



Lily and the Duke

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Description: Lily and the Duke is the first book in the new Regency romance series, Regency Spinsters Alliance, by USA Today and International #1 Bestselling Author, Carole Mortimer.

Lily, and five of her friends all suffered through the previous London Season together. One thing they are now all agreed upon, as they are forced to attend a second Season, is that the gentlemen of the ton are invariably arrogant, conceited, and far too full of themselves and their own comfort to be in the least attentive to even the basic needs of a wife.

As such, these six young ladies have formed an alliance, one in which they have agreed none of them will ever marry.

Accepting a challenge, from the arrogant and dangerous Gabriel Lord, the Duke of St. Albans, when he questions her ability to resist succumbing to desire when in his arms, is the very last thing Lily should do.

Gabriel knows, from the moment he sets his eyes on Lady Lily Tremayne, that she is meant to be his. But not only is she eighteen years his junior, but he also learns Lily is determined she will never succumb to feeling love or desire for any gentleman in Society.

A battle of wills is about to commence!

Total Pages (Source): 44

CHAPTER ONE

The St. Albans House, London

February, 1817

“So, ladies, now that we are all safely returned to London and before we fully embark upon another Season, are we all agreed, as the six founder members of this Alliance—”

“That would seem to imply you expect others will wish to join us?” came the question from one of those other ladies.

“I believe it to be a strong possibility,” Lily confirmed. “After all, we are not the only young ladies in Society unhappy with having our future husband, and consequently our life, chosen for us.”

“Agreed,” came the husky answer.

“But first, we must confirm that we all agree to the rules for our behavior for these following months and beyond, and which we have already discussed today.” Lily held up sheets of paper with the copious amount of notes she had taken during their meeting in the library of St. Albans House.

The library ran the length of the ground floor of the magnificent town house. It had two seating areas, each with a fireplace: one at the back of the house and one at the front. In between were vast floor-to-ceiling bookshelves that made Lily’s fingers itch

to explore them.

As an avid reader, Lily knew she could spend a month in this room and still not wish to leave at the end of it.

Not so Lady Chloe Lord, the beloved only daughter of the Duke of St. Albans, who freely admitted she would rather shop than read.

One strong incentive for Chloe having chosen to meet in the library today, she had explained earlier when all the other ladies were shown into this room rather than her own private parlor, where she explained the chimney was in need of cleaning, was the warmth of the fire.

The other reason was that the library windows nearest to them faced the front of the house, whereas the ones in Chloe's parlor faced the back of the house.

This way, Chloe had explained, she would be able to see when her papa returned from lunching at his club.

She had not enlarged upon that remark, but all of them knew Chloe would prefer her father, the fourteenth Duke of St. Albans, not be made aware of the alliance the six of them had formed today. Because, as they all were also well aware, it was highly probable that he would not approve.

"One of the things we discussed and agreed upon was that we are to be called the Spinsters' Alliance," the fair-haired Chloe now corrected with one of her mischievous smiles.

A smile that revealed her impish enjoyment of life. That joy was echoed in the glow of her pale blue eyes, the same color as her illustrious father's, except the duke's eyes were invariably cold as ice.

“And I believe we agreed they were to be guidelines rather than anything as rigid as rules,” Chloe added.

“You are quite correct,” Juliet Chalmers agreed. “Rules imply there is no...elasticity to the resolve of our little alliance.”

“That is because there is not,” the acerbic Georgiana Stapleton snapped.

“But there is always the possibility, a slim one, granted, that one of us mightpossiblymanage to meet a gentleman whom wemightconsider suitable to marry and spend the rest of our life with,” Amanda Styles reasoned.

“I am sure that Lily, having taken the minutes of this meeting, will confirm that the first agreed-upon rule of our Alliance is that none of us intends to marry,” Georgiana reminded. “If you would care to read out those rules, Lily?”

Lily nodded. ““Number One: As the six founding members of the Spinsters’ Alliance, we will fight any attempt to force, cajole, or coerce any one of us into marriage.””

“Which confirms my point. That guideline will not apply if any of us shouldchooseto fall in love and marry,” Amanda said.

“Continue, Lily,” Georgiana instructed with a reproving glance at Amanda.

““Number Two: No man, be it father, brother, or any other male relative, fiancé, or husband, shall be allowed to come between our friendship for each other. Number Three: Weshall, whenever and if it becomes necessary, ensure each other’s comfort now and in old age.”” Lily looked up from her notes. “I believe we agreed that last one was in the form that any of us who remain alive into old age will share a house to ensure we are never left alone and destitute, as so many older unmarried ladies are.”

“Indeed.” Georgiana nodded her agreement. “These rules, ladies, are our strategy for war against the gentlemen.”

“Oh, dear me, no,” the timid Rose Appleby protested. “I am not at war with any man or woman.”

“Not even those conceited and ridiculous popinjays of Society?” Georgiana scorned.

“No.”

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“Then what are you doing here?” Georgiana gave her a questioning glare.

Rose glared. “I am protesting, in the only way allowed to me, at being forced to accept my parents’ choice of husband for me.”

“I do not think the Earl of Kingswood to be all that bad,” Amanda Styles stated.

“Then might I suggest you consider marrying him?” Rose accused.

Amanda’s cheeks became flushed. “I am not the one who has been betrothed to him since birth.”

“He is a rake and a bounder!” the agitated Rose dismissed. “A man I find totally contemptible. Which is why I cannot understand how my parents could have agreed to a betrothal between the two of us the moment I was born.”

“His mother is a dear friend of your own, and I do not suppose he was either of those things at the time that agreement was made, having been only twelve years old himself,” Chloe teased. “Besides, not all unmarried gentlemen of the ton are bad. My own beloved Papa is a widower and a veritable angel!”

This announcement resulted in her becoming the focus of five pairs of shocked or disbelieving eyes.

Chloe looked startled when she became aware of the sudden silence and looked up to find those five astounded gazes levelled at her. “Well, he always behaves like an angel toward me,” she protested.

Lily sank her teeth into her top lip to prevent herself from laughing at this indignant assertion.

Because everyone knew that, despite his obvious deep love and regard for his daughter, the very tall, handsome, and imperious Gabriel Lord, the Duke of St. Albans, was also arrogant and the height of haughty condescension.

A gentleman, moreover, who, whenever he did deign to attend Society events, which was not often, was known to prefer standing on the edge of that event looking down his haughty nose at all who were assembled there rather than even thinking of enjoying that entertainment himself.

Not that Lily had ever found herself the focus of that critical pale blue gaze for more than a second or two. She was the eldest daughter of an earl, admittedly, but not one who was a particular friend of the Prince Regent, as St. Albans was. Her father was also severely depleted in funds, although that was not public knowledge.

Even so, Lily knew herself to be well beneath the notice of the wealthy gentleman eighteen years her senior and who bore the title of the fourteenth Duke of St. Albans.

Besides, if the scandal involving her younger sister's elopement two years ago, when Hazel had run away with a penniless Frenchman, should ever become known, then Lily's whole family would be included in that scandal, and Lily would be rendered unmarriageable anyway.

Far better to make that decision for herself than to have her heart broken by being rejected after a betrothal had been announced.

Her sister Hazel had been aged only sixteen and not yet introduced into Society when she eloped to Gretna Green with their father's French émigré secretary. She had left a note telling them as much, but they had not heard from her since, regarding either the

taking place of that wedding or her whereabouts now. A fact which hurt Lily immensely, the sisters having been close in both age and affection.

Their father had refused to search for his errant daughter. Encouraged by their mother, Lily had no doubt. The countess would not tolerate even a whiff of scandal being attached to their name, which meant that Hazel was now well and truly lost to them. Something which saddened Lily.

Taking into account that scandalous situation and her father's lack of funds, Lily doubted the Duke of St. Albans would even allow her to continue to be one of Chloe's closest confidantes if he became aware of either of those things.

Not that Lily's friendship with his daughter made her of any more interest to St. Albans than an irritating piece of lint that had dared to place itself upon the sleeve of one of his perfectly tailored always-dark evening jackets or superfine.

St. Albans had gone into mourning after the death of his wife when Chloe was born nineteen years ago, and the black clothing he still wore would seem to imply he had never completely come out of it.

There had certainly never been so much as a hint of gossip of the duke showing an open or clandestine interest in any woman during those years, in Society or out of it.

Indeed, Lily believed that cold and haughty gentleman to be capable of eviscerating anyone who would dare to gossip or speculate in regard to his private life.

Dark clothing or otherwise, to Lily, he remained the most handsome gentleman she had ever met, his appearance the epitome of elegant refinement.

An elegance many younger men in Society tried, and failed, to emulate. The reason for that failure was because none of them had that inborn air of haughty indifference

that caused male as well as female heads to turn wherever and whenever St. Albans chose to grace Society with his presence.

Lily freely admitted, inwardly, at least, that she was one of those ladies.

Indeed, she had been smitten with the duke since the moment she entered this house one evening during the spring of the previous year to attend a ball given by the duke to introduce his daughter, Chloe, into Society.

Even now, merely thinking of him, Lily knew her heart had begun to pound loudly, her breasts seeming to swell in the bodice of her pale green gown, and a familiar warmth now ached between her thighs and coursed through the rest of her body.

All from merely recalling staring unashamedly at the handsome duke, with his muscular shoulders and chest, narrow waist, and elegant legs, as he guided his daughter effortlessly about the ballroom in this house for her first dance at her inaugural ball.

It was because Lily knew how futile that attraction was, and that it had only grown deeper during the past year rather than dissipating, that she was only too happy to help her five closest friends form the Spinsters' Alliance.

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Her feelings for St. Albans and the secret of her sister's elopement were enough for her to know she would never marry. She believed it would be unfair to any gentleman to do so. Not just because of the scandal of her sister's elopement and marriage to a penniless Frenchman, but because she knew herself to be completely in love with the unattainable Gabriel Lord, the Duke of St. Albans.

"Oh, dear me." A flustered Chloe suddenly jumped to her feet as the longcase clock in the hallway began to strike the hour of three. "Forgive me, ladies, but I must leave immediately. Papa wishes me to have a new gown made for my birthday in three weeks' time, and I have finally managed to acquire an appointment today with my seamstress to discuss designs and the color. It is in only ten minutes' time."

"I am sure she will wait for you," Georgiana dismissed in deference to the Duke of St. Albans's importance in Society.

"I am sure she will not," Chloe scoffed. "Mrs. Ashton has become very much the rage this Season, so much so that it has taken until now for me to even secure this appointment to speak with her."

"Then you must go now," Lily encouraged with a wistful smile. There was no money for new dresses for her this Season.

Indeed, she and her mama had been busy all winter reworking and refreshing the designs of the half dozen gowns Lily had worn the previous Season, as well as some of her mother's that could be suitably adjusted to her slighter figure and this year's fashion.

“I must leave too.” Georgiana offered no further reason as to her actions, as was usually her way, when she rose to her feet.

“We are both scheduled to have afternoon tea with our maternal grandmother.” Juliet made the excuse for herself and her cousin, Amanda.

Their very rich and widowed maternal grandmother, Lily knew. Which was why Juliet’s and Amanda’s mothers, being the two daughters of the wealthy lady, often arranged for their own daughters to spend time with the elderly grandmother. No doubt in the hope she would bestow money to them upon her death.

Rose also stood. “I had not realized it was so late.”

“Would you care to accompany me in my carriage as far as my seamstress?” Chloe invited. “It is but a short walk from there to Appleby House.”

None of the other ladies made comment on this suggestion. Mainly because they all knew, although it was not discussed, that the Applebys were even more seriously strapped for money than Lily’s father was. As such, they did not have enough wealth to own a second carriage.

A lack of funds, which was no doubt the reason, now that Lily thought on it, that Rose’s parents were so insistent upon her upholding the agreement for her to become the wife of the wealthy Earl of Kingswood upon her nineteenth birthday at the end of this summer.

It was a pity that Lily’s own parents had not had the foresight to arrange such an advantageous marriage for her. Knowing she was engaged to someone else, Lily would have focused her attentions upon her fiancé rather than fallen hopelessly in love with the unattainable and haughty Duke of St. Albans the moment she set eyes upon him. A fiancé who, it might be hoped, would have also overlooked her sister’s

scandalous elopement.

“Could you see yourself out, Lily?” Chloe gave an apologetic smile once there was only her, Rose, and Lily remaining in the room. “I really dare not be late for Mrs. Ashton.”

“Of course. I will see you all again this evening, in any case, at Lord and Lady Chelsea’s ball.” Being left alone for a while would also allow her, for a few minutes at least, to peruse the books in the St. Albans library.

But as she tidied up the sheets of paper containing the notes she had taken of their meeting, she became aware of a rustle of movement from the other end of the library.

A mouse, perhaps?

It was not unheard of for some of the vermin to enter even the most prestigious and well-maintained London houses.

Or possibly it was the black cat that Chloe adored, searching for the mouse?

Lily was not afraid, in either case—

Her thoughts came to an abrupt halt, her mouth suddenly dry, her lips falling open, and her heart seeming to cease beating altogether, as a tall and imposing gentleman unbent his powerful frame from the wingback armchair facing the unlit fireplace at the opposite end of the library.

The imposing figure of none other than the fourteenth Duke of St. Albans.

CHAPTER TWO

Gabriel was easily able to discern the complete shock, followed by an expression of wariness, on the face of Lady Lily Tremayne. A young lady whom he knew to be a close friend of his daughter, Chloe.

He had not realized quite how close until he overheard the reason for six young ladies having decided to hold a meeting today in his library.

Upon hearing that reason, he had initially been too taken aback to even think of making them aware of his presence. Then, once the conversation began, he had been too intrigued as those young ladies began to thrash out the rules—excuse him, guidelines—for this new association they had formed.

It was his secretary Jacobson's day off, and Gabriel had fully intended to take advantage of the younger man's absence to enjoy a leisurely morning at home before lunching at his club with his friend, Hellsmere.

Jacobson's position as Gabriel's secretary required he live at St. Albans House. But that young man had announced this morning that he intended to spend the day with friends and would return later this evening.

Gabriel suspected one of those "friends" was actually a young lady, but he preferred not to intrude by asking. Jacobson was an employee, not an acquaintance.

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When Hellsmere had sent word he was unable to join him for luncheon after all, Gabriel had decided to remain at home quietly reading a book in his library.

What had become immediately obvious, from the reasons his daughter had given to the other young ladies for gathering in the library rather than her private parlor, was that Chloe had been completely unaware Gabriel had changed his plans.

With hindsight, Gabriel should most certainly have immediately made his presence known.

Instead, those first few minutes of surprise had passed, and by the time Gabriel had gathered his wits again, it had been too late to alert the ladies.

So, he had remained hidden in his wing-backed armchair and listened unashamedly to his daughter and five of her friends as they formed an alliance which excluded marriage and a husband from any of their futures.

As Chloe was only nineteen, and as aching beautiful as her mother had once been, Gabriel considered that alliance to be the height of folly.

Her silly friends could do as they wished, but he would not countenance having Chloe's emotions shackled by what he believed to be a recklessly conceived association.

His nostrils flared as he now stalked between the bookcases either side of him, knowing by the way Lily Tremayne's pale green eyes widened the closer he came that she was fully aware of the displeasure no doubt revealed in his rigid demeanor

and scowling countenance.

Lady Tremayne was, Gabriel realized as he drew closer, lovelier than any of his previous uninterested glances in her direction had revealed to his critical gaze. Uninterested because she was only a year older than his own daughter. Admittedly, he had become father to Chloe when he was himself only nineteen, but he still thought Lily Tremayne too young for him to ever think of being attracted to, in a physical sense or otherwise.

Somewhat to his surprise, he realized his assessment of her now was fully that of a single man taking an interest in a beautiful woman.

Her hair was dark and looked silky, styled in an upward sweep and secured at her crown, with several loose tendrils at her temples and nape. As was currently fashionable. She had equally dark brows over translucent sea-green eyes. Her skin was smooth and unblemished, her cheekbones high, her nose short, and her chin slightly pointed. Her lips were full and wide above it, and slightly turned up at the corners, as if, despite not doing so now, she smiled often. The top lip was shaped into a cupid's bow and was lush in proportion to her bottom lip.

At least eight or so inches shorter than his own height of six feet and four inches, she wore a fashionable pale green gown that revealed the tops of her creamy breasts, the high-waisted style hinting at rather than emphasizing the slender curves beneath.

On closer inspection, Gabriel could see signs, in the stitching of the rounded neckline and the addition of the pale green lace cap sleeves, of the gown having been recently altered.

He was not well acquainted with Lily's father, the Earl of Truro, but he did know the older man, along with many others, had lost a fortune on 'Change during the years of war against Napoleon.

An unfortunate occurrence, which obviously meant there was now very little money in the Truro family coffers which might be spent on frivolities such as new gowns for his unmarried daughter's coming Season.

The fact Lily Tremayne was a full year older than Chloe meant this could not be Lily's first, or even her second, Season. Although, Gabriel did not recall having noticed her before she became friends with Chloe the previous year.

It might seem to his daughter's close circle of friends that he was unaware of their existence. The opposite was true. Anyone who came into contact with his beloved daughter was summarily investigated to ensure they were no danger to Chloe or her continued safety.

His daughter was too precious and too deeply loved by him for Gabriel to ever take the risk of losing her. Indeed, he was going to suffer the pains of hell when it came time for him to give her away to another gentleman in marriage.

Something that would not happen if Chloe and her five friends continued with this farce of an alliance in which they had agreed never to marry. Much as Gabriel would hate the day Chloe moved out of St. Albans House and into a new home to live with her husband, the thought of her not marrying at all or having a family of her own and enjoying a full and happy life with her husband and children, was totally unacceptable to him.

In the meantime, Gabriel would ensure Chloe's warm nature was not taken advantage of in any way. Another reason he insisted an investigation be made into any and all of Chloe's new friends or acquaintances.

None of the young ladies who had gathered in his home today had been found to be of any deep concern. There was the fact of the secret elopement of the youngest Tremayne daughter two years ago and several other less-than-desirable aspects to one

or two of Chloe's other friends. But none of them had been serious enough for Gabriel to consider them a threat to Chloe's future or happiness.

But he could not have known of the ridiculous alliance the six young ladies would decide to form only a year after those friendships were made.

If Gabriel's assessment of the alterations to Lily's gown was correct, then it had also been very inconsiderate of Chloe to have spoken so eagerly of any new gowns she might have made and would wear this upcoming Season.

And he, Gabriel realized, was allowing his thoughts to wander to matters, starting with the Earl of Truro's financial circumstances and the hardship it was obviously causing his daughter, which were none of his concern.

He deliberately looked down the length of his nose at Lily Tremayne. "I fully accept it to be the choice of you individual ladies as to what you wish to have and do in your own futures. What I do not appreciate nor approve of was Chloe's inclusion in the foolhardy alliance I heard the six of you forming today."

Lily Tremayne slowly closed her eyes before opening them again, revealing a spark of anger in their pale green depths. "I believe that to be the point of our alliance, in that it is for Chloe to make that decision, not you."

Her words sounded confident, but Gabriel could see the slight trembling of her hands before she clasped them tightly together in front of her.

His jaw tightened at this attempt at dismissing him and what he considered was best for Chloe. "She is aged only nineteen, and I am her father."

Her smile lacked humor. "I believe all in Society are well aware of who Chloe's father is."

“What do you mean by that remark?” he bit out from between clenched teeth.

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Yes, exactly what had she meant by that, Lily inwardly chastised herself.

The fact Gabriel Lord had been present and listening during the whole of their discussion of the Spinsters' Alliance, was embarrassing enough. It would not do for Lily to add to that awkwardness by insulting this very powerful and influential gentleman.

That may be so—Lily knew itwasso!—but, wisely or unwisely, his words had stung, and she refused to cower in the face of his disapproval.

Which, she admitted, might have been easier for her to do if she was not constantly breathing in his tempting scent: a combination of citrus and cedarwood, with an undertone of male musk she realized must be uniquely the duke's own.

Nor should he be allowed to look so heart-poundingly handsome and distinguished in a fitted black superfine and gray pantaloons. He also wore a gray brocade waistcoat buttoned over a snowy white shirt. There was a diamond pin visible amongst the folds of his perfectly tied neckcloth.

The darkness of his hair was liberally sprinkled with gray, as might be expected of a gentleman aged eight and thirty. But somehow, on this autocratic gentleman, it only succeeded in rendering him even more breathtakingly handsome and distinguished.

Those looks were added to by the intelligence visible in his pale blue eyes. He had sharp cheekbones either side of a long slash of a nose, and Lily knew that his lips, when they were not thinned in disapproval as they were now, had a fullness that hinted at what might, on any other gentleman, have been a sensual nature.

Lily immediately halted her wayward thoughts to again inwardly berate herself for indulging in such flights of fancy.

