



A Duke for the Taking (Wayward Dukes' Alliance #26)

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Category: Historical

Description: Upon her brothers passing, Harriet Comeford seeks out the Duke of Pendrake for help in finding a secure position for herself as a companion or as a governess in a respectable household.

Harriets brother assured her that he and the duke were soldiers in arms and brothers on the battlefield, so the duke will protect her as though she were his own sister.

With her brother now gone, what does Harriet have to lose now that she is all alone in the world?

Maximillian, Duke of Pendrake, remembers Harriets brother fondly and is not about to forsake his duty to a fallen friend.

However, Harriet has arrived at his home just as a house party is about to get underway.

Maximillian is in search of a wife, and every ton diamond present at his week-long party is hoping to catch his eye.

But it is shy Harriet, who is staying on as his guest and doing her utmost to keep out of his way, that he cannot seem to get out of his thoughts.

What if the best position he can secure for her is as his wife?

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She took a moment to dry her tears. “This is actually humiliating for me. I am a stranger to you. And here I am, dropping in uninvited at an obviously inopportune time for you, and begging a favor.”

“You are the sister of a friend.”

“And the first thing out of my mouth was to ask for your help.” She shook her head, silently berating herself. “That was very rude of me.”

“Hardly,” he muttered. “And it is no imposition at all to assist you in this modest request. Is there anything else you need?”

“No,” she said, her eyes widening in surprise at the question. “The abbess quite thoughtfully provided me with a letter of recommendation when I left the school, and I know there are agencies that specialize in providing companions and governesses. I thought I would try those, but I have no idea which ones are reputable and which ones are not.”

The duke leaned forward, his gaze intent on her. “I have a house full of guests at the moment and will not have time to give proper attention to your situation this week. Here is what I propose...”

She nodded, eager to hear him out.

“You’ll stay on as my guest for the week, and we shall deal with getting you hired in a respectable household once the house party is over. How does that sound?”

“Exceedingly generous.”

He regarded her thoughtfully. “It also helps me out.”

“How so?” It seemed he was giving her every benefit and asking nothing in return.

“It will be nice to chat with someone who is not looking to trap me into marriage. I hate these bothersome summer parties. It is bad enough I am chased around London during the Season, but to be chased in my own home...well, that is the final insult.”

She studied him, confused. “Your Grace, this is your home. You are the duke. If you do not like these parties, then why hold them?”

“Because I have a meddlesome grandmother who is determined to see me married.”

He was grinning, and spoke with such affection, that Harriet could not help but smile in return. “You are fortunate to have someone who cares so much about you.”

He nodded. “I’ll introduce you to the dowager duchess at supper. She breathes fire like a dragon, but she is really a lamb. Ridiculously sentimental and soft-hearted. You’ll join us, of course.”

Harriet tensed. “No, it isn’t possible. You see, I...I don’t have anything suitable to wear. I would embarrass you, and mostly myself. Please do not feel obligated to include me in any of your activities. But do let me know if I can make myself useful to you and your family in any way.”

The duke remained silent for a long while, no doubt contemplating what he should do with her. In truth, she did not mind being put to work for her room and board.

His generosity was most surprising.

“I’ll have Mrs. Watkins deliver supper to your room this evening,” he said with a slap to his muscled thighs as he came to a decision. “You must be tired from your travels anyway. But first thing tomorrow, I’ll put my grandmother to the task of finding suitable clothes for you to wear.”

“A uniform?” She nodded, believing he might put her to work as a maid since he had a full house and his regular staff would be run ragged.

“No, Miss Comeford. Have I not made myself clear that you are to be my guest? George and I saved each other countless times on the battlefield. I do not know if those who have never fought in a war can understand the bond of friendship that forms between soldiers under these circumstances. Of all the men in my regiment, George was the most capable. Smart, sensible, able to keep his wits in the face of enemy fire. I was so impressed, I offered him a position on my estate. But he never wrote to me or followed up after the war ended.”

“He told me of your kindness. However, by the time the war ended and he made his way home, he knew he was dying. He enjoyed serving under your command and always held you in the highest regard. In truth, he admired you tremendously. I know he wanted very badly to take you up on the offer, but he could hardly crawl out of bed on his own by the time he returned to England.”

The duke’s expression was all seriousness. “So this is why he did not come to me? I wish I had known. I would have done what I could to help you. He was promoted out of my regiment about two months before the battle of Waterloo. He had a stubborn cough by that time. Was this the start of his illness?”

She nodded. “Consumption is what killed him. It ravaged his body.”

The duke raked a hand through his hair. “I wish he had told me.”

“He did not want you to see him in his weakened condition. At times, he did not want me to see him, either. But he was too ill to care for himself, so I ignored his demands and took him to the best doctors in the hope of a cure. He seemed to be on the mend, but it is a wicked disease and finally claimed him.”

They said no more as Flint rolled in a cart laden with cakes, fruit, and sandwiches of every variety. With it was a tall pitcher of lemonade that looked delightfully refreshing.

