigh’s London residence, filled with the city’s most fascinating and wealthiest citizens. Ceresa’s godfather’s celebrations were spectacular, the unexpected and exciting sure to happen.

As they entered the lofty hall decorated with intricately woven tapestries, Reva opened her mouth to reply, but a hearty greeting issued by several members of a group prevented her from uttering so much as a

word.

As Lady Kirkleigh hugged and kissed them, Ceressa stood to the side, politely waiting while her eyes scanned those present. There was no other woman as exotic or as envied as Sir Geoffrey's sister. Ceressa wished she could be like Reva Kirkleigh—an independent woman happily unmarried who fearlessly sought adventure and travel. As it was, Ceressa was happiest at home with her books, writing poetry, teaching the servants' children, and doing the things a dutiful daughter did for parents who were absolutely adored. But was Reva right? Did her father really intend to marry her off to someone he considered solid and honorable and of an age greatly beyond the flush of youth?

There had been talk between her parents of gentlemen suitable for marriage. Though they had never indicated they would pledge her to someone not of her choosing, Ceressa shuddered at the thought of wedding a gouty noble. Having turned a score and one three months ago, a restlessness teased the fringes of her consciousness. She diligently sought God's will and was certain that if God directed her path, she would know true contentment. Admittedly, such was proving more and more difficult.

Ceressa banished her troubling thoughts by observing the audience, so captivated by Reva's animated conversation and natural élan. Backing away from the friends, Reva turned to Ceressa. "*Cherie*, do forgive me." She linked arms with Ceressa, and they resumed their journey to the ballroom. "I haven't seen them for years. When I'm in the city, they are in the country on holiday. Or they are in the city and I'm on the Continent—you know how it is."

No, Ceressa thought enviously, *I don't know how that is*. They stepped within the ballroom, and though she'd been there countless times, a breathless wonder filled Ceressa. The walls painted blue and gold displayed many of the ancient tapestries that Sir Geoffrey collected. Beside them hung paintings, equally as aged and miraculously spared during the great fire years before. One wing of the mansion had burned but was now restored to its original grandeur. The furnishings were richly upholstered in dark blue brocade and at least a hundred years in age; the ornate backs gleamed from recent polishing. Three chandeliers hung suspended above, their shapes reminding Ceressa of intricate golden webs.

"But enough talk of my affairs. It is you who concerns me."

"There's no need to be concerned. I'm perfectly content."

"Ummph!" Lady Kirkleigh snorted improperly as she stepped around a male guest whose unsteadiness told them he had stopped somewhere before arriving at the soiree and had a bit too much to drink.

Sir Geoffrey never served spirits but did provide coffees, teas, and a delicious fruity punch that Ceressa loved. In fact, she was desirous of a cup at that very moment.

"If you don't change," Reva continued, "you'll find yourself married to that insipid viscount who plods about carrying his book of poetry and marveling at how lily-white is your skin. I should think that would be reason enough to seek change."

"Lady Kirkleigh." Ceressa hoped to sound stern even though she was about to laugh. "I am certain my parents will allow me to choose the man I marry. If

they knew you were carrying on like this, they would forbid me to visit you."

"Perhaps I should take you under my wing while your parents are away."

"They asked Sir Geoffrey to keep an eye on me, not you." The two fell silent as they slipped through a small opening between a short baron, who was fumbling with his diamond encrusted pocket watch, and a table laden with delicacies. Lady Kirkleigh snapped open her Spanish fan and began to wave it slowly as her gaze roved the assembly.

"Ceresa, surely you have thoughts on whom you wish to marry. Given your age I would think you'd have put some effort into this."

Ceresa averted her eyes, fearful the woman could see truth lurking in them. She did dream of a man—none other than Reva and Sir Geoffrey's nephew, Latimer Kirkleigh. Earlier, she had overheard the servants whisper that Latimer had returned to London and trouble was brewing between nephew and uncle. But Ceresa doubted she would see him. Their last encounter had been several years ago when she'd been in that awkward state of adolescence.

Ceresa knew the story of how Sir Geoffrey had taken in Latimer and his sister, Constance, when they'd been orphaned. He'd raised them as his own and seen to it that they were properly educated. But seven years ago, Latimer and Sir Geoffrey had a hostile parting of ways, and the rift remained. In order to keep a sufficient distance, Latimer had chosen to build a plantation on land inherited from his father in Virginia Colony. Constance journeyed to Virginia with Latimer, and it was gossiped that the girl had married a native man. Ceresa gave scant credence to such talk, aware

that it was not anyone's right to judge the girl or question her choice of a husband.

Two years ago, Sir Geoffrey received word that Constance had died, and Ceressa clearly recalled his devastation. As the young woman had left this earthly existence to be with the Lord, Ceressa reasoned that Constance should no longer be a topic of conversation.