Gabriel Lord, the Duke of St. Albans, whilst being extremely handsome, gave no indication of having a sensual bone in his body. Indeed, his having remained unmarried since the death of his wife, nor ever taken a mistress amongst the married ladies in Society, implied that he felt no burning need to regularly indulge in the desires of the flesh.

Lily did not know whether to feel happy or sad about that fact.

Happy, because her attraction to this gentleman was so deep, it would actually hurt her to know the identity of any woman who regularly had shared or did share his bed.

Sad, because if the beautiful and accomplished ladies of theton, married or otherwise, had not succeeded in seducing him into a relationship or remarriage, then it meant there was absolutely no possibility of him ever considering someone as young and inexperienced—with a potentially scandalous family—as Lily, to be of any interest.

And the duke, she realized, was still waiting for her answer!

She straightened with purpose. “You should, in all good conscience, have made your presence known to us the moment you realized our discussion was a private one,” she accused rather than answered his question.

“Should I?”

“Yes!” She glared.

“Why?”

“Because— Well, because—”

“Because you did not wish me to hear Chloe describe me as being an angel, immediately followed by the total astonishment of the other five ladies in the room for having heard me described in such glowing terms?” he derided.

Lily felt the burn of embarrassment in her cheeks. “Listeners never hear anything good about themselves.”

“Yet I did. From my daughter, at least,” the duke said dryly. “And young ladies who do not wish their conversations to be overheard should be more aware of their surroundings and the people within them.”

“I will ensure we do not make that mistake again.” Lily fully intended to do so by making sure the members of the alliance never again met in the home Chloe shared with her father. The very opinionated Duke of St. Albans.

“I do not approve of Chloe being involved with a coven of misandrists.” He did not hesitate to voice that opinion now.

“We are not witches, so we have not formed a coven. We are merely young ladies who are tired of having their needs and desires dismissed as being unimportant to the gentlemen in their lives—if they are considered at all. Of being forced to marry whom we do not love. Nor do I personally have a dislike of men,” she added with a frown.

St. Albans lifted one eyebrow. “You know the meaning of that word?”

“I know the meaning of many words, Your Grace,” she scorned. “Indeed, my many governesses ensured that I am well versed in literature and politics as well as music, needlework, and the running of a home.”

“The conversation I overheard today between you and your friends implied a lack of respect for men as much as an aversion to marrying any of them.”

Lily inwardly conceded that Georgiana seemed to feel that way, and Lily knew part of the reason for that was the disinterest of her own father, the Earl of Shefford.

But the remainder of her friends simply did not wish to be bullied into marrying someone they did not love. “Then I believe you misunderstood our conversation,” Lily snapped and then instantly winced as she realized exactly whom she was snapping at.

Not only did she risk making an adversary of the powerful Duke of St. Albans, but he was also known to be a very close friend of the Prince Regent. The one gentleman who might banish her from society altogether if he so chose or was asked to do so by his very close friend. Much as Lily found society tedious on occasion, she would not wish to be completely cut off from it or her friends.

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“I believe,” the duke continued haughtily, “that if you would care to read those rules again now, you will see how I could be forgiven for believing otherwise.”

Lily had no reason to read them again. She knew exactly what those rules entailed. “My friends and I simply do not wish to be a part of the practice of arranged marriages, invariably with gentlemen with whom we have usually not previously been well acquainted, let alone fallen in love with.”

“Most of those gentlemen will not have been acquainted with you until the proposal either,” he reasoned.

“Which is why the practice should be stopped.” Lily became more heated in her protest.

“It is the way it has always been.”

“That does not mean it should continue.”

St. Albans studied her for several long seconds. “A strong opinion, when I doubt you have ever been kissed?”

“I do not see what that has to do with anything.” Her cheeks had bloomed with heat. “Especially when the marriage bed involves far more intimacy than kissing!”

“Yes,” he acknowledged.

“Then you see our dilemma,” Lily prompted eagerly.

“Not completely,” St. Albans answered slowly.

She glared her frustration. “Why not?”

“Because I believe there is a category missing from the second rule of your alliance.”

A category missing? Georgiana would be most displeased to learn of it.

The duke quirked those haughty brows. “Perhaps you would care to read it to me so that we might both refresh our memories, and then perhaps you will realize what that category might be.”

Lily looked down at the papers she still held before finding, and then reading out that second agreed-upon rule. “‘Neither father, brother, nor any other male relative, fiancé, or husband shall ever come between our friendship for each other.’ That all seems self-explanatory to me.” She looked up to eye St. Albans curiously.

“Except you omitted one other category of gentleman, which, considering your other rules, could be of great significance,” he added huskily.

“Which category is that?”

“You missed lover from your long list of men who shall not be allowed to sway you from the affection held by you and your friends for each other,” he explained softly.

Lily stared, sure she must have misheard him. That she could not possibly be having this conversation with the man she had previously only known, despite her unrequited crush on him this past year, as the cold and distant Duke of St. Albans.

“I beg your pardon?” she prompted warily.

St. Albans gave a shrug. “If none of you intends to marry, then I can only assume that it is your intention to acquire a series of lovers instead of a husband,” he drawled. “Am I wrong in that assessment?”

CHAPTER THREE

Lily fell back a step in surprise at the turn this conversation had taken. “I— Yes, of course you are wrong!” she snapped incredulously.

“I am?” St. Albans sounded amused. “You are seriously telling me that six young, healthy, and beautiful ladies intend to remain celibate for the rest of your long lives? Possibly, as was suggested, by living together in old age, and no doubt kept company by a house full of cats and lapdogs whom you will shower your frustrated affections upon?”

Despite her sister’s scandalous elopement and their father’s lack of funds, Lily knew she had thought only of her unrequited love for St. Albans when she and her friends made their pact earlier. Knowing her love for him meant she could never allow another gentleman to so much as touch her intimately, she had not considered the omission of physical love relevant to that decision.

Or the lack of physical pleasure in her future, as the duke was now suggesting.

She exhaled slowly before speaking. “I am allergic to cats and have no liking for lapdogs. And is it not hypocritical of you to mock the state of celibacy you have been guilty of living for the past nineteen years since your wife died?” she accused, then instantly regretted it as those pale blue eyes turned flinty. “I apologize. I should not have made my observations so personal.”

His mouth twisted. “Oh, I assure you, this conversation has now become very personal,” he derided. “Quite where you attained your information regarding my

private life, more specifically the physical side of that life, I have no idea. Wherever it was, your informant was incorrect.”

Lily swallowed at the implication behind that dismissal. “You have not remained celibate since Chloe was born and your wife died?”

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“I have not,” he stated softly.

“Oh.”

Lily had no doubt that the initial emotion she now felt upon hearing this was disappointment. There had been something deeply romantic in imagining this handsome but aloof gentleman locking his heart away—as well as other parts of his anatomy—in the equivalent of an ivory tower, because of the deep love he still felt for his deceased wife.

That disappointment immediately turned to a deep sense of envy for any woman who had ever become the focus of the attentions of such an outwardly cold but viscerally attractive gentleman as the Duke of St. Albans. At the realization of how elated those women must feel when they were the recipient of his no doubt expert lovemaking.

She could not imagine this gentleman doing anything badly or halfheartedly.

“Indeed,” he now drawled. “But I have never taken a mistress in the true sense of the word.”

Lily blinked. “Then in what sense have you taken them?” She was uncertain as to how this conversation had come about, but had absolutely no idea how to end it. She was unsure if she really wished to do so...

He gave a hard smile. “In whatever sense I chose.”

Lily felt her cheeks warm at his implication. “Then surely that would make them your

mistress?”

“Not if the intimacy never lasts for more than a single night.”

“Oh.” Lily drew in a controlling breath. “And have there been many such ladies since your wife died?”

The duke’s mouth twisted wryly. “They were not ladies. As for how many...” He shrugged. “A gentleman does not discuss such matters.”

“Not even with his own group of cronies?” she scorned.

“I do not have a group of cronies,” he bit out. “What I do have, as do you, is a small circle of close friends whom I trust implicitly.”

“Including the Prince Regent?”

“Including Prinny.” He nodded. “But neither I nor any of them would ever be so ungentlemanly as to talk of our...physical liaisons, let alone openly discuss the lady whom we are bedding. Such behavior would be disrespectful to her in the extreme.”

Such consideration for the woman involved had not been Lily’s experience in regard to her two older brothers. Who, it seemed to her, took delight in trying to better each other in discussing how many conquests they had made this Season or that. The fact they were now both married men, each with a child in the nursery, did not seem to make the slightest difference to their behavior. Lily felt sure that, since her parents’ marriage was so obviously not a happy one, her father was equally as guilty of being unfaithful.

Yet another reason why Lily had no interest in marriage.

“To my knowledge, there has never been any gossip about you in that regard in Society,” she now confirmed.

St. Albans raised one eyebrow. “That would seem to imply you have you been paying particular attention to the subject on my behalf?”

“No! Of course I have not,” Lily blatantly lied once she had calmed herself enough to speak evenly.

She abhorred dishonesty, but felt it was necessary on this occasion. In order to maintain her pride, if nothing else.

“The reason for the silence amongst the gossips in Society is easily explained,” St. Albans bit out. “It is widely known, and accepted, that I will not tolerate having the details of my life, or that of my daughter, openly discussed for their amusement.”

Lily eyed him curiously. “But how can you stop that from happening when the gossips so much enjoy discussing everyone else’s business ad nauseum?”

It was one of the things Lily truly disliked about the gentlemen and ladies of Society. Partly because she could only imagine the things they said about her and her family behind their backs.

“Oh,” she murmured when St. Albans merely continued to stare at her, that haughty eyebrow once again raised.

No doubt because he would make a point of destroying anyone, verbally and socially, who dared to gossip about what he considered to be his very private life.

“Do you have a woman in your life now? Oh dear God...” Lily could literally feel the blood draining from her previous flushed and hot cheeks at the realization of what she

had just asked. “I am sorry. So very sorry. Please forgive me. I should not have asked you such a personal question.”

“Then why did you?” he prompted softly.

She winced. “I suppose because I was curious as to the answer.”

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St. Albans studied her from between narrowed lids. “I like your honesty, and we will return to the reason for that curiosity in a moment. First, I should like to know if you have already taken a lover.”

Lily gasped. “It would be scandalous for an unmarried lady to do so!”

“But you have told me you do not ever intend to marry, so my natural conclusion, as I mentioned earlier, must be that you intend to take a succession of lovers during your lifetime in place of a husband. Unless you are of the opinion that what one has never experienced, one cannot miss?”

Lily bristled at the mockery in his tone. “I am of the opinion, from what I have observed in my parents’ and older brothers’ marriages, that for the woman, there is as little pleasure in the marriage bed as there is out of it,” she bit out waspishly.

For obvious reasons, she had no idea of her sister’s opinion on the experience.

St. Albans’s nostrils flared. “Then your father and brothers must be inconsiderate lovers who care only for their own pleasure and have no interest in whether their wife experiences the same.” The disdain in his voice emphasized what he thought of such selfish behavior.

Lily snorted. “Next, you will be telling me that your own wife was not subject to that same lack of consideration and that Chloe was born as a result of a shared love and passion between her mother and father.”

She immediately regretted that tone when she saw the way St. Albans’s pale eyes had

darkened to a deep and stormy blue.

“I apologize for my outspokenness,” she said quickly. “Again.” She winced.

She had not spoken more than a brief and polite greeting to St. Albans before this, and now she could not seem to stop an avalanche of unfiltered, and inappropriate comments, spilling from her lips.

“My own bluntness of nature is such that I believe I might learn to appreciate your outspokenness,” the duke admired.

Lily avoided meeting those piercing eyes. “Even so, I should not have made my remarks so personal.” Even if that was exactly how Lily would describe his comments regarding her proposed passionless future.

St. Albans stared at her for what was to Lily several long and anxious moments. She was aware that this man could eviscerate her with just a look or a single word in the Prince Regent’s ear.

“You agreed earlier that you have never been kissed.” St. Albans finally spoke again, but the flintiness had not completely dissipated from his gaze.

“I have not,” Lily confirmed again.

He nodded. “Then I do not see how you can possibly comment, with any degree of authority on something you admit you have no experience of. Especially if it was in the hands of a lover who is both experienced and puts your pleasure before his own.”

Lily had no idea where St. Albans was going with this conversation.

But his words made her feel as if she were balanced on the precipice of hot molten

lava. To fall over that edge, although it was capable of killing her, could also surround and draw her into a depth of heat and pleasure such as she had never imagined possible.

From the way the pupils of Lily's eyes were so dilated they almost obliterated the pale green irises, her cheeks were once again flushed and her breathing had grown shallow and ragged, Gabriel knew that she had become aroused merely from discussing, then imagining, such intimacy.

All were indications that, despite what she thought to the contrary, Lily would be very passionate with the right lover with whom she might explore that desire.

A knowledge that immediately caused Gabriel's half-hard cock—it had been that way since the beginning of their conversation—to fully engorge inside his drawers.

A clear indication of how much he now wanted to make love to Lily Tremayne.

A realization that both concerned and exhilarated him.

It concerned him because Lily was so young and had admitted to being completely inexperienced.

But Gabriel's strong and immediate physical response to this young lady told him that he nonetheless desired her. More than he had any woman for some time. Which was the reason for his exhilaration.

He had told Lily the truth when he said he'd had other lovers since Mariah.

He had remained celibate for fully a year after his wife died, out of love and respect for her.

But his youth and a need for physical release not by his own hand had then caused him to seek out ladies in the houses of the demimonde with whom he could be intimate without anything more being expected of him. Because those ladies were not a part of Society but were wholly mindful of the need for discretion in regard to their gentleman callers.

Those physical liaisons had satisfied Gabriel for several years, but eventually, they too had palled, and his visits had become less and less frequent. Returning to the use of his right hand could bring about the same release, without the need for politeness or conversation first.

Which was why Gabriel couldn't remember the last time he had physically touched the softness of a woman's skin, let alone made love to her.

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But could he, in all conscience, think of touching Lily that way when she was a peer to his own daughter?

That was not quite accurate, he consoled himself, Lily being fully a year older than Chloe.

As if a year mattered.

Perhaps it didn't when he knew this young lady had entered into an alliance, one which included his own daughter, to shun and refuse any gentleman she knew did not love her and whom she did not love either, if he should offer her marriage.

Gabriel and Mariah's marriage had been such an arrangement, but they had been lucky enough to fall in love with each other after they were married. So that Chloe had indeed been born as the result of a "shared love and passion."

Having known the opposite, Gabriel fully recognized the limitations offered in a loveless marriage.

But these six young ladies, one of them his own daughter, were making a decision, a wrong one, he believed, which could affect the rest of their lives.

And he, Gabriel realized self-derisively, was mentally trying to justify his attraction to the forthright Lily Tremayne.

"I believe I should like you to call me Gabriel," he murmured.

Her eyes widened. “You would?”

Gabriel smiled slightly at her wariness. “I believe it would be inappropriate for you to continue calling me Your Grace once I have kissed you.”

Her eyes were huge in the pallor of her face. “You intend to kiss me?”

“I think if I did, it would help you to see how true physical pleasure is to be savored and enjoyed.” Good Lord, was he now trying to justify his desire to kiss Lily by using such pompous rhetoric?

It seemed that he was.

“Careful!” He stepped forward to take a firm grasp of Lily’s arm as she seemed to sway on her feet, before he then gave in to the temptation of pulling her fully into his arms.

Gabriel drew a sharp breath at the feel of her heat and softness resting against the hardness of his chest and abdomen. That indrawn breath brought with it the light but heady floral scent of Lily’s hair.

“What if I do not wish to be kissed?” Lily’s words were whispered into his chest.

“How can you possibly know that until you have first tried the experience?”

She raised her head to look at him searchingly. Whatever she saw in his face or read in his eyes caused her breathing to falter and the pupils of her eyes to once again dilate.

Which was when Gabriel took the opportunity to lower his head so that his mouth could take possession of hers.

A single taste of her luscious lips and Gabriel lost his battle to keep the kiss on the right side of his usual rigid control, even in the most intimate of circumstances.

Instead, he kissed Lily hungrily. Demanded her response as his lips devoured hers and his tongue thrust deeply into the warmth of her mouth.

She tasted delicious and responded with a heat that matched Gabriel's own.

Quite how far he would have taken those hungry kisses, Gabriel had no idea, because minutes later, the sound of the bell ringing to announce a visitor infiltrated what was rapidly becoming an overwhelming tide of passion which he felt absolutely no desire to call a halt to.

It actually pained him to break the kiss before lifting his head to stare down into the face of the young woman whose understated beauty and fire were, he knew, the sole reason for the reawakening of his long-silent libido.

Lily looked slightly dazed as she stared back at him, her eyes now having a feverish glow, her cheeks flushed, and those already pouting lips slightly swollen from the overwhelming force of his passion.

Gabriel could taste her still as he swept his tongue across his own slightly moist bottom lip. "This conversation is not over," he told her softly, aware of his butler's increasingly audible steps as he approached the library down the flagstone hallway. "Lily?" he prompted when she made no reply.

She continued to look up at him with lust-drunk eyes, but, for the moment, seemed incapable of answering him.

"We will continue this another time," he vowed even as he stepped a polite distance away from her.

Just in time, as his butler knocked briefly before entering. “His Grace, the Duke of Hellsmere, is here to see you, Your Grace,” Cramer announced.

Damn Hellsmere.

Damn anyone who would dare to keep Gabriel from pursuing the deep desire currently raging through his body for Lily.

An intensity of passion Gabriel had not allowed into his life since, at the age of sixteen and home from school for the summer, he had fallen in love with one of the dairy maids at St. Albans Park.

A healthy and ultimately harmless infatuation, most would say, considering his age.

But not so when Gabriel had spent his every waking moment following the girl around like a lovesick puppy, dreaming of her at night, and feeling resentful of anyone whom he thought was trying to steal her away from him.

The whole situation had come to a violent end after Gabriel had almost killed one of the grooms when, one afternoon, he had found the other boy and Gabriel's dairy maid naked together in the loft over the stables.

Gabriel had beaten him almost to the point of death. It was only due to the head groom managing to pull him off the other boy, and the diligence of Gabriel's father's physician, that his life had been saved.

After that incident, Gabriel had learned to keep tight control of what he now recognized as the depth and strength of his passions.

Oh, he had loved Mariah. It was impossible not to do so when in the presence of her

laughter and lightness. He had adored his daughter since the moment she was placed in his arms as a newborn.

But there nevertheless remained a wall Gabriel had deliberately erected about the more...intense of his emotions.

A wall, Gabriel now recognized after a single hungry kiss shared with Lily Tremayne, that had begun to crumble.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Are you even listening to me, St. Albans?”

Gabriel pulled himself out of his reverie. Not because George, the Prince Regent’s question had made him feel guilty for his inattentiveness to their discussion. No, his startled reaction was because of the painful kick his friend, Lucien Lyons, the Duke of Hellsmere, and seated across from him at the table, had given to Gabriel’s now bruised shin.

Arranging this hasty meeting was the reason Hellsmere had been called to attend the Prince Regent earlier today and so had been unable to join Gabriel for luncheon at their club. Hellsmere had come to St. Albans House to explain later that afternoon, and also to inform Gabriel of this meeting the moment he was able to do so.

There were nine gentlemen seated at the long rectangular table. Prinny resided at the head of it, of course, the other eight men seated four either side. A group of gentlemen Prinny had brought together during the years of the war against Napoleon.

They were gentlemen whom Prinny trusted implicitly and liked to call his own private army. All the men gathered here had connections both here and in France, and so were able to gather information that was of paramount importance, during the

years of battle to subdue Napoleon's despotic reign and since.

The Prince Regent had seen no reason, despite the Corsican having now been incarcerated for a second time, to disband that army of powerful gentlemen. Indeed, their strategic places in Society had become even more necessary when there were still French spies, abroad and at home, who were intent upon causing unrest and freeing their emperor before restoring him to his despotic rule.

"Of course I am listening to you, Your Majesty." Gabriel gave his full attention to the Prince Regent. "You have stated your belief that there is a French spy amongst the members Salisbury's government."

"Possibly several of them," Prinny confirmed.

Gabriel knew that their Regent took a great interest in his government, sometimes too much so for certain ministers' comfort.

Admittedly, Prinny could sometimes be a little...paranoid, regarding the possibility of there being spies in England, near or far from him. But it was a paranoia which was perhaps understandable when several members of Society had already been proven to be colluding with the rebellious section of the French people who wished to have the king removed and their emperor returned to them.

"Then we must discuss what is to be done about it," Gabriel stated firmly.

The next hour was spent doing exactly that, most importantly dividing up the investigation into Salisbury's cabinet ministers between the eight gentlemen attending the Prince Regent.

The meeting ended with an agreement for the nine gentlemen to meet up again in a week's time to discuss any progress made. Unless one of them attained crucial

information on the subject in the meantime, in which case they would reconvene earlier.