To her surprise, the duke dismissed his butler, and then went about the task of serving her himself.

She watched him, wide-eyed as he piled a cake, a sandwich, and some fruit on her plate before handing it to her. “You are an unusual man, Your Grace.”

“Why? Because I can actually cut a slice of cake and pour you a glass of lemonade?”

She laughed. “Yes, something like that. I see you like doing things for yourself, but obviously feel constrained by the expectations of your rank.”

He handed her the lemonade and then poured a glass for himself. “Tell me about yourself, Harry. Sorry, that just slipped out. George always called you that when he spoke of you. Do you mind if I do the same?”

“Not at all. Please do. It takes me back to happier times in our youth when George and I used to tease each other. I was Harry or Hairy or Scary Hairy, but never just Harriet.”

He took a bite of his cucumber sandwich. “My name is Maximilian. You can call me Max.”

She had just taken a sip of her lemonade and now coughed as it went down the wrong pipe. “I think I had better refer to you as Your Grace.”

“All right, you’ll be the one to decide when you are comfortable enough around me to call me Max. But I am still going to call you Harry whenever it pleases me to do so. Frankly, the name suits you. Why did he call you Hairy or Scary Hairy?”

She laughed softly. “Because of my hair. It was quite thick and curly when I was younger, and also a most unfashionable ginger color back then. It has darkened to a warmer shade of cinnamon now, but still remains unfashionable. Whenever I let my hair down, it springs out wide and practically swallows my face.”

She made a silly face to emphasize her point.

He threw his head back and chuckled heartily. “There is something earnestly charming about you, Harry. That’s what George always said, and I see that he is right.”

When they finished their light repast, he rose and tugged on the bell pull to signal the end of their conversation. “It is time for me to attend to my guests. Mrs. Watkins will show you up to your quarters now. Do not hesitate to ask her for anything you need. Promise me that you will, Harry.”

She nodded. “Very well, but must I point out again that you are being exceedingly generous?”

He grinned. “Nonsense, it is the least I can do. George told me how he always used to tug on your pigtails to tease you. He said you were such a sweet girl, and never got angry with him even when he was goading you. I see that sweetness in your smile and the brightness of your eyes. If you had pigtails, I would be pulling on them, too. Childish, I know. But you are a refreshing change from these ton diamonds with their

tiresome airs and perfectly styled facades. One never knows what is real and what is not. I need you to promise me one thing.”

She nodded without hesitation. “Yes, anything.”

“I want you always to tell me the truth.”

He was confusing her again. “Should I not always do this? Why would I ever lie to you?”

His laughter was curt and more than a little bitter. “Because everyone lies to me.”

She tried not to look appalled, but was this not a horrible way to live? “Your Grace, I had no idea you were so cynical. I give you my word of honor, you shall always have the truth from me.”

“And not hold anything back?” he asked.

“Nothing held back.” She nodded. “Even if it not something you wish to hear. However, I do not want to say something that might hurt or insult you.”

“But this is precisely what I hope you will do. An honest opinion can never be an insult, Harry. Do not remain silent out of politeness or tact. Tell me exactly what is on your mind. I need that. Everyone else only tells me what they think I want to hear. Will you be my eyes and ears during this party?”

Now she understood. “You want me to spy on the young ladies who hope to marry you? That is awful. I would feel like a rat.”

“I phrased it badly. Not spying. But you will be in their company and might hear things they would never tell me to my face. Marriage is a dangerous business. Am I a

fool for wishing to find a wife who has a good and compassionate heart? Who actually likes me? Hopefully, who will grow to love me?"

"Your Grace, may I be truthful starting now?"

He nodded.

"You are an extremely handsome man. It cannot have escaped your notice how eagerly women respond to you. You have only to look in the mirror to see how exceptional you are."

He laughed. "You think I am handsome?"

"Heavens, yes," she said with a roll of her eyes. "But more important, you have fine qualities. Of course, this is only a first impression since I have just met you today. However, I also know what George has told me."

"I'm curious," he said, crossing muscular arms over his chest. "What are my fine qualities?"

Other than his exquisite good looks?

She had already made a cake of herself by revealing her thoughts.

Why would he care about her opinion of him when she had already proven herself to be a goose, just as silly as all the other women who swooned over him? But she gave thought to what George had told her. "You are compassionate, so I understand why you would seek a wife with that same quality. Especially when you have so many people who work for you relying on your goodness. You know how to be a true friend. You are scholarly." She motioned to the books that filled his mahogany bookshelves. "Your estate seems to be well run, which means you are also clever and

have business acumen. There are many lords out there who may have good looks but are fools.”

“Too many of them,” he muttered.

“You are not among that lot. These ladies, and I am sure every last one of them feels as I do, will genuinely fall in love with you. I cannot imagine how they could not. You have only to choose the one you like best.”

He looked dangerously appealing as he arched an eyebrow in response to her statement. “You truly believe it will be that easy for me?”

“Yes,” she said with a slight shake of her head.