Sighing, Ceressa plucked at the tufted gold satin of her billowing sleeve.

"Why the deep sigh, *cherie*?"

"No reason. I can't say that I have romantic notions about any man with whom I am currently acquainted." She wasn't lying; her childish infatuation was merely fantasy. And Latimer couldn't be counted as one of her current acquaintances. "The Viscount Montvale is a good friend, nothing more. I could never marry him."

"See that you hold firm to that decision," Reva cautioned as she took hold of Ceressa's chin, "or you could find yourself wed to either an impractical man like the viscount or an old man too feeble to make a true wife of you."

Ceressa reddened, but Reva seemed impervious to her discomfort.

"Even worse, you could wither and grow ancient in that drafty old abbey reading poems about a love you will never know." Lady Kirkleigh released her hold and straightened. She was three inches taller than Ceressa, as graceful as a gazelle with a regal bearing that drew men of all ages.

How Ceressa wished she could be half as intriguing and mysterious. She was acutely conscious of her rounded figure made more noticeable by her small waist and legs that were a bit short. Fortunately,

Sir Geoffrey chose to join them, ending her distressing dissection of her less-than-perfect body.

"I can't understand why the two most beautiful women here are hiding in the corner. Ceressa, my child, you look lovely." Geoffrey Kirkleigh leaned toward her and kissed her cheek. Sir Geoffrey was her father's oldest and most trusted friend and was like a second father to her. It was impossible not to be fascinated by him, for though he was well past two score and ten, his bearing was erect, his dark eyes vibrant, and his hair thick, its natural reddish-brown shade marred by a bit of gray. Ceressa preferred the way he wore his hair, foregoing the perukes so favored by male nobility. Geoffrey Kirkleigh was undoubtedly handsome, and he and his sister were both striking. She wondered what the other sibling—Latimer and Constance's father—had looked like. He'd probably been just as attractive.

"I believe I see the duke and duchess, Geoffrey. I shall speak to them and give you time to chat. I'm afraid I've unsettled your goddaughter with warnings to beware of any matchmaking efforts on the part of Jonathan." Reva glided across the room, no small feat given the crowd. Sir Geoffrey tucked Ceressa's arm within his, leading her into the heart of the room. Magic was in the air—Ceressa could ever feel it when she visited her godfather—and it promised to be a night filled with beauty and adventure like the fairy tales her father had so often read to her as a child.

The people they passed were already eating and sipping their punch while conversing spiritedly. It appeared Sir Geoffrey's event was to be a success.

"Lady Kirkleigh is so amazing. Look at her. The regal queen entertaining her loyal subjects."

"Reva does give one that impression." Sir Geoffrey chuckled, his sister now enveloped by another admiring group. "It's impossible to ignore her."

"Lady Kirkleigh seems overly concerned with my marriage prospects, or rather the lack of. She should turn her attentions to you." Though Ceressa teased, her words extinguished the laughter in her godfather's eyes, and she regretted having spoken. Sir Geoffrey still mourned the wife lost to him during childbirth thirty years ago. He never spoke of her, and no one in his circle of friends, including her father, ever referred to the woman. Ceressa had never so much as heard her name. It was Sir Geoffrey's housekeeper who had once mentioned the "great love of his life who died giving birth to his son." Obviously, the babe had died as well, for there was no child. Ceressa lightly touched his arm. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

"Think nothing of it, dear." Geoffrey managed a tight smile. "Believe me, Reva has tried. If and when I fall in love, she'll be the first to know."

"Then you're in capable hands." Thankfully, the tension between them eased.

"Don't become overly hopeful. I doubt any woman would fall in love with me. I don't deserve such joy." Lonely, unhappy words. Ceressa wished desperately that this man could be filled with joy. He was so very important to her, almost as important as her parents. "Enough of that," he added, then abruptly changed the subject. "I suppose Jon and Theresa are in Cornwall by now."

"They should be. They didn't need to ask you to keep an eye on me. It's not as though I'm a child."

"I don't blame Jon one bit. I'd want to be sure my little girl was safe. As I recall, you're just recovered

from a fever. You know I don't mind looking in." He affectionately chucked her beneath the chin and she smiled. "You're as important as my own daughter would be. Now tell me again what relative passed away in Cornwall?"

"My great aunt, Lady Penhagen, on Mother's side. She lived with her servants outside Plymouth in a castle that is falling into ruin. Lady Lydia never married and has been a recluse. They say she had her heart broken by an unfaithful lover and never recovered. I met her but once, and I remember that she was a tiny woman and quite kind. She took me to the kitchens and served me the sweetest berries covered in cream. Mother felt it necessary to attend to the details herself as she is Lady Lydia's closest living relative."

"Indeed, it's good of Theresa to go, and it's exactly what I would expect of her—always putting the needs of others before her own. There was no reason for you to spend days journeying in this chill weather—fever can be a tricky thing. But you're here and there are things we can do together over the next few weeks. Might I point out there are several eligible young men present tonight that might be worthy of a second look?"