“Bit of a witch hunt, don’t you think?” Hellsmere prompted as the two men walked out to their waiting carriages.

They had been at school together from the age of eight, their friendship having continued through Gabriel’s brief and ultimately tragic marriage. It had endured in the years since.

Gabriel shrugged. “Prinny thinks it worth investigating, so that is what we shall do.”

The other man eyed him curiously. “I did not ask before, but can that pretty young lady I saw leaving St. Albans House earlier possibly have been Lady Lily Tremayne?”

Gabriel stiffened, both at the question and the fact that Hellsmere knew exactly who she was. “She is a friend of Chloe’s.”

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“Really?” Hellsmere mused. “Because when I arrived, your butler informed me that Chloe was out and only you were at home.”

Gabriel’s nostrils flared. “Chloe had been in the house earlier with a group of her friends, but then had to rush away to an engagement with her seamstress,” he defended, at the same time that he resented feeling forced into making the explanation at all. “I believe Lady Tremayne was merely gathering up some papers before she also took her leave.”

“Hm.” Hellsmere’s frown was speculative. “Then why were her cheeks flushed and her eyes overbright and slightly unfocused, when she nodded acknowledgment of me before hurrying from the house as if the devil were at her heels?”

Gabriel scowled at being referred to as the devil. “How the hell should I know?”

“You are very tense today, as well as inattentive.” The other man continued to study him. “Is Lady Tremayne—”

“You will cease questioning me in regard to that young lady,” Gabriel snapped.

“That particular young lady?”

“Yes!” he bit out from between clenched teeth.

“Why?”

“Because I believe you would like, as would I, our friendship to continue.” Gabriel

was angrier than he could remember having been for some time.

Not because Hellsmere had commented on the way Lily looked when she left him earlier.

No, the reason Gabriel was angry was because Hellsmere was daring to speak of Lily at all.

Warning him that he was already well on his way to feeling a proprietary claim on that young lady. An intensity of emotion which Gabriel instinctively knew he would not have the strength to quell every time he saw or was with her.

It was a galling admission for a man who, since that unfortunate incident twenty-two years ago, had prided himself on the strength of control he held over himself and his emotions.

Good God, Lily had not even been born twenty-two years ago!

“We will talk on every subject but Lady Tremayne whilst we enjoy an early supper, which you will be paying for,” he now told the other man.

“Oh, I will, will I?” Hellsmere sounded amused.

Gabriel nodded. “Your cancelation of our luncheon is why I have forgotten to eat today. Which, in turn, is no doubt also the reason for my current lack of either attention or good humor.”

“Then it is a pity you did not take a nibble out of Miss Tremayne when you had the opportunity to do so,” the other man taunted. “Or perhaps you did, and having found her to be sour, that is now the reason for your bad humor?”

Gabriel narrowed his lids. "I have warned you once against talking of Lady Tremayne. I shall not warn you again."

Hellsmere continued to study him for several long seconds before nodding in abrupt acceptance of Gabriel's decree. "But please bear in mind I reserve the right to return to the subject of Lily Tremayne if I consider it to be of further interest."

"It will not be," Gabriel stated with more conviction than truth.

He had only kissed Lily once, but even so, he knew that all his years of rigid control and self-denial had begun to be stripped away from him.

Gabriel could not allow his emotions to become so raw and exposed again.

Which meant he must, for both their sakes, avoid being alone in Lily's company again.

A decision which did not console him in the way it was intended to do.

Nor did it stop him from giving the necessary instructions to Jacobson to make arrangements for the two of them to leave London tomorrow. One of the ministers Gabriel was to investigate had not returned to the city as yet due to his wife's illness, but that did not mean Gabriel would not visit that gentleman on his estate.

Lily sat alone beside the fire in her bedchamber at Truro House later that afternoon, still slightly dazed over what had happened earlier.

Beginning with her unexpected meeting with, and then the inappropriate conversation, with Gabriel Lord.

Followed by himkissingher.

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It had been an intensely erotic kiss, one that had stripped away any façade or belief of him being the cold and aloof Duke of St. Albans. It had instead revealed a man possessed of the deepest of sexual passions. The physical evidence of which had been evident in the throbbing length of his arousal as it pressed insistently into Lily's abdomen.

She would not previously have believed St. Albans to be capable of feeling such a depth of emotions, and she doubted others in Society would have thought it possible either.

Most especially not toward someone like Lily, so much younger than him and not dazzlingly beautiful as so many of the other ladies in Society were.

But there had been no mistaking the hunger in Gabriel's kiss. Or, despite Lily's lack of experience in such matters, the evidence of Gabriel's aroused and heated cock.

A very long and very thickly aroused and heated cock.

Lily felt a quivering down the length of her spine just imagining touching that throbbing length.

Her thighs clenched together merely thinking of that heat pushing and then thrusting deep inside her moist and welcoming channel.

Dear God, she was now aroused again only from thinking about it!

Her breasts were swollen, the nipples plump and aching, and between her thighs was

once again both hot and wet.

“Why are you sitting here daydreaming when you should be dressing for the Chelseas’ ball this evening?” a familiar waspish voice demanded.

Lily turned to look at her mother standing in the open doorway.

The countess was still beautiful, with her fair hair and blue eyes, but it was a beauty tempered by dissatisfaction with her lot in life.

Lily wondered if her mother had ever known, even at the beginning of her marriage to the earl, a fraction of the passion Gabriel had awakened in Lily earlier today.

Somehow, Lily doubted it.

Even if there had been an initial affection between her mother and father, it no longer existed all these years of marriage later. Perhaps it had when the children—two sons and two daughters—had been young. But Lily very much doubted it had survived her mother knowing of the many mistresses the earl had taken over the years. Indeed, Lily knew that it had not, and that for her mother, at least, their marriage was now one of duty and tolerance only.

Which was exactly why Lily balked at ever entering into such an arrangement herself and had gone so far as to make an agreement on the subject with five of her close friends.

An agreement Gabriel Lord had no doubt thought to shatter earlier with his passionate kisses.

Lily had no intention of being so easily swayed from her purpose. Indeed, she was filled with fresh resolve on the matter as she rose to her feet. “I shall do so now,” she

assured her mother with a warm smile.

There was no reason for her to think Gabriel would be at the ball this evening. In fact, as it was well-known in Society how much the duke hated attending social events, the opposite was more likely to be true.

Chloe had an elderly great-aunt who, although she didn't live in the St. Albans household, always acted as chaperone when Chloe attended social engagements without her father.

No doubt that would be the case at this evening's ball too.

It was.

Worse, Lily learned from Chloe, it was St. Albans's intention to leave London the following morning, accompanied by his secretary, the duke having business needing his attention in the country.

Chloe had obviously been displeased with her father for leaving when the Season had barely begun. Even more so when he had not stated when he would return.

Lily's emotions were less straightforward.

On the one hand, she was relieved she would not have to face the duke again so soon after the two of them had kissed.

On the other, she ached to see and be with him again. To be kissed by him again. To do more than kiss.

She doubted Gabriel would feel that same hunger. Obviously, he did not, if he intended to leave London on business with no word, even to his daughter, of when he

would return.

CHAPTER FIVE

One week later

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Gabriel knew the moment he entered the Marquis of Landers's ballroom that belatedly deciding to accompany Chloe and his elderly aunt to the ball had been a mistake.

He knew that without a doubt because of the murderous rage which took possession of him when he glanced about the crowded room and saw Lily dancing and laughing in the company of a handsome young gentleman. Gabriel easily recognized him as Lord Andrew Maybury, the eldest son and heir of the Earl of Trowbridge.

Lily looked very beautiful this evening in a high-waisted gown of teal-colored silk. It had small puff sleeves and delicate gold braid stitched along the square neckline. Her curling dark hair was brushed back from her face and secured at her crown, with loose wisps in front of her ears.

Gabriel's thoughts immediately strayed to speculating how long her hair would be when free of its confining pins.

Would those curling locks reach down to cover what he had many times this past week imagined being her ruby-tipped breasts?

Or would it be longer still, perhaps reaching the slenderness of her waist and beyond? Possibly even to the perfectly rounded cheeks of her bottom?

In either case, Gabriel resented seeing the young gentleman, in whose arms Lily was currently dancing, so much as receiving a smile from her. That resentment increased every time he witnessed the light clasp Maybury took of her gloved fingers when the dance called for them to meet before parting again.

“Did you say something, Papa?” Chloe looked up at him expectantly.

Which was when Gabriel became aware that he had been softly growling as he was forced to watch Lily dancing with any man who was not him.

Which, in turn, told him that the torment of wanting to claim Lily as his own had not dissipated in the slightest during this last week of not seeing or being with her.

But Gabriel had already known that.

How could he not when, before the morning of his departure to the countryside on Prinny’s behalf, he had worked Jacobson long into the night in a futile effort to stop thinking about Lily.

Jacobson had not complained at having his day off end in that demanding fashion.

But Gabriel had been forced to relent in his desire to distract himself when he realized the pale light of dawn was slowly creeping into the study window.

It had been a waste of his time and Jacobson’s effort anyway when Gabriel’s thoughts had refused to deviate from Lily and the kiss they had shared. Of how right it had felt when he held her in his arms. And tasted the sweet nectar of her plump lips.

His visit to the country to investigate one of the cabinet ministers he had been assigned had not been in vain, however. It had been a tedious journey and visit to the unsuspecting minister, but it had nevertheless resulted in Gabriel being able to reassure the Prince Regent as to that particular minister’s innocence.

Gabriel had hoped that being away from Lily, from even the possibility of giving in to the burning hunger he felt to kiss her again, would cause his desire for her to fade.

If anything, that need had deepened, until being with Lily again was all Gabriel could think about. All he hungered for or wanted.

Making a complete nonsense of that ridiculous saying “out of sight, out of mind” when Lily had not left his thoughts for a single moment.

“Oh, look, there is Lily,” Chloe exclaimed before giving a girlish giggle. “Maybury is so handsome and such a fine dancer,” she admired.

Gabriel had no time to snap his opinion of that gentleman before he found himself being pulled along in his daughter’s wake. Her elderly chaperone, Gabriel’s aunt, had no choice but to attempt to follow them as Chloe made her way determinedly around the edge of the dance floor to where the same group of friends who had met in the library at St. Albans House the previous week, all stood talking together.

Except Lily, of course.

Who was dancing.

With a man who was not Gabriel.

He and Chloe arrived beside the group at the same time that Lily was accompanied back to them by a very attentive Maybury.

The younger man’s eyes widened when he saw Gabriel. “Your Grace,” he acknowledged with a bow. “It is not often that we see you at these events.” He voiced the observation no doubt many in Society were already discussing, the ladies behind their fans and the gentlemen in lowered voices.

Gabriel gave him a coldly dismissive glance before turning back to the group of young ladies. “Would you care to dance, Lady Tremayne?”

Lily was excruciatingly aware that the whispers of gossip, on the dance floor and off it, had begun the moment the Duke of St. Albans stepped into the ballroom.

Indeed, the moment Lily saw him enter with Chloe on his arm, she had been unable to look anywhere or at anyone else. Gabriel—she still blushed when she referred to him that way, even if it was only in her thoughts—took her breath away with how magnificent he looked this evening in his tailored black evening clothes and snowy white shirt and neckcloth beneath a brocade waistcoat.

She assumed he must be here at Chloe's request, knowing how persuasive her young friend could be and how indulgent her father was toward her.

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Lily had not thought for a moment that the duke would single her out in this way by asking her to dance. A request which had, she realized, halted all conversation in their immediate vicinity and beyond.

Rightly so when this gentleman, if he did deign to attend a ball during the Season, had never been known to dance at any of them since the evening of the ball in which he had danced with Chloe when she was introduced into Society.

Yet that same aloof gentleman was now asking Lily to dance.

Her bodice suddenly felt too tight for Lily to be able to breathe comfortably. Her legs were trembling so badly, beneath her ankle-length gown, she wasn't sure how much longer they would be able to support her.

As for answering him... Lily's mouth had become so dry, she could barely swallow, let alone speak.

"If you will excuse us, ladies." Taking Lily's silence as agreement, St. Albans bowed to the group before he took a firm grasp of one of her gloved hands and placed it upon his forearm. "Maybury," he dismissed in a hard voice before leading Lily back toward the dance floor.

Lily glanced at St. Albans, a heaviness forming in her chest at the coldness she could see in his austere withdrawn expression. She could also feel how rigid his arm was beneath her gloved hand. The tension in the rest of his body was also discernable in the stiff manner in which he held himself as the people who had the misfortune to be in his way quickly moved aside.

He appeared to Lily as Moses must have when he took his people through the parted Red Sea!

“I really do not care to dance again so soon.” Lily spoke softly enough so that only St. Albans could hear her at the same time as she heard the hiss of the gossip beginning again in whispers behind them.

He turned to look down the length of his aristocratic nose at her. Whatever he read from her expression caused him to veer slightly to the right and toward the French doors leading outside and onto the terrace that ran the length of the garden at the back of Landers House.

“We cannot go outside together either,” Lily hissed.

“I beg to differ.” St. Albans nodded acknowledgment to a footman as he opened one of the doors for them. “After you,” he prompted Lily.

She gave a desperate glance at the other people now gathered together in groups in the ballroom, talking in hushed whispers.

The quartet of musicians was only playing softly.

Her group of friends were all watching in wide-eyed wonder. Except Georgiana, who was, as usual, scowling her displeasure with the world, rather than only Lily.

Without exception, all the ladies and gentlemen present were openly staring at them.

Her mother’s brows were raised so high in shock, they almost touched her hairline.

But it was the avaricious expression Lily so easily read on her father’s face that caused her to purposefully remove her hand from St. Albans’s forearm. “I am afraid I

must refuse your generous offer. I have a headache and had already decided to take my leave before you arrived.” She curtsied her indication of leaving him.

She could not, would not, be a party to any machinations her father might conceive in regard to the unexpected interest St. Albans was showing in her this evening by taking her out onto the terrace.

The whole idea of that happening made Lily feel as if she might burst into tears if she did not immediately escape the gawping speculation of her family and other members of the ton.

When she looked up from curtsying, it was to find the duke’s pale blue eyes narrowed intently on what Lily was sure must be the paleness of her cheeks.

That questioning gaze remained on her for several long seconds before St. Albans nodded abruptly. “If you insist upon leaving, then I am equally insistent on being the one to escort you back to Truro House.”

“No!” Lily protested loudly enough that she was immediately aware of the increased speculation of the others in the room. “You cannot take me home,” she muttered fiercely. “We both know it would be scandalous for you to do so.”

St. Albans gave a dismissive snort. “My dear girl, I can, and invariably do, behave exactly as I please.”

“And no doubt you do so without fear of recrimination, but I am a far less important mortal than the Duke of St. Albans,” she stated firmly. “As such, I am forced to follow certain rules set by Society.”

He scowled. “I am sure you must agree that the two of us need to talk.”

Because this man had kissed her.

Because Lily had kissed him.

“Even if we do, it does not need to happen now,” she insisted.

“Then when?”

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“I have no idea.” Her gaze avoided meeting his before she turned to make her way purposefully through the crowded ballroom toward where she might make her escape through the open double doors out into the hallway.

Once outside, she made her way to the room where the ladies’ and gentleman’s cloaks had been placed upon their arrival. Only to find, after retrieving her cloak and turning to leave, that Gabriel had followed her and now stood in that room with her.

That the two of them were completely alone together in a house that was crowded with the rest of the Landers’s guests.

Dear God, did this man have no sense of propriety?

No hint of self-preservation that ensured he remained free from the traps often set by matchmaking parents?

Or was St. Albans simply so arrogant in regard to no one daring to question his behavior that he really could choose to behave exactly as he pleased?

Even if the latter were true, as Lily had already pointed out, that license did not apply to her own behavior. Which she already knew was going to be questioned by everyone. Some, like her parents and close friends, would do so to her face. Others would prefer to gossip and speculate outside of her hearing.

“Would you please step aside?” she requested when Gabriel remained standing in front of the open doorway.

His boot-clad feet remained firmly in place. “The alliance you made a week ago in my library with my daughter and your other friends means that you should not have been dancing with Maybury when I arrived,” he stated in a hard voice.

Lily felt the warmth of anger enter her cheeks. “We all like to dance, and at no time during our discussion did any of us state we would refuse to dance with a gentleman.”

A nerve pulsed in the duke’s clenched jaw. “So, it is permissible to dance with them, but not to marry them?”

“Yes.”

“Does that mean, as I suggested might be the case and which you denied at the time, that it is also permissible to fuck them without marrying them too?”

Lily gasped at what she believed to be the duke’s deliberate attempt to shock her with this vulgarity. The flintiness she discerned in his scathing gaze and the derisive twist of his lips confirmed as much.

Quite what she would have said in answer to his crudeness, Lily had no idea, because the arrival of another gentleman in the open doorway prevented her from saying anything further.

“I suggest you take advantage of my arrival and leave us, Lady Tremayne,” Lucien Lyons, the Duke of Hellsmere, invited with a gentle smile.

Lily gave one last pained glance in Gabriel’s direction before brushing past both gentlemen as she rushed out into the hallway.

She did not breathe easily again until she was safely seated inside the family carriage and on her way home to Truro House.

No doubt her escape was only fleeting, and the earl and countess, along with her brothers and their wives, who were also attending the Landers' ball, would all have questions for Lily to answer.

At this particular moment, Lily had no interest in what questions they might ask. Her thoughts were all centered upon escaping the outrageous behavior of the Duke of St. Albans.

The same man she had found herself thinking of constantly during the week of his absence.

Wondering how he would behave toward her when they saw each other again.

She now had her answer to that question.

Gabriel could not have shown her, told her, in any more candid terms, how much contempt he now held her in.

CHAPTER SIX

"You were wrong in your assessment of the situation a week ago, St. Albans," Hellsmere drawled. "The subject of Lady Tremayne has now become one of great interest to me," he added softly.

The two gentlemen had followed Lily outside. Gabriel, because he wished to reassure himself that she had departed safely in the Truro carriage. Hellsmere, because... Well, Hellsmere invariably had his own reasons and held his own counsel on most things he did and said.

"I believe I have warned you of how unwise it would be for you to speak of that lady again," Gabriel grated, waiting until Lily's carriage had completely disappeared

before turning to look at the other man.

“I am simply curious regarding the depth of your...zeal in pursuing her,” Hellsmere voiced carefully.

Gabriel snorted. “It is so zealous that I have been away from town this past week! A week during which I worked Jacobson so tirelessly, he might never forgive me,” he added with self-derision.

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“And the moment you returned to London, you came to a ball, when you never attend balls. A ball at which you no doubt knew, as your daughter was to be here with your aunt to chaperone her, that her good friend Lily Tremayne would also be in attendance.”

Gabriel’s eyes narrowed. “I am curious as to what you are doing here, when you never attend balls either.”

Hellsmere grimaced. “I called at St. Albans House earlier this evening. Imagine my surprise when your butler informed me you had accompanied Chloe and her great-aunt to the Landers’s ball.”

Gabriel had no wish to imagine any such thing. “What my butler would not have been able to tell you is that I parted from Jacobson as soon as we returned to London so that I could spend two hours reporting my findings to Prinny. I was only able to return to my home late this afternoon.”

“Is Brinton innocent or guilty of any wrongdoing?”

“Innocent.” A nerve pulsed in Gabriel’s jaw. “Perhaps you would now like to tell me why, after learning I was not at home when you called, you then felt it necessary to seek me out here?”

The other man shrugged. “I was curious about your sudden interest in attending one of the balls you have always claimed you abhor. I realized the reason the moment I entered the ballroom and saw you conversing, rather heatedly, I might add, with Lily Tremayne.”

Gabriel tensed. “Your point being?” he challenged.

“My point being that by singling her out in that way, you are making her an object of speculation, possibly ridicule, regarding what the Duke of St. Albans’s intentions might be toward her.”

“I do not have any intentions toward her.” Gabriel felt a dark scowl creasing his brow.

“No?”

“No!”

Hellsmere grimaced. “Then you are lying to yourself as well as to me.”

Gabriel’s hands clenched into fists. “Men have been called out for less.”

“And you are perfectly at liberty to do so if you feel the situation warrants it,” his friend invited calmly. “I will enjoy kicking your arse in both the boxing ring and with sword.”

“And I will outshoot you every time.”

“Indeed.” The other man nodded. “But as I am speaking out of concern for both you and Lady Tremayne, I am trusting none of those scenarios will prove necessary.”

“That will depend upon the reason for you having voiced that ‘concern.’”

Hellsmere sighed. “I am worried in case this situation should in any way be similar to the one involving Clara.”

Gabriel stilled. He and Hellsmere had known each other for almost three decades. As children, then as youths, and now as adults. Which was why Hellsmere was fully aware of Gabriel's infatuation with the dairy maid all those years ago. The other man also knew of the violent outcome of that situation.

Hellsmere grimaced at Gabriel's continued silence. "Lily is obviously a different sort of woman to the dairy maid."