He cast her a wry smile. “No, Harry. You know very little about the ton . Here’s a word of warning for you. Do not fall prey to any of the lords who might show interest in you, for they would only take you on as their mistress, never as a wife.”

She gasped.

“Forgive my bluntness, but it is necessary if I am to protect you while you are in my care. They are all here for one thing, to marry a title or a healthy bank account, or both if they are fortunate enough to attain that golden pinnacle of a titled heiress.”

It all sounded quite mercenary to her. “I doubt anyone will notice me, so I ought to be safe enough.”

They were both now standing, and his face was so close that their breaths mingled. “Here’s where you are wrong, Harry.”

“What do you mean?”

He traced his hand lightly along the line of her jaw. “Do you have any idea how pretty you are?”

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Pendrake Hall

Devonshire, England

July 1816

“OH, DEAR. IT is massive,” Harriet Comeford muttered to herself while staring at the stately manor in the distance that served as the Duke of Pendrake’s country home. The sun beat down on her as she approached the grand house with growing trepidation.

Had she made a terrible mistake in coming here?

It seemed as though a house party was about to take place, for several elegant carriages had passed her as she walked along the expansive drive toward the house on this warm summer’s day. The carriages now filled the courtyard, and liveried footmen were scurrying back and forth to unload trunks and carry them inside. An older gentleman who appeared to be the head butler rushed out to escort the recent arrivals into the house.

Harriet stood off to the side, hesitating to step forward since no one seemed to have a moment to attend to her.

She clutched her brother’s letter of introduction in one hand and a pouch carrying her worldly belongings in the other. The pouch was not all that heavy since she had little other than a few gowns to her name.

“Oh, dear,” she muttered again, wondering whether her brother had truly been a good friend to the Duke of Pendrake. “George, I hope you were not exaggerating or I am done for.”

But he had claimed they were.

She hoped it was not a complete fabrication.

With her brother now gone, Harriet had nowhere else to go. Nor did she have the means to travel back to Yorkshire where she had been raised or the convent school in Gloucester where she had been teaching until a few months ago.

Three gowns and this letter of introduction comprised the sum of her worldly possessions.

The carriages that had arrived just ahead of her were now driven off to the carriage house which was situated beside the stable.

This left her standing alone in front of the duke’s imposing home.

“Miss, you seem lost,” a gentleman said, startling her out of her thoughts as he emerged from the stable and approached her.

Harriet knew she must have looked quite out of her element, but managed a friendly smile as he reached her side in a few long strides. “Good morning, sir. Not lost. Just...a bit uncertain.”

He was a big man, standing a full head taller than herself, and powerfully built.

“Uncertain?” He had dark hair and smoky gray eyes that could make a girl’s heart flutter. His attire was casual, a work shirt that stretched across his chest and muscled

shoulders, and dark trousers that molded to his long legs. His boots were scuffed, but otherwise finely made.

All in all, he appeared too elegant to be one of the stable grooms. “How may I help you?”

She let out a breath and smiled again. “I am Harriet Comeford. My brother was George Comeford, a good friend of His Grace, or so my brother claimed.”

The man frowned. “Was?”

She nodded. “George died a month ago.”

She was surprised by the compassion she noted in the man’s eyes. “I am so very sorry,” he said with unmistakable sincerity. “Miss Comeford, come into the house and we shall get you properly squared away.”

“Oh.” She held back when he took her lightly by the elbow and started to lead her in through the front door. “Sir, perhaps I ought to go in from the kitchen. You see, I am not a guest. His Grace does not expect me or even know who I am.”

He arched an eyebrow. “You are George’s sister. I can assure you, the duke will be quite pleased to meet you.”

“Truly?” She released a breath and smiled at the man yet again. “That eases my mind greatly. You seem to have known my brother, as well. Did you fight in the war alongside him?”

“Yes, I was there with your brother.”

“Then I thank you sincerely for your service to the Crown and for keeping all of us

safe here in England.”

He nodded, then took her travel pouch out of her hand and gave it over to one of the footmen standing at attention in the entry hall. “Tell Mrs. Watkins that Miss Comeford’s belongings are to be placed in the blue bedchamber.”

The footman’s gaze flicked to her before returning to her companion. “At once, Your Grace.”

“Your Grace?” It took a moment for Harriet to grasp who this man was. “You are the duke?”

He nodded. “Forgive me, Miss Comeford. I should have identified myself sooner, but I liked that you had no idea who I was.”

She had not the chance to say another word before he led her down the hall toward his study. She tried to take in as much of her surroundings as possible, for portraits lined the hallway walls, and she was curious who these people might be.

The prior dukes and duchesses, of course.

And their children.

Was one of them this impressive duke as a child?

“Keep up, Miss Comeford,” he remarked, leading her along.

“Yes, Your Grace.” She would have liked to study these portraits, but the duke was walking too fast for her to get a good look, and everything passed in a blur.

He certainly was decisive in his strides and did not waste any time dawdling.

She was used to walking briskly, but still had to take two steps for every one of his in order to keep up.