"I hope you're not playing matchmaker, now, Sir Geoffrey."

"Surely you're not adverse to marriage?"

"Of course not, but I'd like to fall in love first."

"Perhaps tonight you'll meet the man of your dreams." Ceressa knew Sir Geoffrey was teasing. If he only knew whom she really loved—and had loved since the age of fourteen. It was utter foolishness, of course, but Ceressa sometimes worried that she discouraged prospective suitors because of her childish

infatuation. Latimer Kirkleigh was as unattainable as a star. He lived thousands of miles away in a land that was dangerous and unwelcoming.

Ceressa watched Sir Geoffrey as he addressed a servant clad in the Kirkleigh livery of black and gold and took two cups of punch off the silver tray the man held. As he handed her one, she met her godfather's thoughtful gaze. He lifted his cup in a toast.

"To the evening. May it reveal your heart's desire." Ceressa smiled and then sipped the flavorful, fruity liquid while wondering if his copy of Shakespeare's sonnets had arrived. Just as she started to ask, her gaze was drawn to the entrance of the ballroom. Shock set her atremble. It was difficult to breathe, and she feared she might faint, though she never had before. Was she imagining what her gaze now beheld?

"Sir Geoffrey, is that...could that be"—Ceressa paused to summon courage—"Latimer?"

2

There, before Ceressa, stood Latimer Kirkleigh, his bearded visage unfashionable among the pampered and cleanly-shaven men that openly stared as though he were a beast escaped from the wilds. His dark auburn hair was worn simply and waved to his shoulders. Beneath his scarlet velvet coat peeked a waistcoat of palest blue brocade embroidered in silver, and his satin knee breeches displayed his muscled calves. Ceressa's hand shook so badly she feared she would slosh punch down her gown, so she quickly set it on a nearby table. Sir Geoffrey muttered beneath his breath, but Ceressa clearly heard.

"So he did show up."

"His arrival is upsetting?" Ceressa knew her voice was unnaturally pitched and unsteady. Why was she so nervous?

"His visit hasn't been a pleasant one. The Latimer you see is not the Latimer you remember. I confess I hoped he wouldn't come for he is determined to fight me over every issue that arises. He assured me he had no intention of putting in an appearance at an event he referred to as 'frivolous.' I suppose he wants to make me miserable one last time before sailing tonight, now that he's made it clear I'm to stay out of his affairs and my opinion is of no consequence. But here he is, and I'm certain his presence only bodes ill." Suddenly, Sir

Geoffrey looked at her and his face reddened. "I apologize for my unkind words, but Latimer is most adept at making me forget our Lord in my thoughts and words. Please excuse me, my dear."

Turning abruptly, Sir Geoffrey strode toward the man Ceressa hadn't seen in seven years. Two plump dowagers descended upon Sir Geoffrey who, ever the gentleman, greeted them politely and remained cordial even when each took hold of an arm and steered him in the opposite direction. Ceressa might have given way to a soft giggle had Latimer not chosen that moment to shift his gaze, meeting hers.

Heat rushed and she knew her cheeks flamed red. Latimer simply stared, and she stared back, taking in how he looked, wishing she could tell him what was in her heart. But she couldn't, so she broke contact and fled the ballroom, seeking sanctuary in a small chamber positioned off the long central hallway. As she hurried within, relieved that she might be able to breathe normally, she found herself face to face with Viscount Montvale and his formidable mother.

It required skillful maneuvering and the aid of Reva Kirkleigh to extricate Ceressa from the viscount and his mother. First, the young man had insisted on reciting a new poem—one he'd written just for her. Then his mother demanded that Ceressa tell her all about the aunt in Cornwall. If Reva hadn't noticed her plight and declared there was an old friend to whom she must introduce Ceressa, Ceressa would still be standing there trapped.

"You must have a care, Ceressa." Lady Kirkleigh

propelled her into another room, this one arrayed in shades of royal purple, black, and silver, "Lest you be cornered by his lordship when neither I nor Geoffrey is about. Now, go mingle with some more interesting men. I noticed the son of Count du Plessen was watching you most intently. It would do no harm to speak with him. Now, I want to warn you—Latimer is here, and I know you once thought a great deal of him. I've always adored the lad, but I fear he only came tonight because he's up to mischief, which will anger Geoffrey. His ship sails a little after midnight for the colonies, which is for the best. It seems of late that he wants nothing more than to wage battle with Geoffrey."

"I know. I saw him. I'm sure he hasn't time to give me a thought." Ceressa changed the subject. "I see Lord and Lady Conover near the palms. Lady Conover is a good friend of Mother's, and she would want to know about Aunt Lydia. Perhaps I'll have a word with them."