"I should hope so."

The other man nodded. "From what I observed of Lady Tremayne's blushes a week ago—also unlike Clara, who never blushed because she preferred the rougher company of stable boys—it would seem Lady Tremayne reciprocates the attraction you feel toward her."

Lord, Gabriel hoped that was the case! "Your point being?"

"That I should not like that lady to become in any way...alarmed by the depth of your interest in her."

Gabriel gave a humorless chuckle before sobering. "You are correct in saying that Lily is nothing like Clara. She is the opposite to her in looks and is in every way a lady. But she is also an outspoken one. Which is why I have absolutely no doubt that Lily will bluntly tell me when or if she wishes any interest in her on my part to cease." She certainly seemed to have no trouble speaking her mind to him on other subjects.

The other man studied him for several long moments before nodding. "Very well." He brightened. "Shall we now depart this hellish ball and instead enjoy a bottle of brandy together at our club?"

"An excellent idea," Gabriel agreed.

In truth, Gabriel was relieved that, for now, the subject of Lily had been dropped.

By Hellsmere, at least.

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Gabriel spent the rest of the evening inwardly trying to formulate a plan in which he might arrange to spend more time with Lily, not less.

“Ah, Lily, now that you have decided to grace me with your presence, we shall immediately discuss the reason why the Duke of St. Albans should have singled you out for his attention at the ball yesterday evening.” Lily’s mother eyed her reprovingly after she dismissed the attending footman with a wave of her hand. She waited until he had left the room before continuing. “Neither your father nor I, indeed none of our family, can withstand the possibility of you being involved in an even more scandalous situation than your sister was two years ago. We only managed it then, and since, because her lover was only a secretary and we, as a family, have been able to maintain secrecy on the subject. The same would not be possible if you were to become involved with a man as prestigious as the Duke of St. Albans.”

“There will be no scandal, Mama,” Lily assured calmly. “And once I have chosen the fruit for my breakfast and am sat at the table, we shall discuss any subject you wish.”

She had successfully avoided answering her mother’s curiosity the evening before.

She had done so when, after the countess returned from the Landers’s ball, she had come directly, and no doubt purposefully, to Lily’s bedchamber and Lily had pretended to be asleep. After several frustrated attempts to wake her, the muttering countess had departed to her own bedchamber for the night.

Lily had decided it would be for the best if she allayed her mother’s frustrations as soon as possible this morning. Goodness knows she knew how relentless her mother could be when she was set on a subject.

Which was why, instead of asking for a breakfast tray to be brought up to her bedchamber, as Lily would have preferred, she had instead come down to eat as soon as she had washed and was dressed for the day ahead.

As expected, her father had already left to go about his daily business, whatever that might be, leaving Lily and her mother to breakfast alone together in the small family dining room.

Lily duly collected the selection of diced fruits before sitting opposite her mother. She smiled as the footman returned with a fresh pot of tea. He poured her a cup before placing the pot in the center of the table and once again leaving the room after a dismissive nod from the countess.

Once they were alone again, Lily knew she could no longer delay answering her impatiently waiting mother. “The duke wished to talk to me concerning his need to choose the material and design for a new gown he would like to give Chloe on her nineteenth birthday in two weeks’ time.”

Lily had been rather proud of herself, as she lay in bed the previous evening, for having thought up this excuse for Gabriel’s conversation with her. Having made that decision, Lily had fallen into what had unfortunately been a restless night’s sleep.

How could it be any other when she could not stop thinking of the hunger in Gabriel’s eyes as he attempted to coax her out onto the terrace with him? A hunger which had left Lily in no doubt of his desire to kiss her again.

Lily would have willingly allowed him to do so, would have enjoyed kissing him back. If they had not been at an event such as a ball, where so many eyes and ears of Society had already been concentrated in their direction.

Her mother now tutted her disappointment in that answer. “Is that the only reason?”

Lily nodded. “Obviously, he should not have done so where our talking together was sure to attract interest. But as he so rarely chooses to be seen in public, I believe he must have decided to make a special effort to converse with me when the opportunity arose.”

“Oh.” Her mother’s disappointment deepened. “Your father had hoped...”

“What?” Lily gave a derisive laugh. “Surely Papa did not think, even for a moment, that a wealthy and toplofty gentleman such as the Duke of St. Albans would ever be interested in someone like me?”

“You are the daughter of an earl,” her mother protested.

“A poor one.”

“That is not publicly known.”

Lily did not totally agree on that point, but she was not about to say so. Let her mother continue to live in her fantasy world, if that was what she chose to do. “I am not pretty enough to attract such a man as St. Albans.”

“You think far too little of yourself, Lily,” her mother reproved sharply.

Which was ironic, considering her mother was the one who constantly complained that Lily's looks were such that her French maid could only ever manage to make her appear “tolerably pretty.” The countess had also been known to claim that no effort on the part of Lily’s maid would ever succeed in presenting her as a true beauty.

Her mother usually added that Lily’s dark hair, olive complexion, and strange pale green eyes were not in the least fashionable and would never win her a husband.

The truth was, this was Lily's third Season, not her first, all without a suitable offer of marriage having been made. She was the daughter of an earl, after all, even if he was an impoverished one, and her parents did not believe that a simple Mr. or Lord would do as a husband for her. This lack of a betrothal only added to the countess's vitriol on the subject.

Lily had inherited her looks and coloring from her father rather than her mother, the countess being a woman who was fashionably fair-haired and blue-eyed. Hazel was similarly fair-haired and blue-eyed, and even at sixteen had been hauntingly beautiful.

It was their mother's fair beauty which had no doubt briefly captured the Earl of Truro's attention all those years ago, enough so that he had offered her marriage and they had produced four children together.

But the countess's looks were now marred by the visible lines upon her forehead as well as beside her eyes and mouth. Formed over the years, Lily believed, by her mother's deep unhappiness within her marriage.

Whatever the reason, the countess's frustration with her lot in life was such that she often vented those feelings as criticism of her unmarried daughter.

It was a dissatisfaction with life which Lily was determined she would not emulate.

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Primarily by refusing to marry at all and so not allowing herself to be forced to suffer the disappointment of living with such unhappiness.

“What were you talking to Lily about so earnestly at the ball yesterday evening?” Chloe prompted as she and Gabriel enjoyed breakfast together. “It caused quite the scandal, you know.”

Gabriel tapped his daughter playfully on the nose. “A gentleman must be allowed to keep some secrets from his daughter.”

Chloe’s eyes widened. “A secret? Oh, do please tell me, Papa.” She clapped her hands together in her excitement.

Gabriel might have done so if he had any idea what that secret was!

But he freely admitted, to himself at least, that he had no idea what he was talking about. It was his intention to spend the morning at the boxing salon, then fencing at his club and practicing with his sword—possibly as a reaction to Hellsmere’s claim to outdo him in both those skills—in the hope that he would be so thoroughly exhausted in both body and mind later today that he might actually be able to sleep tonight.

A mind which, the previous night, no matter how much Gabriel tried to divert it, had refused to stop thinking of Lily. Of wanting to be with her again. It refused to do so still.

“I know what it is!” Chloe announced triumphantly. “You and Lily are conspiring to arrange a surprise for my birthday in two weeks’ time.”

Gabriel wished that was the case. He would gladly take any situation that began with “you and Lily.” But with no other explanation in his mind, Chloe’s explanation would do as well as any other. It would also, he hoped, be reason enough for him to see Lily again.

He arched a mocking brow. “Is the purchase of a new gown not present enough?”

Chloe giggled. “Stop teasing me, Papa!”

“I will if you agree to cease asking me questions on the matter,” he encouraged affectionately.

Chloe beamed. “Lily thinks of the best birthday surprises!”

“She does...?” Gabriel prompted curiously.

“Oh yes. Last year, for Rose’s birthday, she arranged for us all to go on a picnic at Vauxhall Gardens. On Georgiana’s birthday, we all attended the theater and sat in the Earl of Truro’s box. On Juliet’s birthday, we visited the animals at a private zoo. Juliet is particularly fond of wild animals.”

“Yes, yes,” Gabriel dismissed, having heard enough of the treats Lily had arranged for the benefit of others. Treats, he noted, which would not have cost her money but were nonetheless both thoughtful and kindly tailored to the recipient. “What surprise did you all give Lily for her birthday?”

“We—” Chloe broke off with a frown. “Now that you mention it, I do not believe we gave her anything.” She winced. “Her birthday is in December, you see, and so we were all with our individual families rather than together.”

This lack of consideration for Lily made Gabriel once again wish that he could

mention Chloe's thoughtless excitement the previous week regarding the ordering of her new gown. But to do so would reveal that he had been in the library at the same time as the group of young ladies, that he had heard all they had to say on the subject of marriage.

So he must remain silent on the subject of Chloe's new gown, but that did not mean he had to remain silent regarding this other situation. "Chloe, I cannot tell you how disappointed I am to learn that none of you have been as generous a friend to Lily as she obviously has been in the past, and continues to be now, to all of you." A generosity, now that Gabriel was aware of it, he fully intended to return on Chloe's behalf.

He would call upon his lawyer today before doing anything else, with the intention of asking Harold Atherton to check deeper into the financial situation of the Earl of Truro.

Gabriel did not care about the lack of funds in the earl and countess's account. But he intensely disliked Lily having to go without those other frivolous pleasures in life that her friends so easily enjoyed. Both Mariah and Chloe had told him of the simple joy of being able to choose and own a new gown.

Chloe looked suitably chastened. "I am sorry, Papa."

He gave her a stern look. "It is not me you should be apologizing to."

"No," she acknowledged sadly. "I realize now that we have all of us behaved very selfishly."

He nodded. "Then might I suggest you discuss this situation with your other friends and decide how you might all do something this year to return Lily's generosity."

“Of course, Papa.” His daughter eyed him curiously beneath her lashes. “Why do you sometimes call her Lady Tremayne and at others only Lily?”

Gabriel cursed under his breath at his lack of caution when speaking of Lily. Hellsmere’s accusation had been a correct one, in that Gabriel really was not adept at hiding his interest in that particular young lady. Even from his own daughter.

“I am of an older generation to all of you, and so might do as I wish,” he teased.

“You are not that old, Papa,” Chloe protested with affection.

“Thank you for that.” He gave a derisive smile. “But the real reason is that I thought you would prefer it if I were not so formal toward someone of whom you are obviously deeply fond,” he excused. “When I forget to do that, I call her Lady Tremayne.”

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Inwardly, I now refer to her, always, as my Lily, Gabriel admitted to himself.

Thankfully, he was easily able to divert Chloe into talking about her plans for the rest of the day rather than continuing to pursue the subject of Lily Tremayne.

Meanwhile, it was Gabriel's hope, now that Chloe had suggested it, that he might forgo the boxing salon as well as practicing with sword and rapier in order to use the excuse of organizing Chloe's birthday surprise to be with Lily again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"His Grace, the Duke of St. Albans," the Truros' butler announced before ushering Gabriel into a salon where the furnishings and fabrics were decorated primarily in a pale blue and white.

They were not colors that complemented the dark coloring and green gown of the youngest of the two ladies present, both having risen to their feet when he entered the room.

A glance in Lily's direction showed him her hands were tightly clasped in front of her as she stood near the window but did not speak.

"How very kind it is of you to call upon us, Your Grace." Lily's mother, the second lady present, felt no such inhibition as she gushed her greeting at the same time as she curtsied low.

Allowing Gabriel to realize that the décor in the room was a much kinder background

to that lady's fair coloring, blue eyes, and blue gown.

"I assume you have come here so that you might talk to Lily again regarding the surprise gift for your daughter's birthday?" the countess prompted lightly.

Gabriel was rendered speechless by the realization that Lily must have chosen to use the very same excuse to her mother as he had to Chloe as a way of explaining away their private conversation together the previous evening.

A sign, perhaps?

That the two of them thought alike.

Although that affinity was not echoed in the alarm he now saw in Lily's pleading gaze. No doubt a plea for him to endorse that explanation.

"It really was very naughty of you to compromise Lily that way at yesterday's ball, simply so that you might discuss her assisting you in the choice of your daughter's new gown," the countess added coyly. "I am sure that many of the other guests will have thought—"

"I was not compromised, Mama," Lily said as she stepped forward, no doubt in the hope of preventing her mother from adding to that embarrassing comment. "My acquaintance with the duke is only that of his being the father of one of my closest friends. Which, as Chloe is my peer, must mean the duke is old enough to bemyfather."

"Not unless he was very precocious in his youth," the countess reproved her daughter.

There was a flirtatious smile upon the older woman's lips to accompany the rebuke.

But Gabriel didn't see any warmth evident in her hard blue eyes.

Gabriel had given an inner wince at hearing his age and, in turn, his eligibility, in Lily's eyes, being dealt with so dismissively by the young woman he couldn't stop thinking about and in whose presence his cock had once again hardened to an aching throb the minute he entered the room and saw her again.

Confirming, in case he had ever thought it might be otherwise, that his desire for Lily was as strong as ever.

"I believe I was a very precocious youth, ma'am," he drawled in answer to the older woman. "But in order for me to be Lily's father, the two of us would have needed to have been intimately acquainted twenty-one years ago, and I do not believe that to have been the case."

The countess gave a coy and girlish giggle, much like the one Chloe, almost thirty years her junior, had given at the breakfast table this morning.

"No, I do not believe we were," she confirmed. "I am, of course, slightly older than you, but I am sure I would have remembered if we had met when we were both young and single," she added with a coquettish smile.

Gabriel maintained his outer expression of polite interest. But, inwardly, he was horrified at the thought that, even as a youth, he might ever have flirted with this obnoxious woman.

Not that he thought it was possible. He had married Mariah when he was eighteen, and Chloe had been born a year later. At the time, the countess already had three young children in the nursery, two boys and a girl, that baby girl being Lily. Which meant the countess was at least ten years his senior, and not the year or two she was now trying to imply.

Gabriel had met the countess several times twenty years ago, usually when he accompanied Mariah to a social event she had voiced a wish to attend. But even then, he had never particularly cared for the older woman's obviously avaricious and emptyheaded behavior. A trait her daughter had not inherited, but which seemed to have intensified in the countess if her current flirtatious manner toward him was any indication.

Oh, the countess was still pretty enough. But those hard blue eyes and the lines of dissatisfaction visible beside her eyes and mouth revealed her true nature. As well as making her appear much older than the possible late forties Gabriel guessed to be her true age.

"As would I," he now answered her politely before straightening. "I trust, as your daughter is to be of assistance to me in the choosing of Chloe's new gown, that you and Truro will give me permission to also purchase a new gown for Lily—"

"No!"

"Oh, I do not think—"

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“—as a thank-you for helping me,” Gabriel finished firmly over the top of Lily’s single-word protest and the countess’s hesitant refusal. “I assure you, I mean no impropriety by suggesting it.”

Lily realized, by the bizarre turn this conversation had now taken, that she had delayed far too long in recovering her wits after their butler had announced the Duke of St. Albans’s arrival, followed by his immediately entering the salon.

Long enough for her mother to behave as a simpering and flirtatious ninny. Behavior which did not suit the often acerbic and obviously middle-aged countess in the slightest.

Lily’s delay had also allowed Gabriel to take complete control of the conversation before making this outrageous request.

The Duke of St. Albans could not, most assuredly couldnot, buy her a new gown!

It would be scandalous for him to do so under any circumstances but even more so after they had been seen talking alone together the previous evening.

She could not allow—

“After all, I am old enough to be Lily’s father,” he now added with a pointed glance in Lily’s direction.

She gave him a glowering one back. “I will happily accompany you on a visit to the seamstress to help you choose the material for Chloe’s new birthday gown.” There

was much Lily would like to say to this arrogant duke in private! “But purchasing a second gown for me as a thank-you for that assistance is unnecessary.”

“I disagree,” he stated haughtily.

“You—”

“I am afraid there is no more time for us to argue the point,” St. Albans told her after a glance at his pocket watch. “The seamstress is expecting us to arrive within the next fifteen minutes.”

He sounded so sincere, Lily realized, when in reality they both knew there was no reason for her to accompany him to a seamstress. Indeed, Lily very much doubted there was an appointment with a seamstress to attend.

Lily put aside questioning the real reason for his visit in favor of inwardly debating how odd it was they had both chosen the purchase of Chloe’s new gown as the explanation for their conversation the previous evening.

Even odder that Gabriel now wished to whisk her away from her home.

“You should have stated you were in a rush to leave when you arrived, St. Albans,” the countess snapped. “Lily must be accompanied by her maid, of course—”

“I drove here in my phaeton, I am afraid,” St. Albans dismissed unapologetically.

“A vehicle only seats two people comfortably.” The countess sounded scandalized.

“My point exactly, Countess.” The duke gave a slight bow of acknowledgment.

“Lily’s maid might travel up front with the driver, I suppose,” the older woman said

distractedly.

“I prefer to drive myself, so I did not have it designed with a seat at the front.” St. Albans shot that suggestion down too.

“I suppose I could—”

“We would all be made very uncomfortable if you were to accompany us,” the duke warned.

“Yes, of course.” Lily’s mother looked deeply irritated by this turn of events. “I am not sure it is seemly for Lily to be alone in a carriage with you.”

“It is a very small and open carriage, my lady,” he reminded.

“I really cannot understand why you would have chosen to drive here today in such an unsuitable vehicle,” the countess bit out her irritation with the situation.

He shrugged. “It is a pleasant day, and I am sure Lily will be warm enough if she wears her winter cloak. Unless you think me an unsuitable chaperone for her?” he challenged.

Lily bit her bottom lip to stop herself from bursting out laughing at how neatly St. Albans had turned the tables on her mother.

Confirming for Lily that there was far more to the duke than he allowed the majority of the ton to see. Well, of course there was. He would not have the ear of the Prince Regent nor have avoided the matchmaking mothers for so many years if he were not ruthlessly intelligent.

Lily’s mother did not have either of those attributes.

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“You will act as chaperone?” the countess said uncertainly.

“But of course,” the duke confirmed. “I assure you that while she is in my company, I will not allow Lily to be accosted by any young gentleman, unsuitable or otherwise.”

“But what of yourself?”

“I believe we are all agreed that I am not a young gentleman.”

“This is a very strange situation,” the countess stated crossly. “But I suppose I must give my permission if you are not to be late for your appointment,” she added after St. Albans had given another impatient glance at his pocket watch.

Lily didn’t understand Gabriel’s choice of carriage either or why he should go to such lengths to have her accompany him.

But she was prepared to do the latter in order to have her questions answered.

She waited only long enough for them to be seated side by side in the phaeton and the duke had instructed the horses to pull away from Truro House before making her thoughts known. “What are you about, Your Grace?”

“Gabriel,” he corrected huskily. “And what I am ‘about’ is ensuring we are able to spend some time alone together. That I might have you to myself for the rest of the afternoon.” His voice warmed at the statement.

Lily gave him a wary glance. “Why would you wish to do that?”

“Would you like me to tell you or show you?”

Lily eyed him uncertainly. “I am afraid I do not understand... Oh!” she gasped when Gabriel reached out to place one of her gloved hands against the hot and very sizeable bulge inside his pantaloons. She swallowed. “You are aroused.” Her cheeks burned with that knowledge as she hastily removed her hand to tightly clasp her reticule.

“It is worse than that, I am afraid,” he confirmed ruefully. “I have been in this uncomfortable condition every time thoughts of you have intruded into my previously peaceful existence—which has been often—since the day I kissed you in my library.”

Which, Lily calculated, was nine days ago. “It does not sound a very pleasant state to be in.”

“It is not,” he confirmed grimly.

Lily frowned. “What do you expect me to do about it?”

“That is the subject of the conversation I should like us to have this afternoon.”

“Conversation?” she repeated skeptically.

“Initially, yes.”

“And once the initial conversation is over?”

He glanced at her, the heat evident in the pale blue eyes that were usually flinty with disapproval. “That will depend upon you.”

Lily’s cheeks warmed. “And where is this ‘initial conversation’ to take place?”

“I have arranged a private room for us, so that we might talk privately, with the lady in charge of a house of the demimonde. It is a far from perfect arrangement,” he acknowledged after Lily gave another shocked gasp. “But for the moment, it is the only place I can think of where we might be alone together and so avoid having a member of our respective families interrupt us. Is that arrangement acceptable to you?”

Lily knew the houses of the demimonde were where ladies who were not part of Society, despite some of them being well-born but usually outside of marriage, entertained the gentlemen of the ton. For Gabriel to be so well acquainted with the lady who ran one of those houses must mean that he had—still did?—visit one or possibly more of the ladies who resided there.

Lily was curious to see inside such a house, at the same time as she did not wish to meet or see any of the ladies Gabriel had intimate relations with. After all, he had told her that he had not remained celibate since his wife died.