He led her into a large room with beautiful mahogany shelves that lined the walls and were filled with books she hoped he might allow her to peruse at her leisure. But now was not the time to ask.

In the center of the room stood a massive desk, also of the same mahogany wood. Beside the desk were two leather chairs that appeared well padded and quite comfortable. A magnificent carpet of oriental design took up most of the floor, its deep maroon and gold hues enhanced by the richness of the surrounding wood.

“You must be thirsty and likely hungry,” he said, tugging on a bell pull by the door. “Would you prefer lemonade or tea? Cakes or cucumber sandwiches?”

She was surprised to be offered anything, but quite grateful for it. “Lemonade and cakes would be lovely, but you needn’t go to the bother.”

“No bother at all.” He escorted her to one of the leather chairs and motioned for her to sit. “Did you walk here from the coaching station? I’m sure you must be tired as well as parched. Once we are done talking, I will give you over to Mrs. Watkins. She is the housekeeper at Pendrake Hall and will see to all your needs. Let her know if your bedchamber is not to your liking and we shall put you in another room.”

“Your Grace,” Harriet said with a soft laugh, “unless the blue room is actually a cupboard, I am certain I will love it.”

He grinned as he settled in the chair beside hers and stretched his long legs before him. “It is slightly larger than a cupboard, I assure you.”

It was not long before a butler responded to his summons. “Come in, Flint. This is

Miss Comeford, one of my honored guests. She is in dire need of lemonade and cakes. Have Cook prepare a tray for us and have her pile it high with a sampling of everything. Sweets, savories, and anything else she has available in her kitchen.”

“At once, Your Grace.”

Harriet recognized Flint as the head butler who had earlier escorted the new arrivals from their carriages into the house.

The duke certainly ran an efficient household.

The servants she had encountered seemed attentive to their duties and proud of their roles, including Flint, who had a kind look about him.

“Thank you, Mr. Flint,” she said as he bowed to her and was about to walk out.

He glanced at the duke, then smiled. “You are most welcome, Miss Comeford.”

Harriet returned her attention to the duke.

“Now, Miss Comeford,” he said with unexpected gentleness, “tell me about George.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but the words caught in her throat. She hadn’t meant to cry, but her tears were suddenly flowing and she seemed unable to stop them. “Do forgive me,” she said, appalled to find the waterworks gushing.

The strain of the past few months, first in nursing her brother and helplessly watching him fade away, and then in finding herself all alone with barely enough funds to travel here, was hitting her all at once now.

She searched for her handkerchief and could not find it.

“Here,” the duke said, and withdrew his own to hand to her. “Take your time, Miss Comeford. We needn’t speak of George if it proves too difficult for you.”

“I’ll be all right in a moment. It’s just that I’ve been keeping my grief buried inside for a while now. I did not mean to have it erupt like this.”

“It is quite understandable. You must have been worried that I would refuse to see you after you traveled all this way.”

She nodded. “But you’ve been so kind in welcoming me into your home. Of course, I realize that I cannot impose on you. Your allowing me to stay the night is generous.”

“It is no imposition at all,” he assured her.

She let out a ragged breath. “I am hardly a guest. But I would be most grateful for your assistance in...in...would it be terribly presumptuous of me to ask for your help in finding a position for me? I am willing to work as a companion to an elderly lady or as a governess. I am quite good with children.”

He frowned. “Are your circumstances that dire?”

She winced. “I had some savings, but spent all of it caring for my brother. I taught at a convent school, St. Mary’s in Gloucester, but had to give up my position and return to our home in Yorkshire when George’s health failed. The abbess has since filled my position.”

“So you came here?”

“Yes.” She felt truly embarrassed. “George insisted on it. I am here because I promised him that I would come to see you. I could not renege on a deathbed promise. Even so, I hesitated.”

“Why?”

CHAPTER TWO

MAX'S VALET HAD just finished attaching his cufflinks to his freshly pressed sleeve cuffs, and was now handing Max his jacket to complete his formal dinner attire, when a bombazine clad whirlwind who was the dowager duchess blew into his ducal chamber with all the subtlety of a gale force storm. "Maximilian!"

"Grandmama, you might have knocked." Did the woman not understand boundaries? "I could have been standing here naked."

She ignored the comment. "Who is that girl you've placed in the Blue Room? Only our most exalted guests are ever given that bedchamber."

Max grinned. "Have you met her? What do you think?"

His grandmother arched a silver eyebrow. "She smiled at me."

"Shocking," he teased. "She has a nice smile, doesn't she?"

His grandmother harrumphed . "She forgot herself and almost hugged me."

Max laughed in surprise. "She hugged you?"

"Almost . I thought you had brought a mistress into this house, but she certainly does not behave like a mistress."

"Because she isn't one. When have you ever known me to be so indiscreet? I would

never be so disrespectful as to bring one of my dalliances into our home.”

“Then who is this girl? She welcomed me into her chamber, practically hauled me in and would not stop thanking me for my generosity. Apparently, you have volunteered me to find her some gowns to wear. She offered to sew the alterations herself, assuring me she was excellent with needle and thread.”