Reva frowned, and Ceressa knew the lady was displeased that she'd chosen to converse with a couple of middle age rather than the count's son. In truth, Ceressa was shy at functions, much more like her introverted father than her outgoing mother, a true testament that opposites did attract. But in most matters her parents were in harmony. Her mother always supported Father's decision that Ceressa be well educated even though the notion was considered foolish by many. But Ceressa was grateful to them for the opportunity, even when their love and overprotectiveness made her crave escape.

Summoned by another group, Lady Kirkleigh slipped away. Determined not to be trapped by

Viscount Montvale, and having lost sight of her mother's friends, Ceressa decided it was time to sample her godfather's bounty. Making her way to a small table which groaned beneath the weight of trays bearing tempting treats, she took up a gilt-edged plate festooned with delicate leaves and flowers. Even at that moment, Sir Geoffrey's discreet and efficient servants moved effortlessly about the tables replenishing the food. Selecting a square of toast with caviar, she took a bite, and was about to swallow when a man spoke.

"The caviar is good, but I prefer the raw oysters."

Ceressa sucked in breath, whirling about to see Latimer Kirkleigh. A crumb of toast caught in her throat at that precise moment. Opening her mouth, no air would pass. The food lodged, refusing to budge. Desperate for air, hissing and wheezing as she choked, Ceressa let him take hold of her arm. Latimer dragged her across the room, and in her state of airless panic, she was aware that people were staring. Taking a cup of punch from a tray held by a servant, Latimer unceremoniously pushed her out the French doors and into the garden, still damp and misty from an earlier rain.

To her horror, Latimer proceeded to whack her on the back, and with the second firm slap, the troublesome bit of toast loosened and indelicately popped out. Ceressa found the crystal cup of punch thrust into her shaking hand, and she somehow managed to lift it to her lips. Taking a drink, the food washed down, and shutting her tearing eyes, Ceressa drew in a deep breath, the scent of blooming narcissus and primroses filling her nostrils. She continued to pull the heavenly air into her lungs until at last, sure she

was no longer strangling, she opened her eyes. Latimer stood regarding her with a roguish grin. Removing the cup from her trembling fingers, he placed it on the ledge.

"What caused you to choke? Did I frighten you that badly, or was it my mention of raw oysters? They're quite a delicacy where I come from." All Ceressa could do was stare as she tried to make sense of his words. It dawned that this was his attempt at humor. Even so, no words would come, and she wondered if her near strangulation had left her vocal cords paralyzed.

"I take your silence as an indication you've nothing to say. I've spoken to many a lass, but I don't think I've ever caused one to choke." The teasing note flavored his voice, but Ceressa's gaze was focused on his eyes, and the words still wouldn't come. Golden-green they were, and they blazed boldly. Here was a man confident in manner and purpose, and certain of his effect on women. She knew she should break the hold his gaze had upon her, but a rebellious, determined part urged her not to. Latimer's face was a fascinatingly attractive combination of strength and ruggedness accentuated by his bearded jaw and dominated by a strong nose that was just a fraction off center.

Tall and muscular, he was a man not easily forgotten. No wonder he'd lived in her dreams for so many years. The light spilling out the door created a copper halo about Latimer's head. How absurd to think of a halo, for if Sir Geoffrey was to be believed, Latimer was anything but an angel. A fire-breathing dragon, perhaps, for she feared she might very well receive a blast as his dark brows lowered in

displeasure.

"I...I...it...a piece of toast went down the wrong way. I'm quite well now, thank you. You were most helpful." His jaw twitched, and Ceressa silently labeled herself as a dullard. Latimer certainly must find her a disappointment.

"So you do have a tongue. I was merely 'helpful'? I'd like to think I was a bit more than that."

"You were God's instrument," she quickly assured him. "Otherwise, I might have died or at the very least disgorged the contents of my stomach. Oh my, that wasn't a very elegant choice of words, was it?" She brought hands up, pressing them to burning cheeks.

Latimer chuckled. "But most descriptive," he replied. "And I am indeed most delighted you weren't snatched and whisked up to Heaven, for it would be easy for you to be mistaken for an angel." As his gaze softened, embarrassment spread lower than her face. Her stomacher was laced so tightly she feared she might indeed relieve herself of anything she'd previously eaten. Or did it seem too tight because she was incredibly nervous? Of one thing she was certain. Latimer didn't recognize her or he would never be looking as he was. Perhaps it was time to let him know the little girl he'd taught to fence and ride a horse and swim was all grown up, though sadly lacking in the skills of harmless flirtation.

"You don't know who I am, do you?" Ceressa hoped her tone was light and nonchalant, although her heart raced. Her voice was raspy and uneven—a side effect of her choking, she assured herself, though she suspected nerves had something to do with that.

"I had hoped you might remedy that situation. But where are my manners? Allow me to introduce myself;