“I have not visited such a house, or anyone inside one, for several years. My name alone was enough to secure our privacy.” Gabriel seemed to guess some of her thoughts. “I would not take you there now if I had any other choice. If we both agree to continue to explore our...friendship, I will find somewhere more suitable for us to meet in future.”

Lily wondered what that even meant.

Did she and Gabriel have a future? And if so, what sort of future was it?

Lily’s curiosity was now such that she found she could not refuse him outright, as she knew she should. “And if I refuse to accompany you?”

He drew in a deep breath before slowly releasing it again. “Then the conversation

will not take place, and we will simply go about our lives as if none of this had ever happened.”

Was that what Lily wanted?

To never know what Gabriel, the imposing Duke of St. Albans, wished to say to her?

What he wanted from her?

More importantly, what she might be willing to give him?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Gabriel regretted bringing Lily to the large house in the quiet London Street the moment the two of them stepped into the narrow hallway after entering through the back of the house.

They had been admitted by the security guard once Gabriel had ensured his carriage was safely in the hands of the groom who had run out from the stables.

There was no sign inside the house of the scantily dressed ladies who lived here, mainly because it was the middle of the afternoon. He knew that was because most of them would be enjoying a well-earned sleep after going to bed in the early hours of this morning.

But there was still an odor of smoke and alcohol from the entertainments the evening before, when the house would have been alive with music and the laughter of half-dressed and beautiful women.

Gabriel had arranged with the hostess that the only person visible during their visit

would be the security guard, who would show them to a private room.

Seen in daylight, their surroundings were far from salubrious, and Gabriel realized belatedly what a totally unacceptable establishment it was to bring a lady. To have brought Lily.

He reached out to grasp her arm and halt their progress down the hallway. "It was a mistake to bring you here."

"Did you mean me any disrespect by doing so?"

"No!" he protested. "Absolutely not," he added in a softer voice. "I simply wished to be alone with you."

Lily nodded. "Then you should know that, unorthodox as it is, this is undoubtedly the most excitement I have ever experienced in my life!" Her eyes glowed and her cheeks were flushed as her gaze darted everywhere at once. Presumably so that she did not miss seeing a single feature of the establishment.

Gabriel could feel a smile curving his own lips as he took in her unfiltered reaction to the novelty of their surroundings. "You do not wish to leave?"

"Certainly not!"

"Wine and refreshments have been set out for you in the parlor, Your Grace," the guard informed them as he showed them into the private sitting room Gabriel had requested in a letter. The madam of the house had confirmed by return that such a room would be made available to him, along with the refreshments.

"Thank you." Gabriel dismissed the other man.

Lily turned once the guard had left and the door closed behind him. “You can have no idea how wonderful it is for me to be allowed to see something as scandalous as this residence when my life is usually so narrow and regimented into what is believed to be proper.”

A spontaneous reaction, Gabriel hoped, which might make Lily open to the suggestion he was about to make.

A suggestion he knew to be highly improper, but the intensity of his desire for Lily gave him little choice but to at least make it to her. If her answer was no, then he would have that same lack of choice when accepting her answer.

Gabriel literally felt as if he was going insane with how deep his need was to kiss Lily again. To caress and make love to her.

His cock was growing sore from how many times a day he gripped it in his hand and pumped it to completion. Only for that disobedient member to plump back into arousal again mere minutes later.

Gabriel now found it impossible to think of anything or anyone but Lily.

“So.” She turned to him now. “What is the subject of this conversation you wish to have with me?”

Gabriel had grown to admire Lily’s straightforwardness since they became better acquainted. But he now wished it were not quite so forward as this.

He drew in a deep breath before speaking. “I would like the opportunity to show you what a waste it would be if you keep to your decision to remain indifferent to men and the physical enjoyment you might find together.”

Lily eyed him skeptically. “You have seen my mother. Would you really wish me to suffer the same deep dissatisfaction she feels for her life?”

Gabriel shook his head. “That will not happen to you.”

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“You sound very sure of that.”

“Because you are not the same woman as your mother,” he chose his words carefully.

“In what way do I differ from her?”

Gabriel studied Lily for several seconds before giving a derisive smile. “I believe you are fully aware of the true nature of the countess and that you are just toying with me by pretending you do not.”

“Only a little.” She chuckled before sobering. “I freely admit that it is the example of my mother’s and two sisters-in-law’s deep unhappiness, along with knowledge of the mistresses my father and brothers choose to keep and whom the ladies of my family choose to ignore, that is one of the driving forces behind my decision not to marry. I have no wish to be treated with that same indifference and disdain by my own husband.”

Gabriel’s hands clenched at his sides at the thought of any man treating Lily so shabbily. He would gladly beat to a pulp any man who so much as dared to dishonor her in such a humiliating manner.

“Not all men behave like those in your family. For instance, I was never unfaithful to my own wife.”

“You were barely married a year!”

“That is true,” he allowed. “But I would never have dishonored Mariah in such a

disrespectful way, no matter how long we were together.”

Lily's eyes narrowed. “Is that another way of saying you would have used more discretion when it came to hiding your liaisons?”

He glared. “I am saying there would not have been any liaisons.”

Her gaze remained skeptical. “From what I have observed, all gentlemen seek...physical satisfaction outside of their marriage. More so once the heir has been secured.”

Unfortunately, Gabriel also knew this to be true. At least as far as the arranged marriages in Society were concerned. He did know of some that were a love match, but there were far fewer of them than there were those that were forged for the benefit of one partner or the other. Money or prestige, or both, being the main reasons.

“Then it is as well I am not about to propose marriage,” he bit out angrily, and instantly had reason to regret his temper when he saw the way Lily flinched. “I am fully aware that I am too old, and possibly too jaded, to be of any serious interest to a beautiful young lady such as yourself,” he reasoned in a softer voice.

Lily could see Gabriel really believed that to be true.

Whereas she knew it to be absolute nonsense.

Not just in regard to herself, but to any of the women in Society, most of whom Lily had watched eyeing him covetously, no matter what their age. Not just for his title and wealth, but for the powerfully attractive man that he was.

Lily had known and recognized that force of attraction from the moment she first saw him the previous year. Now that she'd had opportunity to spend more time in his

company, she felt herself falling more in love with him every single day.

Until nine days ago, she believed she had felt a futile infatuation toward him. But talking with Gabriel, being kissed by him, had turned that infatuation into a full-blown love so big and so strong, the emotion now filled her heart to overflowing.

It was a love Lily could never, would never, allow Gabriel to see. That depth of humiliation was something Lily would never recover from.

“But I also know,” Gabriel continued, “that I have other useful attributes, primarily experience instead of youth, to offer a young lady such as yourself.”

She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin until her own gaze was able to steadily meet his. “What are you suggesting, Your Grace?”

“An exchange.”

Her brows rose. “I do not believe I possess anything that could be of the least interest to you.”

“You are wrong. You possess everything I have wanted since the moment I kissed you.”

Lily eyed him warily. “Such as?”

“Such as an exchange of your beauty and desire for knowledge, set against the experience and pleasure I would like to show you. Please do not insult me by attempting to say you do not feel that same pull of passion toward me,” he advised gently. “I may not have any recent...liaisons to guide me, but I believe I am still capable of telling whether or not a woman returns my desire for her.”

As he had now admitted to knowing that Lily desired him.

Curiosity won out over her feelings of embarrassment. “So, you propose offering me the benefit of your experience in the giving and receiving of physical pleasure so that I might fully appreciate that the marriage bed does not need to be all duty but can also be enjoyable? So that I might persuade my friends, including Chloe, into that same realization?”

“It would be very easy for me to agree to that being my only reason.”

“Is it not?”

“No,” he acknowledged. “The truth is, I desire you, and whilst it is to be hoped Chloe will eventually come to her senses in this matter, I do not give a damn what decision your other friends choose to make for their own future. My offer of being your tutor, your lover, in exchange for your willingness to open yourself to the pleasure I can show you, is for you alone.”

“But that, in turn, would seem to narrow that pleasure to being only with you rather than a future husband.”

Gabriel’s jaw tightened. “With your permission, I will also teach you ways in which you might secure his interest in you. Hopefully, that, in turn, will secure happiness in your marriage bed.”

“This all seems to be a very huge leap in our acquaintance when I do not believe you were even fully aware of my existence until just over a week ago,” she scoffed.

“That is partly true,” he conceded. “I did not know you personally, but I assure you I knew the names and backgrounds of all of Chloe’s friends.” He hesitated. “I employ the services of a man who provides me with such information on anyone Chloe comes into contact with.”

Lily reared back. “You had someone check into my background? Intome?”

Gabriel sighed. “I have just told you I do the same to everyone my daughter knows or spends time with.”

“Without that person’s knowledge or consent,” she accused.

He winced. “Chloe is far too precious to me to allow any danger to come anywhere near her.”

“You thought I might have been a danger to her?” she challenged.

“I think the same of everyone until proven otherwise.”

Lily drew in a deep breath. “If you had my family investigated, then you must know of my father’s...depleted fortune?” As she had suspected some in Society might.

“Yes.”

“And the...circumstances of my sister’s abrupt departure from our home?”

“Yes.”

Lily winced. “And?”

He eyed her quizzically. “I do not understand...?”

“Do you not consider either or both of those things to be detrimental to my associating with Chloe?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because you are not your father, your mother, your sister, nor your brothers,” he snapped. “Your father is incompetent and has been, and still is, derelict in providing

for his family. Your brothers have chosen to behave as irresponsibly as he does. Your mother is selfish and greedy. Your sister has chosen her own path, away from that family. But you are not like any of them, and none of those things is a reflection upon you or your suitability as a friend for Chloe. Or my wish to enjoy physical pleasure with you,” he added huskily.

“And is it your intention to offer all of Chloe’s friends within the Spinsters’ Alliance this same pleasure so that they might also be convinced of how wrong they are?” she taunted to hide her dislike of even thinking of such a possibility.

“Absolutely not!” he disclaimed, his expression one of horror.

Lily shook her head. “Why have you singled me out for your attentions?”

“I have already told you it is because I desire you.”

“And is hearing your voice that passing whim really enough for me to discard all sensibility and caution?”

“It is not a passing whim. It is a burning need to possess, to take, to own you,” he grated through clenched teeth. “And I promise I will make it enough for both of us.”

Lily studied his handsome face for several long seconds. Gabriel’s expression was fierce, his eyes gleaming with that same fire. As if compelling, rather than cajoling her, into accepting his offer of intimacy and pleasure.

It was an offer she had to accept. But no matter how much pleasure or time Gabriel chose to spend with her, she knew it could only ever be a fleeting ecstasy.

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Was she willing to spend the rest of her life longing for the man she loved for the sake of experiencing the pleasure he was willing to give her now? It was too important a decision to make without giving it serious thought first.

She pulled her cloak more tightly about her. “I believe I need more time to think through your offer—”

“No!” Gabriel’s protest was accompanied by him pulling Lily into his arms. “No,” he groaned again. “I need you to stay, Lily. Please,” he urged again before his lips claimed hers. “Lily, I need you.”

If anything, Gabriel’s kisses were more fevered, more demanding than last time. Within seconds, Lily knew she would give this man anything, agree to anything, if he would only continue kissing her.

Lily tasted like pure nectar and lust, addictive in every way, the longer Gabriel continued to devour and claim her lips and mouth for his own.

He rested his forehead against hers when he finally released her lips to stare down at her. “Will you allow me to touch you?”

She moistened her lips, her pupils expanding when she no doubt tasted him there. “Where?”

Everywhere!

Anywhere and everywhere Lily would allow.

But there was no rush, Gabriel reminded himself. They had time. Time to enjoy each other. To learn each other.

“Your breasts,” he breathed softly. “I should very much like to touch, caress, and suckle your breasts.”

Her eyes widened. “Men do the latter?”

“I cannot speak for other men, but this man intends to do so, yes.” Even the thought of drawing one of Lily’s nipples into his mouth, licking, and then sucking on that turgid bud, caused Gabriel’s aroused cock to throb and leak inside his drawers.

He wondered what it would be like to suckle Lily’s breasts if they were full of milk so that he could taste that creamy nectar for himself. He had never done such a thing before, but he knew that suckling on Lily’s full and milky breasts would be the height of eroticism.

That sucking on her breasts at all would surpass any other pleasure he had experienced these past twenty years.

He was right!

Having unfastened her gown and chemise at the back, before pulling that material down low enough to bare her breasts, he then lay her down on the chaise before allowing his gaze to feast on the uptilting globes. They were tipped with nipples that were a deep pink and fully engorged.

“Beautiful,” he admired as his hands cupped beneath them and the soft pads of his thumbs brushed lightly over those sensitive buds.

Lily’s response was to groan, her back arching into the caress.

Gabriel moistened his lips. “I have heard, but I have never experienced it, that some women are able to have an orgasm only from nipple play.” He stroked his thumbs over her nipples a second time and she instantly responded with another aching groan and arching of her back into the touch.

“What is nipple play?” Lily finally gathered her senses enough to ask.

“This is,” Gabriel murmured as he continued to rub one of those aroused nipples with his thumb whilst taking the other one between his thumb and fingers to squeeze and then pull on it in the same rhythm as the pad of his thumb ran lightly over its twin.

Lily had absolutely no idea what was happening to her as pleasure such as she had never experienced rose inside her. High, then higher still, her limbs moving restlessly in an effort to reach a pinnacle that she desperately needed but seemed just out of her reach.

“Gabriel, please,” she begged. “Please!”

“Tell me what you need,” he prompted gruffly, his eyes so dark, they appeared black.

“A release from this torment. Something. But I do not know what— Oh dear God,” she cried out as the heat of Gabriel’s mouth closed about one of her nipples, sucking hard at the same time as his fingers and thumb pulled down on her other nipple.

Pleasure exploded deep inside her, radiating out to every particle of her body, accompanied by a kaleidoscope of colors behind her closed lids.

The pleasure went on and on, fired by Gabriel’s continued sucking and pulling on her sensitive nipples until another even fiercer force of release coursed through her.

Followed by another.

Until it seemed that the pleasure of Gabriel's mouth and hands on her breasts, the touch of him, was all that did or ever would exist.

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Lily knew she would never forget this pleasure for as long as she lived.

“You are magnificent,” Gabriel looked up at her to praise wondrously. “A rare and precious diamond.”

At that moment, Lily felt like one.

Gabriel’s rare and precious diamond.

CHAPTER NINE

“I did not even know that I had a Great-Uncle Frederick, let alone that he had made a fortune in the Indies, which, having no other living relatives, he has now left to me!”

Lily made no move to rise from the chair where she sat reading a book in front of the window in the family’s small private parlor situated at the back of Truro House.

She did look up, her gaze guarded as she watched her father literally quivering with excitement as he waved about the letter he held in his hand. A missive which Lily knew had been delivered a short time ago and which her father had apparently now read, informing him of what appeared to be his unexpected good fortune.

Appeared to be, because—

“Oh, my dear, how wonderful.” Her mother put her embroidery aside, for once smiling happily as she rose to her feet to take the letter from her husband and read the good news for herself. “Twenty thousand pounds!” she gasped, raising a hand to her

throat.

“It is a fortune,” the earl agreed.

“This means that Lily and I might have some new gowns this Season, after all.” The countess looked at her husband. “That we might buy a third carriage so that I can snub my nose at Lady Deidre Hanworth, who only has two! We might also provide Lily with a small dowry to sweeten and tempt a suitable but perhaps penniless gentleman into marrying her,” she added without a thought for whether, or how much, her words might hurt a listening Lily.

“My dear, we must not spend it all at once,” the earl reproved. “Otherwise, we will once again quickly be without funds.”

“It is twenty thousand pounds, Edgar!” the countess dismissed before turning to Lily. “You do not seem excited by our sudden good fortune, miss.” She frowned her disapproval.

That was because, unlike her parents, Lily was more interested in the source of this sudden good fortune rather than the spending of it.

When she was growing up, one of Lily’s many governesses had thought it a good idea for Lily to make a chart of her family tree, from Norman times to the present. The governess had done so because she believed everyone should know “from whence they came and to whom they are related.”

Lily had duly made the chart. It still hung on the wall in the now-abandoned nursery.

Which was how she knew, without the shadow of a doubt, that her father did not have, nor had he ever had, a Great-Uncle Frederick, living in the Indies or otherwise, who might have left him a fortune.

She and Gabriel had not made a definitive agreement as to when they would meet again after their last passionate tryst. They had only agreed that Gabriel would contact her again when he had arranged for them to do so.

Lily believed a meeting between them needed to take place now.

“Lady Lily Tremayne is here asking to see you, Your Grace.”

Gabriel felt his heart falter in his chest upon hearing his butler’s announcement.

Lily was here?

There had to be some sort of mistake.

Gabriel’s thoughts raced as he slowly leaned back in the chair behind the desk in his study.

He had been keeping himself and, consequently, Jacobson, busy by writing letters to his estate managers in response to their monthly reports on the half dozen country estates owned by the Duke of St. Albans. He had done so in the hope of distracting his thoughts from thoughts of seeing Lily again.

The distraction had not been a successful one.

His thoughts had not strayed from thinking of her, even for a moment.

“Are you sure she did not ask for my daughter?” Gabriel knew Chloe had gone out for a ride in the park after luncheon, accompanied by two grooms. He had assumed it was her intention to meet with friends there.

If it was, then it would appear Lily was not one of them.

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If Cramer's already haughtily raised nose could rise any further, then it now did so. No doubt in response to Gabriel doubting his abilities. "I am positive that is the name of your visitor, Your Grace. As I am equally sure to whom she asked to speak after I had informed her that Miss Chloe was not at home."

Lily really was here.

Asking to see him.

What possible reason could she have for putting herself and her reputation in such a precarious position?

Single young ladies simply did not visit the homes of unmarried or widowed gentlemen. They did not visit the homes of married ones either, unless it was to call upon his wife or daughter, and Lily had already been told Chloe was not here.

He stood to move from behind his desk. "We will resume our work later." He dismissed his secretary, only turning to address his butler again once the younger man had left the room. "You may show Lady Tremayne in now, Cramer."

"She appears to be unaccompanied by her maid, Your Grace. Nor is there a carriage outside." Cramer's lips were tight with his disapproval. "I do believe she may possibly have walked here."

Gabriel's heart skipped several beats at the thought of being completely alone with Lily. "It is a nice enough day for a stroll," he dismissed, knowing Truro House was situated only a short distance away in the street next to this one.

“Yes, Your Grace,” the butler answered noncommittally.

“Lady Tremayne is my coconspirator in choosing a suitable present for Chloe’s birthday next week.” He knew that Cramer, along with the rest of the household staff, was as devoted to Chloe’s happiness as he was. “Which is possibly why she preferred not to have the Truro carriage seen outside this house. Why I would also prefer you not, by word or deed, allow my daughter to learn of her friend’s visit to me.”

As Gabriel had hoped, the butler’s expression had softened at the mention of a present for Chloe. “Of course, Your Grace. I will show Lady Tremayne in now.”

Gabriel moved to stand in front of the window looking out into the street. As Cramer had already remarked, the Truro carriage was nowhere in sight.

Lily could hear the loud beat of her own heart as she stepped into the study, her gaze immediately drawn to Gabriel as he stood in front of the window. His back was to the room as he looked out at the street in front of the house. Where he had no doubt noted there was no carriage waiting for her when she left.

As soon as she was able, after listening to her father’s announcement of his inheritance earlier and her mother’s excited chatter as to what they would do with it, Lily had quietly closed her book and left the family parlor. She doubted either of her parents had noted or cared about her departure.

Once in the privacy of her bedchamber, she had paced up and down the room, not knowing what to do with the knowledge she had regarding there being no Great-Uncle Frederick in her father’s lineage. She had even gone to her old nursery to confirm her suspicion by looking at the chart still pasted to the wall.

Her father did not have, had never had, a relative named Frederick.

She waited until after luncheon and then left the house to walk to St. Albans House.

Now that she was here, she wondered if perhaps she was wrong in thinking Gabriel Lord could have had anything to do with her father's sudden windfall.

What reason could the duke have had for doing such a thing?

If he had.

There was no one else that Lily knew who had such a surfeit of funds as to be able to give twenty thousand pounds away to her undeserving parents.

"Why did you do it?" she now demanded to know.

"You may leave us, Cramer." The duke's gaze remained fixed on Lily as he dismissed his butler. He waited until the other man had closed the door behind him before speaking again. "Why did I do what?" Gabriel prompted lightly.

A lightness of tone which instantly caused Lily to question whether she could have been wrong regarding St. Albans's possible involvement in her father's inheritance.

But who else could be responsible?

There was no one else.

"Why did you...arrange for my father to inherit a small fortune?"

Gabriel stiffened. "What makes you think that I did?"

"Because I do not know anyone else with enough funds to do such a thing," she accused.

“You—”

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“And because, if it was you,” she continued firmly, “then you have made me feel no better than a whore whose body you are paying to pleasure and give pleasure to!”