“That sounds like Harry,” he muttered.

“Harry?”

Max shrugged into his jacket, then spared a final glance in the mirror to make certain he cut an impeccable figure in his black tie and tails. “Her name is Harriet Comeford. She is George Comeford’s sister. I’ve told you about George.”

She nodded. “He’s one of the few men I’ve ever heard you praise.”

“He passed away recently, Grandmama.”

Her expression immediately softened. “Oh, my dear. I am so terribly sorry.”

“So am I. He was a good friend. There was no one I trusted more when bullets were flying. But come with me,” he said, almost ready to escort her downstairs to the drawing room where they were to join their guests for drinks before dinner. He had one stop for them to make beforehand. “Let me properly introduce you to Harry.”

“Why do you insist on calling her that?”

“I don’t know. George always referred to her in this way. She doesn’t mind at all, and gave me permission to call her that. Of course, I’ll always refer to her as Miss Comeford among company.”

He stopped in front of Harriet's door and knocked.

Soft footsteps padded across the carpet, and then the door was suddenly thrown open.
"Your Graces! Do come in."

Sparkling green eyes stared back at him.

Her smile was pure sunshine.

She was barefoot, had let down her hair, and had a half-eaten meal on a tray atop a small table beside her window.

Max realized they must have interrupted her while she ate her dinner.

Harry subtly tried to tug her gown down to cover her bare toes peeking out from under the hem. It was such a prim, nothing of a gown. A dark green muslin with not a single adornment, but he could not stop staring at it.

Well, he was really staring at her and the shapely way she filled it out. However, she required a little more meat on her bones.

She was still quite pretty, however. "Miss Comeford..."

He cleared his throat, and was appalled to find his body heating as those big, innocent eyes stared back at him.

And her hair...Lord help him, was there ever a lovelier tumble of cinnamon curls on a girl? Or prettier eyes that shone like emerald starlight?

Once more, she smiled up at him in expectation.

Oh, Lord.

She had the sweetest dimples.

And little ears that curled at the tops.

He cleared his throat again.

“Would you care to sit?” she offered when he said nothing more than her name.

He shook out of his bemusement. “No, I merely brought my grandmother here to properly introduce you.”

He then made the pointless introductions since Harriet and his grandmother already appeared to be old friends.

“You have an excellent grandson, Your Grace. You must be very proud of him.”

“I am. Thank you, my dear.” She cast the girl a dotting smile.

Max looked on in amazement as his grandmother fawned over the girl.

Well done, Harry. One dragon dowager duchess tamed.

It hadn’t taken George’s sister very long to accomplish this task.

A remarkable accomplishment since his grandmother never warmed to anyone this quickly.

Harriet, for he really should not be getting too comfortable thinking of her as Harry, cast him another breathtaking smile. “You look quite spectacular, Your Grace. If I

may speak honestly, I believe the ladies will be in a swoon over you.”

He grunted to dismiss the possibility.

These ladies would be swooning over his title and wealth, and not give a fig about him.

Perhaps the war years had made him too cynical.

His features were not elegant.

He looked more like a battle-hardened soldier than a gentleman, a man more used to slogging through mud than through a glittering London ballroom.

He had scars and a small bump on his nose where it had been broken several years ago on some battlefield.

Harriet was looking at him with her big eyes wide so that they appeared to take up half of her face. The other half was also quite striking, for she had a slim nose and a gracefully curved mouth that he would not mind kissing if the opportunity ever arose.

But it would not, for he had to concentrate on finding himself a wife from among the bejeweled elite of London. Oh, how he hated the thought of endless hours engaged in nonsensical chatter.

He hated these blasted house parties and should not have allowed his grandmother to talk him into holding one.

Harriet was frowning at him. “What, Miss Comeford?”

“You will scare the young ladies if you scowl at them the way you are scowling at

me.”

“I am not scowling at you. I was merely thinking to myself. If those ladies are so timid as to be afraid of a harmless frown, then am I not better off without them?”

“Why would you bring them all the way here just to dismiss them?” she asked, pursing her lips that once again brought on his urge to kiss her. “It would be a shame to pass up the opportunity to get to know them better. This is why they have come to Pendrake Hall. This is why you invited them here.”

“My grandmother did the inviting,” he corrected her. “This was never my idea.”

“But it is done and it is a good idea to have them all conveniently close to you. You’ve mentioned they are here for a week, so why not use the time to learn more about these young ladies? Should you not have some sort of plan? Or a schedule?”

He had never given it a thought.

She opened her mouth as though to say something more, then snapped it shut.

“Yes, Miss Comeford?” He tried to hold back his amused laughter. The girl seemed to have a comment about everything, but was he not the one to blame for urging her to voice her opinions?

“I wish to be honest again,” she said.

He chuckled. “Please, go ahead.”

“Thank you.”

“Not at all. I’m eager to hear what you have to say.” There was an earnest sweetness

about her that even had his grandmother smiling as she prepared to listen to the girl.