“No!” Gabriel’s mask of haughty indifference had been stripped away when he stepped into her space and placed his hands about her waist to keep her in front of him. “No, Lily,” he pleaded. “Please believe I thought only of you, of your comfort and well-being, when I arranged for your father to receive an inheritance from a distant, if bogus, relative.”

“Did you truly believe that I would see the benefit of even one penny of that money?” she scorned.

He frowned. “I had hoped so, yes.”

Lily gave a pitying shake of her head. “My mother is already ordering new gowns and urging my father to buy a third carriage. Oh, but how could I forget the best part?” she bit out scathingly. “My mother also suggested putting several thousand pounds of that money aside as a dowry for me. As an incentive to convincing a ‘suitable gentleman’ into offering marriage to me!”

“Over my dead body!” he rasped harshly, his hands tightening painfully about her waist.

Lily grimaced. “Gabriel, I am sorry to say—dead body or otherwise—I do not think you will have any say in when or whom my parents bribe into offering me marriage when the time comes. Or how my parents might choose to otherwise fritter away the inheritance you have given them.”

His eyes darkened. “I want to be the one to give you everything. To shower you with diamonds and pearls. A dozen new gowns. A carriage of your own—”

She interrupted him. “I believe those are the gifts given to a mistress, not a lover.”

They were, Gabriel realized.

Or to a much-loved wife.

Except Lily was not and never would be his wife.

Because he was too old for her?

Or because she was a friend of his daughter’s?

Neither of those things. Lily would not be Gabriel’s wife because, as she and the other young ladies in the Spinsters’ Alliance had clearly stated, they would not marry at all if they did not love the man they were to marry.

Lily did not love him.

He knew she desired him, that her body responded to him spectacularly, but she did not love him.

Gabriel drew in several deep and calming breaths before releasing her to step back. “It would seem that I have made an error in judgment that I cannot reverse. I apologize if that error has in any way made you feel less than appreciated as the beautiful and passionate young woman that you are.”

“Your actions did not have anything to do with your knowledge of the scandal of my sister’s elopement?”

He was puzzled by the question. “Why would they?”

“Because it might lead you to think that my own morals are less than they should be.”

“That possibility never entered my thoughts for a moment.”

Lily gave a tight smile. “Then your apology is accepted.”

He shook his head. “I have already assured you that none of the actions of any member of your family affects my opinion of or desire for you. Did you not believe me when I said as much?”

She sighed. “I am trying to do so.”

“Then you must try harder.”

“I...I did not ask the last time we spoke but...but when your man investigated me and my family, did he...did he tell you if my sister...if Hazel—”

“Your sister is now married. She is the Contessa de Villere and living in Inverness in Scotland. The Scots are more kindly disposed toward the French than we are,” he added ruefully.

Lily’s eyes widened in obvious alarm. “But— What of Michel Jaques, the gentleman who was my father’s secretary, and whom Hazel eloped?”

“Michel Jaques Fornier is the Comte de Villere. When he escaped to England, he preferred to earn his way in life rather than just be another French aristocrat who had escaped his homeland after being robbed of his estates and fortune. Since settling in Scotland, he and your sister have purchased a smallcroft, and they now live there happily together with their three-month-old son.”

She gasped. “Hazel has a son?”

Gabriel nodded. “Your nephew, Andrew.”

“Oh, thank God.” Lily’s breasts quickly rose and fell, tears of happiness glistening in her eyes. “Thank God. And thank you for telling me all this.”

“You are very welcome.” Gabriel eyed her searchingly. “Have your parents never tried to learn their daughter’s fate? Has your sister never contacted you to reassure you of her marriage and motherhood?”

The happiness faded from her expression. “If Hazel had ever tried, my parents would have ensured no word of her safety ever reached me. They have disowned her and refuse to so much as speak her name,” Lily added bleakly.

“They might not feel the same way if I were to introduce them to the Comte and Comtesse de Villere.”

“Probably not,” Lily conceded. “But kind though your offer is, I would never ask Hazel to put herself and her family through such a false reconciliation. It is enough for me to know that my sister is happy and loved.”

Gabriel hated the bleak look he could now see in her eyes.

He stepped forward again to take one of her gloved hands and lifted it so that his lips could press against the warmth of her palm. “Tell me what I can do or give directly to you that will make your own life more comfortable?”

“You have already given me enough comfort by telling me of my sister’s happiness.”

His mouth twisted. “That is not the sort of comfort I meant, and you know it.”

She looked at him from beneath lowered lashes. “I also know I prefer it when you make my lifeuncomfortable. Deliciously so,” she reminded huskily.

Gabriel’s tension eased as he took note of the return of the feverish glitter in her eyes and the flush to her cheeks. His cock swelled inside his pantaloons as he watched Lily’s tongue moisten first her top lip and then the bottom one.

When he looked up, it was to find her heated gaze fixed upon his own slightly parted lips.

Gabriel’s breath caught in his throat at the desire he read in that shining gaze. Desire for him. For the pleasure Lily knew he could give her with his hands and mouth.

“Did you really come here to berate me for my error in judgment?” he prompted softly.

“I believed at the time I did...” She gave a rueful smile. “Now, I am not so sure. Maybe I just wished to see you again? Two days is a very long time.”

He nodded. “I am sorry for that. But I assure you, I am doing everything within my power to bring that time to an end.”

Lily eyed him shyly. “I am here now.”

“So you are.” Gabriel claimed her mouth, as he had longed to do since the moment he saw her again.

Not one kiss, but many. Those kisses quickly became heated, the two still kissing hungrily when Gabriel lifted Lily in his arms and carried her across the room to lay her down on the chaise in front of the window.

“Any people walking by will be able to see us,” Lily pointed out.

Gabriel stood up to release the ties on the drapes before pulling them across the windows, throwing the room into darkness. “I wish to see you.” He moved to light a candle on the fireplace. A warm glow instantly lit the room. “Every delicious inch of you,” he murmured as he sat beside her on the chaise. “May I?” His hands rested on the hem of her gown.

“Please,” she invited, knowing she had been longing for this, for Gabriel to touch her again, since they were last together.

Her gaze remained fixed on the hunger in Gabriel’s face as he slowly pushed the skirt of her gown up her thighs. She enjoyed the heady power of watching such a usually emotionally remote gentleman looking at her with passion and desire, his cheeks flushed, his eyes feverish.

She gasped when she felt the caress of his long fingers touching her heated flesh inside the slit of her drawers. She gasped even louder when the soft pad of his thumb pressed against and then stroked a sensitive nubbin amongst her folds.

“It is called your clitoris,” Gabriel explained gruffly. “It is a bundle of sensitive nerves, but I believe it can best be described as being like a tiny penis. In that the stroking and pressing of fingers against it”—he paused when Lily’s hips rose to increase the pressure of those pleasurable manipulations—“can give a woman great pleasure.”

If anything, it was a pleasure more intense than when Gabriel had touched her

breasts. Addictively so, as Lily's hips began to undulate in a chase to capture that pleasure. She groaned when Gabriel removed his fingers, but her eyes widened when he lifted those fingers to his lips and licked the glistening juices from their tips.

Lily licked her own lips. "How can you— Is that—"

"The juices of your arousal are delicious," he assured. "One day I should like you to taste my release in the same way."

“Why not now?”

“Because now is about you and your pleasure,” he insisted. “I only stopped just now because I want your permission to take off your drawers.”

She swallowed. “I do not— What are you—”

“I am going to pleasure you with my mouth as well as my hand,” he explained. “And for that, I need to remove your drawers.”

Her eyes were wide. “You are going to put your mouththere?”

“Oh yes,” he assured longingly. “Then I am going to lick you, suck you, maybe even bite you, before fucking into your wet channel with my tongue.”

Lily almost swallowed her own tongue at hearing Gabriel talk so crudely. A crudeness which, she admitted, deeply excited her and increased her desire for everything Gabriel promised.

It took a matter of seconds to remove her drawers before she lay back down on the chaise, this time with her knees bent and her legs parted as Gabriel knelt between them.

He looked up at her. “If I do anything you do not like, I wish for you to tell me to stop.”

Lily couldn’t imagine what he was talking about. So far, she had loved every pleasure

Gabriel had given her.

She was glad of the candlelight to hide her blushes when she felt Gabriel's lips and tongue along the length of the folds between her thighs, first lapping up the juices escaping her channel before concentrating on that bundle of nerves above.

The rasp of Gabriel's tongue against that nubbin was even more arousing than his fingers had been. Those fingers found other places to caress and pleasure her. Between the glistening folds at the entrance of her channel, before those then-wet fingers moved farther back until his thumb pressed against the rosette between her bottom cheeks.

"Trust me," he encouraged, the warmth of his breath an arousing caress against her clitoris as his thumb pressed harder, seeking entrance. "It is a little daring, yes, but it will intensify the pleasure for you," he promised before sucking her swollen nubbin into the heat of his mouth.

Lily was about to say she was unsure as to whether she would be able to cope with more intense pleasure than she was already feeling when Gabriel's thumb penetrated that ring of muscle.

That, along with the hard suck and caress of his tongue across her clitoris, threw her into a maelstrom of pleasure such as she had never imagined existed.

Lily lost all sense of space and time after that, of everything that was not Gabriel, as he took her to that pinnacle of release over and over again.

But her pleasure was increased exponentially, her release explosive, when she looked up and saw that Gabriel had released his cock and was now pumping that turgid flesh in the same rhythm as his tongue plunged into her channel.

She promised herself that the next time, she would be the one to give him that pleasure.

Next time.

Because she wanted as many of those with Gabriel as he was willing to give her.

CHAPTER TEN

“I should be interested to learn where you have been these past few days?” Hellsmere raised a questioning dark brow as the two gentlemen sat in comfortable chairs drinking brandy after enjoying luncheon together at their club. “Investigating more on Prinny’s behalf, perhaps?”

“No.”

“No?”

Gabriel managed to keep his own gaze leveled on the piercing ones across from him.

“I have been at home.”

“Not on the two occasions I came to see you.”

He frowned. “I was not told you had called.”

Hellsmere shrugged. “That is probably because I decided to spend time visiting with Chloe once I was informed you were not at home. Who, I might add, seems to be as puzzled by your mysterious afternoon absences as I am curious.”

Then it was a puzzlement and curiosity which Gabriel intended to ensure remained unsatisfied.

Gabriel had spent those afternoons looking at several properties Jacobson had managed to acquire the keys for so that Gabriel might view them. His intention to rent or buy one of them.

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Pleasurable as it had been to make love to Lily, both within the excitement of a house of the demimonde and the quiet of his own study, neither of those locations had offered the complete privacy Gabriel wished the two of them to have for their future liaisons.

Gabriel wanted to be able to hear the uninhibited moans and gasps, Lily's screams as she reached the pinnacle of her release. Sounds which she had necessarily been forced to stifle in both those previous locations. He also wished to be able to hold her in his arms after their pleasure had abated.

The quicker Gabriel could secure their privacy, the sooner he would be able to arrange to meet with Lily again. Somewhere where he would have the freedom to strip her completely and look at and touch all of her naked body. Also allowing him to feel and hear her every response to his lovemaking.

Something Gabriel believed he was becoming as deeply addicted to as he imagined those who visited the opium dens situated in the slum area of Limehouse along London's docklands were prone to do.

Thank God Gabriel's own addiction was only for making love to Lily. But it had grown stronger and more demanding in the days since he was last able to be alone with her.

So deep was his longing to be with her again now, he had even agreed to accompany Chloe and his aunt to a musical soiree this evening after learning Lily was to be there too. Unfortunately, she would be in the company of her mother and sisters-in-law.

Gabriel was well aware those circumstances would mean it was unlikely that he and Lily could be alone together. But just to see her again, to be in the same room, breathing in the same air, would, Gabriel hoped, satisfy some of his hunger for her.

“Has Lady Tremayne realized yet how obsessed you have become with her?”

Gabriel glanced sharply at Hellsmere. “I am not—”

“Do not make the situation worse by lying to me about it,” the other man warned.

Gabriel’s nostrils flared as he fought the urge to tell one of his closest friends to mind his own fucking business. “I would prefer that we not discuss that young lady at all,” he stated coldly. “How goes your own investigations into the identity of Prinny’s spy?”

Hellsmere narrowed his gaze for several seconds before he answered Gabriel’s obvious attempt at a diversion. “My own three candidates are all innocent. Every one of them has proved to be as boringly predictable as might be expected.”

“Predictable?”

“Each is lining his own pockets as much as he can. Each has a mistress. As I said, boring and predictable.”

As had been Lily’s explanation as to why she did not wish to marry any gentlemen of theton.

Hellsmere grimaced. “Those gentlemen are all far too busy thinking of how to ensure their own comfort to be remotely interested in spying, for Napoleon or anyone else.”

Gabriel was aware that he still had two ministers of his own left to investigate. Just as

he was aware that he had been neglecting his duty to Prinny so that he might pursue Lily and, latterly, secure somewhere for the two of them to meet.

He had never shirked his duty before now. Not to Prinny, not during his marriage to Mariah, nor during the years of being Chloe's only parent.

Gabriel knew he was now guilty of being less than his attentive self to both Prinny's requirements of him as one of his close confidants and Chloe's needs as her father.

"I repeat, does Lady Tremayne know that you are obsessed with her?"

Gabriel gave a pained wince. "I am not sure what my feelings are for her." Not so much that he intended discussing them with Hellsmere, in any case.

"I am." Hellsmere snorted. "Not since Clara, including during your short marriage to Mariah, have I ever seen you so preoccupied and willing to do anything, go anywhere, even to a ball, in order that you might see a certain young lady again."

Gabriel's shoulders slumped. "What is your opinion on the matter?"

The other man's brows rose. "My opinion can be of no relevance."

"Except it is." Gabriel released a heavy sigh.

"Why?"

He shook his head. "Am I making a fool of myself again, do you think?"

"Why should you think that?"

"Because Lily is so much younger than I am. Because she has her whole life ahead of

her, and mine is half over. Because she is a close friend of my own daughter.
Because—”

“It seems to me that you are trying to find excuses to prematurely end things between the two of you.”

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Was he? Gabriel no longer knew what he was doing where Lily was concerned. Except the thought of not seeing or being with her again was anathema to him. Even the thought of it made him feel nauseous.

He tensed. “What makes you think there is anything between the two of us to end prematurely?”

“Because by your words and attitude, you have already admitted as much. Do not attempt to deny it, because I will not believe you,” his friend chided before Gabriel could speak. “Besides, I have come to realize that age is irrelevant where desire exists,” he added harshly.

Gabriel gave the other man a searching glance. “You sound as if you might be speaking from experience.”

Hellsmere looked taken aback. “Absolutely not,” he denied vehemently. “I am merely advising, as your desire is obviously reciprocated, that you allow your feelings for Lily Tremayne to run their course. You will only regret it later if you do not.”

Gabriel scowled. “That would seem to imply those feelings are only transitory.”

“Is that not exactly what they are? Yours for her, at least.” The other man quirked a derisive eyebrow. “Lily Tremayne is a lovely young lady, intelligent too from what I remember of her when I danced with her once at a ball toward the end of last year’s Season— Calm down, St. Albans,” Hellsmere advised when the jealousy Gabriel felt rising within himself obviously became visible to his friend. “I danced with her. We discussed the weather and the upcoming grouse season, which her father and brothers

apparently all enjoy and take part in. What I meant to imply by the word intelligent is that the lady is not a giggling and simpering nincompoop like so many of the other debutants are. Chloe excluded.”

“Of course.” Gabriel nodded. “I should not care for Lily if she were emptyheaded.”

“Indeed.” Hellsmere nodded. “But it would be foolish to think that intelligence and physical appeal will be enough to hold your attention for longer than a few weeks, possibly a month or two.”

“Why do you think that?” Gabriel asked.

“Because Mariah has been dead for nineteen years, and you have never shown, by word or deed, the least inclination to publicly or privately tie yourself to another woman during that time. Ergo, your desire for Lady Tremayne will likely be fleeting and quickly over. On your part, at least.”

Hellsmere was quite correct in his summation regarding Gabriel having had no longevity of interest in any woman since Mariah died.

Leading Gabriel to realize that his desire for Lily, although currently as intense as the heat of a furnace, possibly burned too hot and strongly not to eventually burn itself out. Leaving only ashes in its wake.

Leaving Gabriel in ashes.

He had chosen to distance himself from people all these years because he knew his own nature so well. Only Chloe was allowed to occupy space in his heart. There was no room for anyone else.

“Why did you say ‘on your part, at least’?” he asked slowly.

Hellsmere gave him a pitying look. "My dear Gabriel, when a young and beautiful woman such as Lily Tremayne agrees to a physical affair, which is all you appear to have offered her, it is because she is already in love with you."

"No!"

"Yes."

"You are wrong," Gabriel maintained without hesitation. "We...enjoy each other, but I would know if Lily was in love with me."

"Would you?"

"Yes, damn it," he snapped. "But you are quite right. I should stop this now, before any irrevocable damage is done to Lily's reputation." Before he was totally destroyed once Lily no longer wanted him!

"I believe I said the opposite." Hellsmere frowned. "And is this not a rather abrupt about-turn in your intentions toward her?"

"But one your words have made me realize is probably for the best."

"For whom?"

"Lily, of course," he stated without hesitation.

This talk with Hellsmere had cleared the clouds of lustful feelings from Gabriel's brain somewhat, allowing him to finally see how reckless his actions were. And how they might harm Lily if they were allowed to continue.

He had already placed her in a position of speculation by singling her out at the

Landers's ball, and then taking her to a house of the demimonde the following day. Her own subsequent visit to St. Albans House might not have gone unnoticed either, although thankfully, that could be attributed to her visiting with Chloe.

It would be the simplest thing for Gabriel to dispense with the idea of buying or renting a suitable house where the two of them might meet privately. No money had as yet changed hands. Not that it would have proved too much of a problem if it had. Gabriel would simply have instructed Jacobson to cancel the rental agreement or purchase and then deal any financial loss if it became necessary.

Unfortunately, he was already committed to going to the musical recital with Chloe and his aunt this evening—

“You are in love with her.”

“What?” Gabriel glared at Hellsmere.

“The fact that your concern was instantly and only for Lily Tremayne’s reputation and feelings, rather than your own, tells me that you are in love with her.”

Gabriel swallowed. “I—”

“I apologize for my previous lack of perception on the matter,” the other man added as he sat forward in his chair. “I had not realized how deep your regard was for the lady. But I am aware of it now, and it is because I am that I no longer believe ending your association with her is the right thing to do.”

Gabriel scoffed. “Who has done an about-turn now?”

“Before, I spoke like the cynical fool that I am,” Hellsmere dismissed. “Gabriel, think long and hard before you discard something so precious as love from your life. If you do, I assure you, you will live to regret it.”

The fact that his friend had called him by his first name when offering this advice, something they had not done with each other since they both inherited the title of duke, was indicative of how strongly the other man felt on the subject.

The bleakness he could see in the other man’s eyes and the unhappy turn of his lips implied there was more to this advice than Hellsmere had previously revealed.

“Lucien—”

“I have to go.” The other man rose abruptly to his feet. “I hope you enjoy attending the musical soiree this evening. Give my regards to Lady Tremayne when you see her,” he added before striding briskly from the room.

Gabriel was totally baffled by the abrupt end of their conversation. Never, by word or deed, had Lucien ever given the impression that he suffered an unrequited love for any woman. Yet, his words just now implied that he did.

Had Gabriel been so blinded by his love for Lily—yes, he could call it that in his own thoughts—that it seemed he might have neglected to notice when his best friend had also fallen in love?

If that was the case, then he must do better in future. Both toward his friendship with Hellsmere, and with his obligation to the Prince Regent in seeking out the person in government who was spying for the French.

As for attending the musical soiree this evening, Gabriel was still undecided whether he should make his excuses to Chloe and his aunt and remain at home. Or whether he should attend and see Lily once more before possibly bringing an end to this madness between them.

This indecisiveness was a very uncomfortable admission for a man who had, up till now, always been very decisive in both his actions and words.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

To say Lily was restless as she listened inattentively to the piano recital given by one of the other young female guests would be to seriously underestimate her state of inner agitation.

Two days and two nights.

That was how long it had been since she last saw or heard from Gabriel.

Two days of accompanying her mother on numerous and tedious visits to the homes of the other ladies of theton.

The reason for the countess's insistence that Lily accompany her, when normally she preferred to gossip with her friends alone, had become all too obvious when several of those ladies had unashamedly questioned Lily on the subject of her "acquaintance" with the Duke of St. Albans.

Questions to which Lily had sharply replied that her friendship was with that gentleman's daughter and not the duke himself. She had not liked the knowing look in several of the ladies' eyes. Or that her mother had only smiled coyly, as if she were inpossession of a secret, as the countess obviously enjoyed being at the center of attention.

It had also been two nights Lily had spent aching and longing to be with and touch Gabriel again. To have him touch her.