“It seems to me that you put on as much of a facade as they do. So why not let down your guard a little and see what happens? They might shed theirs and allow you to see who they really are.”

“You do not know much about dukes, do you?” he remarked.

“Nothing at all,” she admitted with a nod. “You are the first one I have ever met.”

“It is obvious.”

She blushed. “Oh.”

He gentled his manner because Harriet meant well and he did not wish to discourage her from speaking her mind. “These ladies would eat me alive if I were ever to let down my defenses.”

The notion seemed to shock her.

“You also know very little about how the ton operates,” he warned her gently. “This is why you must trust no one, for they will not hesitate to take advantage of you to achieve their own purposes the moment you give them an opening.”

“Are you saying that I should not trust you, either?”

“My grandson did not mean to sound so harsh,” his grandmother interjected. “Yes, you should always trust me and Pendrake. I know he sounded quite cynical just now, but he was not exaggerating. The Marriage Mart is cutthroat. These young ladies and their families will do anything to undermine their competition, and use anyone to gain advantage. They will scheme, betray, and in general behave as they never would

under normal circumstances. Just keep alert, my dear. Do not hesitate to come to me or Pendrake if you are uncertain about anything.”

“And do not allow yourself to be cornered alone by any of the gentlemen,” Max added as a reminder. “They will try to take advantage.”

“Your Grace,” she said, now looking up at him in obvious dismay, “perhaps I ought find lodgings elsewhere for the week.”

“No,” he said in a rush, silently berating himself for scaring the girl. “You are safest here. And you will always be safe under my guard and that of my grandmother. Perhaps I was too strident in my warning. It is just as likely that all of my guests will ignore you completely.”

His grandmother patted the girl’s hand. “Or will genuinely take to your kindness and befriend you. They are mostly good people, but under a lot of strain when settling a daughter of marriageable age successfully.”

Max raked a hand through his hair as he turned to his grandmother. “Now that I’ve made a complete hash of this conversation and left Harriet thoroughly bemused...”

His grandmother laughed. “Yes, you’ve done quite a job of it, Pendrake.”

“I know,” he said with a wince. “Harriet, just stay close to my grandmother for these next few days and allow her to pamper you. There is no one kinder or wiser than this old dragon.”

“Old dragon, am I? Impertinent whelp,” she teased back.

“Perhaps not so old or all that much of a dragon,” he admitted, giving her a light kiss on the cheek. “I think it is time for us to join our guests, sweetheart.”

Harriet eeped .

His gaze fell to her once again. “Seems you have more to tell me.”

She shook her head. “I commend you for the lovely way you treat your grandmother.”

He chuckled. “Thank you, Harry.”

Max waited until he and his grandmother were down the hall and out of Harriet’s hearing before he broke into a broad grin. “She’s different, don’t you think?”

His grandmother nodded. “She’s lovely. Just as you said she would be.”

But Max sobered a moment later. “I need to take care of her, Grandmama. I owe it to her brother. Now that you have had a better look at her, will you help me?”

“Yes, Max. We’ll start by finding her some proper clothes to wear. She’s quite a pretty thing and might turn out to be especially stunning with a little attention.”

“But don’t turn her into an artificial ton diamond,” he said with a frown. “She’s loveliest just as she is.”

His grandmother studied him with unusual intensity. “Max, do not tell me you are developing feelings for her.”

“Feelings?” He shook his head and laughed. “Not at all. Fulfilling a duty to a friend is not at all the same thing.”

He placed the old dowager’s hand in the crook of his arm and escorted her into the drawing room where their guests were awaiting them. It did not take long for him to

be surrounded by England's most beautiful debutantes.

And yet, the abundance of silk upon their nicely shaped bodies and diamonds at their slender throats did nothing for him.

Not one of them had big, bright eyes or dimples.

Not that it signified anything.

Harriet was different and she amused him.

He shook out of the thought as the supper bell rang.

Max escorted his grandmother into the manor's formal dining room where the table was easily large enough to accommodate their forty guests. A white lace tablecloth covered the entire stretch and silver epergnes bearing exotic flowers grown in his own conservatory stood at measured intervals along the center of the table. Alternating with the epergnes were massive silver candelabra that held scented candles. Crystal glasses at each setting formed prisms of light as candlelight shone on them. The plates, made of finest bone china, had been specially designed for one of the earlier dukes and bore the Pendrake crest, as did the silverware.

The guests took their assigned seats while he and his grandmother took their places on opposite ends of the table.

While custom required the ladies of highest rank to be seated beside him, the rules were relaxed for this house party. He was not surprised to find a ton diamond on either side of him, both of them stunning blondes with blue eyes. "Lady Marianna," he muttered, nodding to the first, and then doing the same to acknowledge the other beauty. "Lady Winifred."

One giggled and the other cast him a seductive smile.

He quickly dismissed one as too silly and the other as too scheming.

Both fluttered their eyelashes at him, but their flirtations held little appeal for him, for their stares were vacant, denoting little intelligence behind their azure orbs.