But Lily had not received so much as a note from him, let alone a visit or an invitation to meet with him privately, as their last conversation together had indicated they might.

The six young ladies of the Spinsters' Alliance had attended the second meeting today, at Amanda's home this time. At which time, Chloe had told them that the duke would be accompanying her to the musical soiree that evening.

Lily was even wearing the sky-blue gown, the exact same shade as Gabriel's eyes when he was aroused, that he had insisted on having made for her and which had

been delivered only that afternoon. It had been her hope that she would be able to thank him for the gift this evening. In private.

It had also been her deepest wish that Gabriel would find as much pleasure in seeing her wearing the fashionable gown he had bought for her as she felt in wearing it.

Unfortunately, the musical soiree was fast approaching the halfway interval for refreshments, and so far, none of the St. Albans family, father or daughter, nor Chloe's great-aunt, had yet made an appearance.

Which accounted for Lily's increasing agitation, her thoughts running wild at Gabriel's noticeable absence. Noticeable to her, at least.

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Did Gabriel's lack of contact with her and his absence this evening mean that he had already grown tired of her?

Possibly because she had been too passionate in her responses to his lovemaking?

The first possibility made her heart heavy, and the second caused her to inwardly cringe with embarrassment as well as dismay.

It had been impossible for her not to respond to Gabriel's lovemaking as wholeheartedly as she had, and the thought of never being alone or intimate with him again caused a painful heaviness in her chest.

"Are you just going to continue sitting there or join me and your sisters-in-law in the other room for refreshment before the second half of the entertainment?" her mother prompted waspishly.

Lily looked up and realized the piano recital had come to an end and her mother was now standing beside her, impatiently snapping her fan to and fro.

The absence of her sisters-in-law indicated the two ladies had already gone through to the adjoining room. The four Tremayne women had attended the musical soiree together. Goodness knew what entertainment the Tremayne men were enjoying this evening.

Lily believed the only reason the other two younger women had decided to attend the soiree with them this evening was because it had been widely rumored that the Duke of St. Albans would be attending, and they were curious to see whether or not the

duke would once again single Lily out for his attention.

She was unsure which was worse, the fact that Gabriel had not appeared at all, or the possibility that he might have done so before then cutting her completely.

On reflection, she decided the first was preferable.

Lily felt ill at the thought of joining her mother and sisters-in-law and possibly having to answer their probing questions as to why Chloe and her father had decided not to attend this evening after all. “It is so hot in here tonight,” she answered her mother. “I think I will step out onto the terrace and take the air for a few minutes. I will join you if there is time after that.”

“Very well,” the countess snapped, obviously impatient to be gone. “But take care you do not catch a chill. I do not want to be kept awake all night from hearing the servants running around catering to your needs because of your silly whim to go outside in the cold evening air.”

As if a chill would be lurking outside on the terrace, just waiting to ambush Lily and so put her hitherto suffering such an inconvenience!

“Of course, Mama,” she replied obediently as she stood and made her way to where one of the doors onto the terrace had been opened when the room became too hot for the comfort of those both playing and listening to the music.

It was much cooler outside, as was to be expected for late February, but Lily felt so numb inside, she barely noticed it as she walked along the length of the terrace lit by the glow of several lamps.

Her evening had started out with such high expectations and excitement at the thought of seeing Gabriel again. Only for those feelings to slowly dissipate

throughout the evening when he had not arrived. Now all Lily felt was that cold lump lodged in her chest, which she believed must be her bruised and aching heart.

There was also the knowledge of the pitying stares she would have to suffer from the other members of the group during the rest of the evening, when it became even more obvious that neither Gabriel nor Chloe intended to join them for the second half of the recital.

That realization caused her to consider exactly what she was doing by indulging in any sort of intimacy with a man who was known to be opposed to love and emotions.

How stupid she had been to think entering into a relationship with Gabriel could ever end happily. For her, at least.

It would not.

It could not.

Nor was she sophisticated enough to deal with such a situation with any continuing degree of detachment.

There was also her pride to consider. Which, she now realized, was desperately in need of attention. She could not, would not, allow herself to be any more of a slave to her emotions, the love she felt for Gabriel, than she had already been. Not when she knew there was not the remotest chance of him returning those feelings.

The tears felt hot on the coolness of Lily's cheeks, and it truly felt as if her heart were breaking as she finally accepted that as her reality.

Her despair at that acceptance was now such that she had no idea how she was ever going to be able to find the courage to face Gabriel again, even socially. Let alone

continue to have a friendship with Chloe, when she would constantly feel in danger of meeting the person who was now the reason for her feelings of humiliation. She—

“What on earth are you doing out here alone and in the cold?”

Lily gasped as she spun sharply on her slippered heels to see Gabriel removing his jacket as he quickly strode down the length of the terrace toward her.

He looked magnificent, as always. Even more so than usual without the tailored evening jacket he now draped about her shoulders. His shoulders were wide in his fitted shirt, his necktie gleaming snowy white in the moonlight, his silver brocade waistcoat fitted to the flatness of his abdomen. The salt and pepper of his hair was slightly ruffled by the softness of the cool breeze.

The inside of his jacket was warm from the heat of his body, and it smelled slightly of the cologne he favored, that heady mixture of citrus and sandalwood.

“Lily?” he prompted sharply, hands lightly gripping her shoulders.

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Instead of answering him, Lily began to sob harder, and she could feel the heat of those tears cascading down her cheeks.

Gabriel's heart ached at the sight of Lily's tears and the sound of her sobs.

Accompanied by yet more indecision on his part.

Instinct, need, said he should take Lily into his arms and comfort her.

Caution as to whether or not he might have done something to be the cause of her tears warned him against deepening her distress by being overly familiar with her when she did not wish him to be.

Followed immediately by the realization of how fucking arrogant it was of him to even think he could possibly be to blame for Lily's distress. Just because he was obsessed with her, knew himself to be deeply in love with her, did not mean she felt the same way about him.

He had offered to show her physical pleasure, she had accepted, and since then they had shared their mutual desire for each other several times. But during none of them had Lily so much as hinted that she might be falling in love with him, as Hellsmere had suggested she might be.

But his need to hold her, to comfort her, overrode those feelings of caution as he now pulled her into his arms and held her tightly against him. "Whoever has dared to hurt you, caused you to cry, I will make their life a living hell!" he vowed fiercely as he gently cupped the back of her head to hold her against his chest.

She sobbed harder, shattering and not merely breaking Gabriel's heart, even as her slender arms clung tightly about his waist.

"Lily, speak to me," he pleaded seconds later when he could not stand the sound of her sobs a moment longer. "For God's sake, speak to me." He forced himself to speak less demandingly.

"Where have you been?" she wanted to know.

He frowned at this being her first coherent comment. "Chloe had some sort of catastrophe with the hem of her gown, which delayed our departure from St. Albans House," he rasped, remembering his impatient pacing in the entrance hall of the house earlier as he waited downstairs for his daughter to reappear. His gaze narrowed on Lily's appearance. "Is that your own new gown?" She looked absolutely beautiful in the blue silk.

"Yes. Thank you. It is one of the reasons I felt your absence so keenly this evening."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to show it to you. To thank you for it. But then when you did not arrive after all, I realized how futile our...friendship is."

He winced. "I have explained my tardiness."

Lily gave an impatient shake of her head. "I was not only referring to your absence this evening when I asked where you have been. I am also questioning your silence for the past two days and nights since we were together in your study."

His brows rose. "I have been involved in a...private investigation on behalf of the Prince Regent." This afternoon, he had successfully proven the innocence of one of

the last two cabinet ministers requiring that investigation. “I have also been attempting to rent or purchase a residence where the two of us might meet in private in future.”

“Oh.”

“I should not have been so late this evening if Chloe had not refused to simply change into another gown and instead insisted we all must wait while her maid made the necessary repairs on the one she was wearing,” he explained irritably, when he was never irritable or impatient with his daughter.

“Chloe alone is the reason for your late arrival this evening?”

“Yes,” he hissed. “What other reason could there be?”

Lily drew in several shuddering breaths before finally looking up at him. “I thought—I feared— You have not contacted me since—since we were last together.”

“I thought it best for your reputation not to do so until I had something substantial to tell you. Besides, I knew that Chloe would tell her friends that I intended to accompany her here this evening.”

Lily gave a shake of her head, her cheeks pale in the moonlight. “I do not believe I am the strong and independent woman you must have thought me to be when you made your offer of sharing the knowledge of physical pleasure with me. That I had thought myself to be,” she added shakily. “Because, sadly, I am proving not to be that woman at all. And if you are to punish anyone for my tears, then it must be yourself.”

Gabriel drew in a sharp breath and his arms dropped to his sides as he stepped back. “I am responsible for making you cry?”

“Yes,” Lily choked. “I cannot go on like this, Gabriel. I simply cannot.”

“I do not understand.”

She clasped her hands tightly together in front of her. “I wish I could be as casual about these things as you gentlemen all appear so able to be, but... But I am simply not capable of turning my emotions on and off at will.”

Gabriel blinked. “It is your belief that I do not have feelings for you?”

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She gave a choked laugh. “Well, of course I know you feel desire for me. That we desire each other. We have demonstrated that, several times. But that is not enough to cancel out the constant feelings of uncertainty and the exhausting inner questioning which goes along with that emotion. At least, for me it is not.” Her gaze no longer met his. “Difficult as this is for me to say and do, I can no longer continue with our association.”

Gabriel could only stare at her, shocked beyond belief.

Hellsmere had been wrong in his summation, so very wrong. Lily was not in love with him at all.

In fact, Hellsmere had been wrong to the degree Lily was now ending things between them.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Knowing she had to bring an end to her intimacy with Gabriel had been the heartbreaking conclusion of Lily’s thoughts during the time she spent alone outside, walking on the terrace of their host’s home.

Much as it hurt her to do so, Lily knew she could not continue feeling this constant uncertainty and only living half a life, reluctant to make plans of her own because she was always waiting to see or hear from Gabriel as to when their next meeting might possibly be. To continue in this way would eventually make her even more heartsick than she already was, possibly even resulting in her becoming physically ill.

She also believed that to continue would only succeed in making her feel more jaundiced toward gentlemen of the town than she had ever been, rather than less so.

The thought of Gabriel now returning to being the aloof and imperious Duke of St Albans, a gentleman who had barely acknowledged her existence, filled her with despair. But this constant uncertainty of never knowing when she would see him again, and then living in fear that the next time she did see him she would learn Gabriel's interest in her had waned, was somehow worse.

The stunned expression on Gabriel's haughty features told her that this was the last thing he had expected her to say to him this evening.

Lily huffed out a humorless laugh. How could it be anything else when her heart was breaking? "I can see I have surprised you with my decision. But I believe that, once you have had time to think about it, you will see it is for the best. For both of us," she added softly.

He grimaced. "I had already half come to that same realization myself earlier today."

A pain unlike any previous ones ripped through Lily's chest at the realization Gabriel really was done with her. It was what she had feared might happen, but it was still difficult to actually hear those words from his own sculpted lips.

"Not because I do not want you with a fieriness of passion such as I have never known before," he assured forcefully. "But because I do."

Lily frowned her puzzlement. "I do not understand. If you feel that way, why would you wish to end things with me?"

"Because I was made to realize I am being unfair to you—"

“Made to realize by whom?” she prompted sharply, her eyes wide with horror at the possibility a third party might know of their scandalous arrangement.

“Hellsmere,” he dismissed. “He—”

“The Duke of Hellsmere knows of our—of our private meetings?”

St. Albans nodded. “He has admitted to knowing of our...attraction to each other, yes.”

“He said much more than that.” The gentleman himself stepped onto the terrace. From the direction of the garden rather than the house. He looked as tall and handsome as ever, wearing a dark cloak over his evening clothes. “But I believe that is for Gabriel to tell you rather than me.”

“What the hell are you doing here, Lucien?” Gabriel demanded.

“Lady Tremayne.” The Duke of Hellsmere gave her a formal bow before turning back to the other man. “William Stapleton’s secretary called in the authorities two hours ago after he found the earl’s body slumped over the desk in his study. There was a half-empty decanter of brandy and a used glass beside him, and he was still holding the pistol he had used to blow his brains out after partaking of that liquid courage,” he grimly told Gabriel without attempting to soften the news.

Lily raised an alarmed hand to her throat. “Can you possibly be referring to the Earl of Shefford, a member of Lord Salisbury’s government? That William Stapleton?”

“Yes,” Hellsmere confirmed without preamble.

Lily’s embarrassment at the Duke of Hellsmere knowing of her scandalous relationship with Gabriel was instantly forgotten in the face of this much more

distressing news.

Lily didn't know the Earl of Shefford very well, but her friend Georgiana, who was another member of the Spinsters' Alliance, was one of his three daughters. From things Georgiana had said, she did not believe that the earl had been the most loving of fathers or husbands. But his death, by suicide, of all things, would be a terrible ordeal for them all to have to suffer through.

What possible reason could Shefford have had for doing such a terrible thing to himself and his family?

A family, Lily knew, despite Shefford being one of Lord Salisbury's closest advisers, the earl was not always kind to.

Indeed, Georgiana's unhappiness over her father's behavior was often such that Lily knew it was mostly the opposite, and also the reason for Georgiana's aversion to ever marrying. Not that the earl was physically violent toward her or her sisters or mother. No, his hurtfulness appeared to mainly be caused by his indifference to all of them.

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Not that many in the town were aware of that. To all in Society and the government Shefford appeared to be upstanding and law-abiding, and a gentleman devoted to his family. The earl was not often at Society events, but then many older gentlemen were not, but when he did deign to appear at any Society event, he was always the epitome of the perfect husband and father.

Indeed, Lily had not known the extent of the earl's hurtful behavior until Georgiana had visited Lily at her home one day in a flood of tears because her father had been particularly cruel to her mother.

It was now a shock to Lily that such a self-absorbed gentleman, one who was always so strict about what was right and wrong, in public at least, and had vehemently adhered to that code of behavior, should have ended his life in a way that would bring such scandal to his name.

The more Lily thought about it, the less she was inclined to believe the earl could possibly have carried out such an act, no matter the provocation.

But a much more immediate question, Lily realized, was why the Duke of Hellsmere believed the earl's death to be of such importance to Gabriel that the other man had sought him out at a musical soiree, of all things.

Lily's thoughts stilled, her gaze sharpening when she saw how the dukes of St. Albans's and Hellsmere's gazes were locked and seemed to be engaged in a silent conversation.

Because they did not wish her to know what else they had to say to each other.

Gabriel had mentioned earlier that he had recently been occupied with an investigation on behalf of the Prince Regent. For just these past two days? Or had he been involved in this mysterious investigation before that time? Possibly during the week Gabriel had supposedly spent in the country at one of his estates?

She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin before addressing both men. “What crime was the earl suspected of having committed that you were investigating him on the Prince Regent’s behalf?”

“I told you she was intelligent as well as beautiful,” Hellsmere admired.

“I believe I had already told you that same thing previous to your own comment,” Gabriel reminded his friend irritably.

Inwardly, he was still reeling at Lily having told him she was ending their relationship.

It was the last thing he had expected to hear this evening.

Although why it should be, he had no idea, when Lily had explained how their intimacy was now hurting her more than fulfilling her.

His own opinion on the matter was his to deal with. Lily’s health and happiness were of paramount importance, not his own feelings.

To say Gabriel was now stunned at her perception in regard to this current situation—despite already having recognized her intelligence—would be an understatement. For her to have assessed the events of the past few weeks and the news of Shefford’s suicide this evening, and then drawn such a conclusion—the correct one—was formidable.

“Was that before or after you had told me she was too good for you and that, for her sake, you should walk away?” Hellsmere retaliated.

Lily turned to look at Gabriel. “You told your friend that?”

“No—”

“Yes.”

Gabriel scowled. “You are becoming beyond irritating, Hellsmere.”

“I am aware of that,” the other man acknowledged without concern. “But that really was a magnificent piece of deduction on your behalf just now, Lady Tremayne.”

“Call me Lily,” she instructed impatiently. “You will also cease flattering me and tell me if that deduction was correct.”

“You will not address her so informally,” Gabriel warned his friend before answering her. “And yes, your assessment of the situation is perfectly correct.”

“Are you allowed to tell me more on the subject? My friend Georgiana... Do you remember her as being one of the other young ladies from the meeting in your library that day?” she prompted, her cheeks reddening when she received a nod of acknowledgment from Gabriel. “She is the Earl of Shefford’s eldest daughter.”

Ah.

The two men looked at each other before Gabriel nodded. “I do not see why we should not tell you more of the situation when Shefford’s suicide will most likely bring the whole scandal to light in any case.”

“Allow me to send word to my mother of my further delay before you do so,” Lily pleaded. “I shall tell her I am feeling unwell and prefer to remain in the garden a little longer.” She turned to walk the length of the terrace before stepping into the music room to talk softly to the footman standing just inside.

“Admirable woman, that,” Hellsmere murmured.

“I will call you out if you continue in this vein, Lucien,” Gabriel bit out from between gritted teeth.

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The other man grinned at him. “You are so deliciously easy to provoke where she is concerned.”

Lily, as Gabriel recalled, preferred it when he concentrated that deliciousness on physical pleasures.

“What did I say to make you smile?” Hellsmere eyed him quizzically.

“I was thinking of Lily,” he admitted.

The other man shook his head. “You will be a double—a triple fool, if you let such a diamond slip through your fingers,” he muttered.

Gabriel was already well aware of that. But if Lily meant to end things between them, he did not see how—

Damn it, he was the Duke of St. Albans.

The arrogant, imperious, the bloody-minded Duke of St. Albans.

A man who had never backed down from a fight or a challenge in his life.

He would not think of doing so now either. Not when it was in regard to something as important to him as Lily now was.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lily grimaced. "I am afraid I cannot agree with the conclusion you have both drawn in regard to the Earl of Shefford having to be the guilty party in the situation you have just described to me."

Once Lily had instructed a footman to take the message to her mother, she and the two gentlemen had retired to the privacy of the summer house in the garden, where Lily now sat, and the gentlemen paced.

It had given them the required privacy for Gabriel and Hellsmere to tell Lily of their investigations into the suspected spy in Salisbury's government. A man who was passing on important information to those French people still interested in having Napoleon return as their emperor.

Because it was still rather cold out, Gabriel had insisted that she keep his jacket draped about her shoulders. Lily was grateful for its enveloping warmth.

"Why the hell not?" the Duke of Hellsmere now stopped his pacing to demand.

"Mind your tone and words, Hellsmere," Gabriel warned the other man darkly.

"Despite our surroundings, I am not a delicate flower around whom either of you need to guard your language," Lily dismissed. "I have a father and two older brothers who do not choose to behave so thoughtfully," she assured derisively. "The reason I do not agree, Your Grace—"

"Lucien," he invited.

"Absolutely not," Gabriel bit out. "I forbid it."

"The reason I do not agree, Your Grace," Lily repeated.

She had no intention, by word or expression of revealing how much Gabriel's vehement denial of her addressing one of his closest friends by his first name had hurt her.

Even though she dearly wished to tell Gabriel what she felt about him thinking he had the right to forbid her to do anything!

For now, they had far more important things to discuss than her annoyance at his highhandedness.

"Is because, as I have already stated, the Earl of Shefford was not a man to so publicly bring attention and scandal upon himself," she continued briskly. "The spy you are describing is also a traitor to the Crown and his country. The Earl of Shefford, despite being an unpleasant man in the privacy of his home, was nevertheless a fierce patriot whom I do not believe would ever have betrayed the Prince Regent or his government."

"Shefford was an unpleasant man in private?" Gabriel said slowly.

She nodded. "Very much so."

"In what way?"

She sighed. "In that he never allowed his wife or daughters to ever forget what a deep disappointment they all were to him. His wife for presenting him with three daughters, and those same daughters for existing instead of the son and heir he had wanted. After the birth of their third daughter, the countess was unable to have more children, which meant there would never be a son. To that end, the earl no longer so much as spoke to his wife in the privacy of their home, and his daughters were treated as the disappointments to him that they were."

“Despicable as such behavior is, it does not absolve him from also being a traitor,”
Hellsmere reasoned.

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“The names of his three daughters are Georgiana, Augusta, and Fredericka,” Lily informed them.

“George Augustus Frederick,” Gabriel muttered the full name of the Prince Regent.

“Exactly.” Lily nodded. “The earl’s loyalty to the Crown was unshakeable, steadfast, and meant more to him than anything or anyone else. Does that sound like a man who would have spied for the French?”

“No,” both men immediately acknowledged.

“There is also the problem of the half-empty decanter of brandy and used glass sitting on the earl’s desk when he supposedly put a pistol to his own head and pulled the trigger,” she added with a frown.

Gabriel looked at her through narrowed lids. “Why is that a problem?”

“Because I have just remembered that the earl did not drink alcohol. He believed, and this is a direct quote from Georgiana”—she grimaced—“that strong liquor was ‘the devil’s work and detrimental to a man’s intelligence and health.’ As such, the earl did not drink brandy nor any other alcohol.”