Unfortunately, their excruciatingly dull conversations confirmed his first impression of them. Both were unsuitable for him. Not that he was seeking Galileo in a gown. His wife did not need to be the wisest person in a century. But she did need to complete a sentence without an inane giggle. And she did need to be inexperienced in the sexual arts.

He was considered a rake.

He knew how to give a woman pleasure.

Nor was he bashful in the least when it came to trying new things.

But he had no doubt that Lady Winifred, even at the tender age of nineteen, could teach him a thing or two about these games of pleasure.

The girl had a ravenous look and it was not for the sumptuous fare being brought to the table.

She would eat him alive for breakfast.

Were he to marry her, she would be cheating on him before their honeymoon was over.

As for Lady Marianna, she was now running her foot up his leg while licking her lips

suggestively.

Well, there were six other young ladies he had yet to meet. There had to be a few among them who could hold an interesting conversation and were unspoiled. Did a duke not need to be certain his wife would be faithful to him?

He needed more than faithfulness, which was one among several important traits.

He wanted a wife with common sense, a cheerful disposition, a smile that lightened his heart, and unwavering honesty.

Yes, honesty and faithfulness were top requirements.

Without those, there could never be trust.

And trust was the vital foundation of any good marriage, was it not?

He glanced down the table and discretely studied the other six hopefuls. They were all beautiful and should have appealed to him. For some reason, he could not muster any enthusiasm for them.

Their smiles were false.

Every last one had a mask in place.

Well, perhaps he was judging them too harshly. Was he not putting on a false face, too? But it irked him that they did not have sincerely heartwarming smiles.

After supper, the men remained around the table having their smokes and port while the ladies retired to the drawing room. Not long afterward, the men joined them. Since this was the first night of the house party and many guests had arrived late in

the day, the entertainments were light and several of the elders retired early.

Card tables were set up in one of the sitting rooms off the formal drawing room, and a harpist played in a corner of the drawing room to provide music but not overwhelm those guests who wished to converse while strolling along the terrace or in the formal gardens.

Some of the gentlemen retired to the billiards room.

Others liberally refilled their glasses with brandy since Max did not stint on the libations available for the asking.

It was almost dawn by the time the last of the guests retired to their quarters. Since Max had stayed up with these stragglers and then made a round of the house to make certain all was securely locked up, he was the last one to head to bed.

He usually kept earlier hours when at Pendrake Hall, retiring around midnight and waking at cock's crow to take an early morning ride along the familiar trails that were sometimes shrouded in mist at the start of his ride. He would skip that routine this morning and grab an extra few hours of sleep.

Most guests would not wake until much later.

He would alter his riding schedule and invite those who wished to ride on a shortened excursion around the neighboring countryside in the afternoon instead.

But he gave no more thought to those plans as he stripped off his clothes and fell wearily onto the soft mattress.

"Harry," he murmured, not certain why this girl with big eyes and a beautiful smile came to mind as he fell asleep.

Indeed, fell into a deep and exhausted sleep.

Max felt as though he had just closed his eyes when his valet came in and drew aside the drapes to reveal a sunny day. “Ah, you are awake, Your Grace.”

“No, Holt. I am fast asleep,” he muttered, sticking a pillow over his head as sunshine streamed into his bedchamber. “What time is it?”

“Almost nine o’clock, Your Grace.”

Max set aside his pillow and sat up, for it was three hours beyond his usual time to rise. “Blasted schedule is completely thrown off,” he muttered.

Holt nodded as he burrowed through Max’s armoire to retrieve clothes suitable for morning wear. “None of your guests are up yet, other than Miss Comeford. I saw no harm in allowing you to sleep in a while longer. I doubt any of them will stir much before noon.”

“I suppose you are right.” He paused a moment, debating whether to ask about Harry’s whereabouts. Well, he was master here. Why should he not be kept apprised of the comings and goings of his guests? “Where is Miss Comeford?”

Holt arched an eyebrow. “You’ll find her strolling in the garden.”

Max hastily washed and dressed, and then hurried down to join her. He felt a jolt of disappointment when he did not immediately spot her. Then he remembered the abandoned structure that had once been the family’s private place of worship several centuries ago, a small chapel in the woodlands on his property.

Did it not make sense that Harriet, who had worked in a convent school, would be curious about it?

He strode past the formal flower beds and into the wilder portion of the garden that had been left overgrown and now partially hid the ancient stone chapel. Sure enough, the old door to the entrance was thrown open.

Light filtered in through the archway and also streamed in through several stained glass windows that were small and dusty.

Max quietly stepped inside and saw her kneeling beside an equally dusty altar.

His heartbeat quickened.

Botheration.

He did not understand why he was so elated to see Harriet. But now that he had come upon her while she was lost in prayer, he felt like a trespasser.

What was he to do?

He did not wish to disturb her.

However, she rose and turned just as he was about to quietly back out. “Your Grace,” she said, casting him another of her breathtaking smiles, “I did not realize you were here.”

He smiled in return. “I could lie and tell you that I often seek comfort in daily prayer here, but I think the dust piled on the altar and pews would give me away.”