“He might have needed some this evening to give him courage to pull the trigger,” Gabriel pointed out.

“I do not think so.” Lily recalled Georgiana saying her father was positively rabid on the subject of the evils of alcohol. “Despite that being the obvious implication.”

“Implication?” the Duke of Hellsmere repeated slowly, a frown marring his brow.

“Do you not find it interesting that one of the few people left for you to investigate, the same person you now both firmly believe to be guilty of treason, is no longer in a position to be able to defend himself against such an accusation?” Lily reasoned.

Gabriel scowled. “Are you suggesting that someone...murdered Shefford and deliberately made it look as if he committed suicide?”

Lily snorted. “I am stating it as being a definite possibility.” The more she thought about it, the more it seemed likely that was the sequence of events of this evening’s tragedy. “To that end, I also suggest that you question the earl’s secretary, the man responsible for finding his dead employer, before you decide to involve anyone else.”

Gabriel’s brows rose. “You think the man might have more information he will not have told the authorities?”

She shrugged. “Tell me, did your secretary accompany you during your own investigations?”

“Yes,” both men confirmed.

Lily nodded. “And have you never thought it interesting how a secretary’s presence, and the fact that he is invariably privy to all his employer’s private business, is so often overlooked? For example, and Gabriel is already aware of this situation, my own father was totally ignorant of the fact that his youngest daughter, my sister Hazel, had fallen in love with his own secretary and that this same gentleman returned her feelings, until we all woke up one morning to discover my beloved sister had eloped with him.”

“Why did we never think of any of the secretaries, or any of the other clerical

servants, of the men we were asked to investigate?” Gabriel speculated.

“Because, as our superbly intelligent Lady Tremayne has already stated”—Hellsmere gave her an acknowledging inclination of his head—“and I am a little ashamed to admit”—he grimaced—“we in the gentry have a habit of not noticing our employees. Indeed, in some cases, we pay them not to be noticed.”

“Exactly.” Lily nodded. “My prejudice against the deviousness of some secretaries might be a little biased, but I would still suggest you question the earl’s secretary as soon as possible. Because if he was not averse to killing a man in order to cover his own guilt, then he will surely also be more inclined to abscond sooner rather than later before that deed is discovered.”

“That sounds very reasonable advice,” Hellsmere nodded.

“I believe so.” Lily turned her attention to Gabriel. “I also advise you not to ever again have the mistaken belief that you have the right to forbid me to do anything.”

He had the grace to look shamefaced. “I—”

“Now, if you will excuse me, gentlemen,” Lily continued coolly. “I need to see whether Georgiana and the rest of her family have already been informed of the earl’s death, and whether they are still here or have already left. In either case, I intend to offer them my love and full support.”

She doubted that her parents would approve of her decision to align herself with a family in the midst of such a scandal, but Lily did not care that for what her parents thought. If Georgiana needed her, then Lily had every intention of being there for her friend.

“It has been a pleasure, Lady Tremayne.” Hellsmere took one of her gloved hands in

his before lowering his head and briefly pressing his lips against the back of it.

Lily ignored the growl coming from St. Albans's throat. "Thank you." Her gaze remained fixed on the third button of Hellsmere's brocade waistcoat. "If you could please find the time to inform me of your progress in this matter, I should be most grateful."

"Go away, Hellsmere," Gabriel rasped. "If you please," he added grudgingly.

"My lady."

Lily raised her startled gaze to find the Duke of Hellsmere had already turned to stride in the direction of the door out of the summer house. "That was very rude of you," she admonished Gabriel.

“I said please.”

“As an afterthought.”

“Lily, I have no intention of arguing with you over the possible hurt feelings of someone I am well enough acquainted with to know that he is not hurt in the slightest,” Gabriel dismissed.

“No doubt that is because Hellsmere is well used to your rudeness—” Her words were cut off this time by the forceful claiming of her lips by Gabriel’s.

How easy it was to become lost in the passion that so quickly ignited between them. To kiss Gabriel back with the same passion as he devoured her. Utterly. Completely.

But it was not enough.

She knew it would never be enough.

Lily wrenched her mouth from his to push him away. “I have to go, Gabriel.”

“No—”

“I must,” she insisted, removing and holding out the jacket that had been keeping her warm this past half an hour.

“We did not finish our earlier conversation,” he protested.

“It is finished as far as I am concerned.” Whatever happened in future, she could not allow this intimacy between them to occur again. “I harbor no bad feelings toward you, but I believe I am worth more than these brief snatches of any gentleman’s time.”

“What if I were to offer you more?” he prompted guardedly.

She gave a shake of her head. “It still would not be enough.” Even Gabriel offering her three afternoons of his time instead of two still only amounted to them spending hours together. Hours when the two of them would need to hide away from the world. Lily loved him too much to settle for such half-measures. “I really am sorry, but I must go.” She turned on her heel and fled the summer house as if the hounds of hell were on her heels.

Or the Duke of St. Albans.

The man she loved beyond all reason.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“I feel no hesitation in saying it again: Lily Tremayne is a diamond beyond compare!” Hellsmere stated with satisfaction as he and Gabriel stood together, watching as the Earl of Shefford’s secretary was led away after being charged with murdering the earl the previous week.

Lily, Gabriel proudly acknowledged, had been completely correct in her summation regarding the method and reason for Shefford’s demise.

Unfortunately, by the time the two dukes had succeeded in persuading the authorities it was an alternate manner by which the earl had met his death, Shefford’s secretary had, again, as Lily had foretold, already absconded.

The man had eventually been discovered making his way to the coast, no doubt in the hope of securing passage to France, when he was finally apprehended and subsequently brought back to London.

Gabriel and Hellsmere had very much enjoyed being present when the man was questioned. He had now been charged and taken away to the cells.

“So.” Hellsmere turned to Gabriel, eyes alight with speculation. “How much longer are you going to wait before making that lovely lady your own rather than allowing some other lucky bastard to snap her up before you realize you are behaving like a stubborn ass?”

Gabriel glared at the thought of any other man so much as touching Lily. “I am well aware of Lily’s worth. And it is not stubbornness on my part, but a regard for her feelings after I offered her less than she deserved when we—when we began our friendship.”

“Because you did not love her then, and you also thought the age gap was too large to offer her anything more,” Hellsmere reasoned.

“I did not think that I loved her.” He now believed that he had fallen in love with Lily that day in the library, rather than just lust. “And the age gap between us is still very real.”

“But of less importance.”

“True,” he acknowledged. “But when you interrupted us on the terrace the other evening, Lily had just been telling me she could not continue with our...arrangement.”

“Why?”

Gabriel glared his irritation. “Obviously, because she wished it to end.”

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“The evidence of the tears she had cried would seem to imply otherwise,” Hellsmere disagreed. “And I was asking what reason she gave you for ending your relationship.”

“She said it was because she found it too hurtful to continue.” He shook his head. “The last thing I would ever wish to do is hurt Lily.” Merely thinking of her tears that night made his chest ache.

“Hurtful in what way?” Hellsmere persisted.

“I believe she said she was incapable of turning her emotions on and off at will, as seems to be a requirement in a casual arrangement such as ours. That she found the constant uncertainty and inner questioning too exhausting.”

“Uncertainty over what? And questions regarding what?”

“Whether or not she wished to be with me, I assumed.”

“But you did not ask?”

“I did not have time to do so before you arrived.” Gabriel frowned. “After we had all spoken in the summer house, and you had departed—”

“I believe you instructed me to get out,” his friend reminded dryly.

“So I did,” Gabriel acknowledged without apology. “After you left, she told me she was worth more than a few snatched minutes of any gentleman’s time.”

“She is.”

“I know that!”

“Then do something about it.”

“I attempted to offer her more. She said it would not be enough.”

Hellsmere eyed him pityingly. “Exactly what more were you offering her?”

Gabriel’s jaw tensed. “I believed that was something that could only be decided between Lily and me.”

“Then it is time for you to return to the lady and the subject,” Hellsmere advised. “But only if you have true feelings for her and really do have more to offer her than that shoddy arrangement which obviously caused her so much unhappiness,” he cautioned.

The last time the two of them had spoken, Lily had been clear it was her wish not to continue with their intimacy.

Gabriel had not agreed with that decision.

He still did not.

“If you should need one, then you have a perfectly valid reason for calling upon her now that her suspicions regarding Shefford’s secretary have proved to be correct, and she specifically asked you to inform her of our progress,” Hellsmere pointed out. “I will go to Prinny and tell him we no longer need to continue with his investigation, and you should go to Lily and tell her exactly how you feel about her.”

“And if she does not feel the same way about me?”

“Then you will have to suffer that hurt on top of the humiliation of having confessed your unrequited feelings for her.”

“Your compassion is overwhelming!”

The other man grinned. “No one said falling in love was easy, my friend.”

No, they hadn’t.

Much as Gabriel had wished to see Lily this past week, he had instead deliberately kept himself busy with his work for the Crown and his other business concerns in an effort not to think of her at all. He had failed, of course, but being constantly occupied had helped.

Chloe’s birthday had also come and gone. It had necessarily been a muted affair, with one of her closest friends in mourning and another attending her.

But Gabriel had done the best he could for Chloe, in the circumstances, by presenting her with a new mare, her real present. The two of them had enjoyed a quiet dinner at home together rather than the evening out with her friends he had anticipated happening.

Now that the search for the spy was over, Gabriel knew he still needed to complete his unfinished conversation with Lily.

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Even if it resulted in his hurt and humiliation.

Lily had spent an exhausting week with Georgiana and her mother and sisters. Indeed, she had virtually moved into Shefford House so that she might offer them her love and support whenever and in whatever capacity they needed it.

As expected, Lily's mother was not pleased by the arrangement, but she did appreciate receiving firsthand knowledge of the situation after the shocking news of the earl's suicide became publicly known.

Quickly followed by the rumor that it had not been suicide at all.

Then the hunt for who could have been responsible for the earl's death if it was not self-inflicted.

A distressed Georgiana had confided her relief to Lily that she and her mother and sisters had the solid alibi of having been at the musical soiree the evening of the earl's death.

It was the first time Lily had realized how very much Georgiana and the other Stapleton ladies had hated the family patriarch.

Much as Lily despaired at her own parents' grasping natures, she did not dislike them enough to want to murder either of them.

The Countess of Shefford, previously a quiet lady who preferred to remain unnoticed in the background, seemed to blossom overnight now that she was no longer under

the domineering and disapproving thumb of her narrow-minded husband.

Georgiana's sisters became equally as lighthearted now that they were not constantly being told what a disappointment they were to their father.

Only Georgiana remained withdrawn. "I hated him, you see," she told Lily vehemently as the two of them sat together in the family parlor on the seventh day after her father's death. "And I wished him dead dozens of times."

Lily reached out to squeeze her friend's hand. "You did not kill him."

"But I wanted to!"

"Wanting is not the same as doing," Lily soothed. "And no matter what your feelings toward him, they are still your feelings, and you are allowed to express them."

"He was so hateful to us all, always." Tears began to fall down Georgiana's cheeks. "He was a horrible, horrible man who made us all feel worthless and unloved, unlovable, and whose death I do not mourn in the slightest." The tears fell faster.

"I believe he was the one who was worthless and unlovable," Lily stated as she drew her friend into her arms.

Georgiana's tears were long overdue, and they were necessary, even cathartic.

"Why did he have to be such a horrible man? Why?" her friend continued to sob.

Lily knew there was no answer she could give that would not sound insincere or trite, and so she said nothing, but instead continued to hold Georgiana as her friend cried at all past hurts and slights she had received from her father.

Lily had kept her own tears over the ending of her relationship with Gabriel firmly under her control. Mainly because she knew that if she once started to cry, she would not be able to stop her outpouring of grief.

She had not heard from him, or the Duke of Hellsmere, as to how the investigation into the Earl of Shefford's death was going. Truthfully, Lily did not expect to hear from Gabriel again in any sort of capacity after the things she had said to him the last time they spoke privately together.

But she still loved him, still ached for him, still wanted to be with him above all and everyone else.

She knew that would never change.

Gabriel's disappointment was heavy as he returned to his carriage after being informed by the Earl of Truro's butler that Lily was not at home.

The man had denied knowing where Lily was. But knowing Lily as well as he did, Gabriel believed she would be at the Earl of Shefford's residence still, after she had told him of her determination to be supportive of her friend and her family.

To that end, Gabriel instructed his groom to drive to Shefford House.

It was time for him and Lily to be honest about their feelings for each other. Good or bad. Far better for Gabriel to know whether Lily still wished their association to be over than to hope and pray that it wasn't.

As chance would have it, Lily was walking down the front steps of Shefford House, pulling her cloak more tightly about her, when the St. Albans carriage came to a halt outside the house.

Her thoughts seemed to be so preoccupied, she was unaware of the carriage, or him seated inside it, as she stepped down onto the cobbled street. Allowing Gabriel the opportunity to drink his fill of her before making her aware of his presence.

She looked as beautiful as always, but there was a fragility to her appearance and demeanor that had not been there previously. She also appeared thinner, her cheeks pale and her eyes lacking their usual warm glow.

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It would be arrogant on Gabriel's part to think that missing him might be part of the reason for these changes in Lily. It was far more likely to be because she had spent so many hours this past week in the company of the grieving Stapleton family.

Nevertheless, he was frowning his concern as he stepped down from his carriage directly in front of her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lily was so startled at the suddenness of Gabriel's appearance in front of her that she came to a halt before falling back a step. "Gabriel...? I mean, Your Grace—Gabriel!" The second gasp of his name was made as he took a firm grasp of the tops of her arms so that he could claim her lips with his own.

Lily was so stunned, and she had ached to be with him again for so long, that she kissed him back.

Only to come to her senses seconds later when she realized they were standing outside on the street in broad daylight where anyone might see them.

She tilted her head back at the same time as she placed her hands against Gabriel's chest and attempted to push away from him. Attempted, because Gabriel remained unmoving and as steady as a rock.

Lily glanced about them self-consciously before hissing, "Someone might see us."

"Let them."

“But—”

“Let them all see,” he dismissed again. “Lily, contrary to what you might believe, I am not ashamed of, nor do I have any wish to hide, my...feelings for you.”

“I— But—”

“There are no buts to that statement,” he assured.

“Why are you here?” Lily kept her gaze lowered as she attempted to change the subject to something she found less confusing. “Have you come to tell me the earl’s secretary has been found?”

“Found and arrested,” he stated with satisfaction. “But that is not the reason I have sought you out today.”

“No?”

“No. Darling Lily.” He held both her hands in his own. “When I offered you more a week ago, I do not believe I made myself clear. With your permission, I should like to do so now.”

It had been the most miserable week of Lily’s existence, knowing she would never spend another moment alone with Gabriel. Never be kissed by him. Made love to by him.

She was almost afraid to hope what he was going to say next. “You have my permission.”

He nodded his satisfaction. “Lily, you are the most beautiful, intelligent, kind, and passionate woman it has ever been my good fortune to know, and I am deeply sorry if

I ever allowed you to think or believe I felt or thought otherwise.”

Her smile was shaky. “I think we might both be guilty of having done that.”

He eyed her hopefully. “We are?”

Lily took her courage in her hands and continued. “I, in turn, believe you to be the most handsome, intelligent, kind, and passionate gentleman it has ever been my good fortune to know, and I am deeply sorry if I allowed you to think I ever thought otherwise.”

“I love you, Lily,” he told her forcefully. “All of you. Every single part of you. I know I will continue to love you until the day I die. This past week without you has been hell on earth.”

Tears blurred her vision. “I love you in the same way, and this past week has been so horrible. I have always loved you, Gabriel,” she added shyly.

“Always?”

She nodded. “I fell in love with you the night of the ball when Chloe was introduced into Society. You, and the love I have always known I felt for you, are the reasons I knew I would never be able to love another man.”

“Dear God...!” He shuddered. “If I had not overheard you all talking that day— If I had not kissed you or made my scandalous suggestion— I cannot believe how close we came to missing each other!” He released a shaky breath before falling to one knee in front of her, unconcerned with the dampness of the cobbled road beneath. “Lily, you are already the greatest love of my life, but the ‘more’ I wished to offer you, to plead with you to agree to accept, is to consent to becoming my duchess.”

Lily was overwhelmed to see this haughty gentleman down on one knee in front of her in the middle of the wet street, proposing marriage to her. She had never dreamed... Never dared to hope...

“Please, Lily,” he encouraged gruffly.

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She swallowed before speaking, still too stunned to believe this was really happening.
“Do you truly promise to love me always?”

“I do,” he vowed.

“Will you remain steadfast and true to only me and our marriage?”

“There will never be anyone else for me but you, my darling Lily,” he promised.

A blush warmed her cheeks. “Will we have children together?”

“As many as you wish.”

She winced. “What will my friends in the Spinsters’ Alliance say if I defect so soon after we formed our association?”

“I will tell them that I cannot live without you, and then I shall ask their permission to marry you.”

Her eyes widened. “You will?”

“I shall.”

And as Lily knew only too well, no one would dare refuse the Duke of St. Albans.

She was right. No one did.

Her friends, even Georgiana, were all pleased she had found love and was to marry the Duke of St. Albans. Chloe found it hilarious that Lily had fallen in love with her father, teasing her as to who was the “perfect angel” after all.

Lily hadn’t liked to tell her friend that she hadn’t fallen in love with Gabriel because he was an angel, but because he was the opposite.

Nor had her own father dared to refuse his permission when Gabriel asked for Lily’s hand. She had also made Gabriel promise before he approached her father that he would make no concessions to her parents, that they had already received enough from him, even if they were unaware of it.

Their wedding was spectacular and attended by the Prince Regent himself, amongst many other illustrious guests.

Their honeymoon was a passionate affair that did not see the newly married couple leave their bedchamber at St. Albans Park for the first week. A time when Gabriel’s curiosity was also satisfied as to the length of Lily’s hair. Once released from its confines, it did indeed reach fully to the soft curves of her bottom.

They eventually stirred themselves enough to travel slowly through England up to Scotland, their destination Inverness, so that Lily might be reunited with her sister and introduced to her sister’s husband and baby son.

The reunion had gone so well that the Comte and Comtesse de Villere, accompanied by their son, were invited to join the duke and duchess at St. Albans Park for Lily’s birthday that December, and they had remained afterward to share in the Christmas celebrations. The Earl and Countess of Truro were not invited, nor were Lily’s brothers and their wives.

The de Villeres had happily returned to Scotland in the New Year, having refused the invitation for them to stay and attend the London Season, stating they preferred the

quieter life they led together in Inverness.

Lily's position in Society was now such that she could choose to have as little to do with her parents and her brothers and their families as possible. Which she did.

Being Gabriel's wife was her honor and her privilege. It was one she intended to cherish for the rest of her life.

As she intended to love and cherish her husband, her darling Gabriel, during all the happy years of their married life together.

Five Years Later

"Take note of those five precious young ladies over there, my son," Gabriel murmured to his six-month-old heir, Henry George Fitzhugh Lord.

The baby gurgled happily, sitting on his father's strong thighs as the two of them sat beneath the shade of an old oak tree in the gardens at St. Albans Park.

"All of them, and you, and your older sister Chloe, are the sole purpose of my existence," Gabriel continued warmly. "I consider it my privilege and priority to love and protect all of you. One day, in the future, you and I will protect them together. But for now, I alone consider it my greatest honor to be allowed to keep that vigil."

He gazed fondly across the manicured lawn to where his beloved wife and their two sets of twin daughters, four-year-old Daisy and Dahlia, and two-year-old Poppy and Primrose, were chasing butterflies.

Five years ago, Gabriel had thought he had settled for the realization that his family would only ever consist of himself and Chloe. But just a few short years later, he not only had his adored soulmate, Lily, but four more daughters and a son.

Gabriel's cup of happiness, literally, runneth over, and he knew Lily felt the same way about him and their children and the life they had built together.

Fire ignited in Gabriel's gut, and his cock stirred as he gazed at the barely visible swell of Lily's abdomen where their sixth child, or possibly their sixth and seventh, considering their penchant for twins, nestled safely beneath breasts that were already growing larger. Breasts Gabriel did indeed love to suckle on, to draw nectar from, as much as his daughters had and Henry still did. As far as Gabriel was concerned, Lily only became more beautiful and desirable with each pregnancy.

Gabriel freely acknowledged he loved his wife obsessively and possessively. But he was happy to share her, and her body, with their offspring, knowing that when darkness came, she would become his wild and passionate Lily. That she had learned how to "secure his interest in her" in the most basic and erotic ways possible. Pleasures the two of them indulged in fully and often. With a desire which burned so strongly between them, it only grew deeper with every day, every week, every year that passed.

Against all the odds, he and Lily had found each other, had fallen deeply in love with each other, and now they were living together in what they knew was their own paradise on earth.