“It is just dust and easily wiped off,” she said with a lilting laugh, walking to his side. “This little chapel is not in bad condition, just a bit neglected. Do you mind that I ventured in here?”

“Not at all. I’m glad someone will finally put it to good use.”

“I’ll bring some rags and a bucket of water down with me tomorrow and clean—”

“You will do no such thing. I have servants for that task,” he said more sharply than intended.

“But I don’t mind—”

“You may supervise,” he said more gently, not understanding why he was so put out by her offering to clean the chapel. Perhaps it was because he wanted to treat her like a princess and not one of the scullery maids.

In honor of her brother’s memory, of course.

There was no other reason for his yearning to pamper her.

Besides, she was a little thing.

Would she have the strength to carry a bucket filled with water all the way down here?

Once they were outside, she ran a hand down the front of her gown to wipe away a few smears. It was the same green muslin she had worn yesterday, but that was no surprise since she hardly had a wardrobe.

He took a moment to study her while she was distracted by her task.

Lord, she was pretty.

He had thought the same yesterday.

More so today since she was well rested and had been adequately fed.

Her hair shone a lovely copper in the sunlight.

She looked up and smiled at him again.

This.

This is what he wanted in a wife.

Big eyes.

Dimples.

Someone who warmed his cynical heart with her sunshine smile.

Well, he had six more young ladies to meet.

Would any of them outshine Harry?

CHAPTER THREE

HARRIET AWOKE EARLY the next morning, eager for what the day would bring. She said a quick prayer first thing, as was her daily routine. “And Lord, please bless the duke and his grandmother, and keep them safe in your hands. Thank you for bringing them to me...or should I say, for delivering me to them .”

She then prepared herself for the day, taking more time than usual in washing up because for the next few days she was a woman of leisure.

Besides washing her body with one of the fragrant soaps provided to her, a lovely lemon-scented one that felt soft as cream on her skin, she also took a moment to wash her hair. The sun was up and the day was already warming, so she knew her hair would dry well before any of the guests awoke. This would give her the opportunity to explore Pendrake Hall’s magnificent grounds while the sunshine dried her unbound hair.

She donned the prettiest of her three gowns, a russet muslin that could never compare to the beautiful gowns worn by the ladies attending the duke’s house party, and then made her way down the servants stairs, intending to quietly walk out the back.

The stairs she chose led into the kitchen that was already bustling as the cook and her staff prepared the day’s meals.

The scullery maids paused in their duties to stare at her.

The cook frowned. “And who might ye be, young miss? Did ye lose yer way?”

“I do apologize for interrupting you,” Harriet said with a smile. “My, that smells delicious. And may I mention that your meal last night was the best I have ever tasted in my entire life? I can see why His Grace speaks so highly of you. It is a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Paltry. I am Miss Harriet Comeford.”

The cook blushed, obviously not expecting any compliments. Nor did she expect to be called by name, but seemed quite pleased that Harriet knew it.

“She’s the young lady His Grace settled in the Blue Room,” said one of the footmen seated at a long table along with several others on the duke’s staff who were obviously being served their breakfast.

Others began to whisper, and Harriet heard her assigned bedchamber mentioned in awe several times, as though this was the room reserved for royalty.

“Do forgive me, m’lady,” the cook said with a reverence Harriet found most amusing, and gave a quick curtsy.

“Nothing at all to forgive,” Harriet assured the woman who looked very much as she imagined a cook ought to look despite the ironic coincidence of her name. Paltry denoted something small or meager, but this cook was plump and ruddy-cheeked, had beefy hands, and a no-nonsense attitude. “I am the trespasser here, Mrs. Paltry. I was merely hoping to slip out of the house unnoticed so that I might explore the beautiful grounds. I have a view of the garden and the meadow beyond from my windows and was eager to see them up close. These grounds are obviously well thought out and maintained with love.”

Two men at the table stood up, one an older gentleman with a lanky build and a younger fellow who was probably his son due to the resemblance. The older man confirmed it not a moment later. “I’m the head gardener, Alfred Blunt, and this is my son, Herbert. We will gladly show you around, m’lady...that is, if you have any

interest in—”

“I would be most grateful, Mr. Blunt,” Harriet said with a nod. “I had a small garden in my prior home that I enjoyed tending, but I never got my roses to bloom as yours do. I would love to learn your secret.”

It was not long before young Herbert and his father, Alfred, were leading her about the formal grounds, discussing every plant and its care. “Good placement in the sun is important for roses, m’lady. But other flowers require more shade. We’re fortunate to have steady rainfall to feed these plants, but not all can endure too much water.”

“So you’ve selected the hardier blooms for this portion of the garden?” Harriet asked.

“Aye, Miss Comeford, because they can withstand the more drastic changes nature throws at them. Take these flowers along the border of each planting bed...”

Harriet listened in fascination as Alfred revealed the tricks he used to create his splendid blooms. “When the weather turns cold, we cut the rose stalks down to here,” he said, showing her how far down he cut the branches to strengthen them for the next year’s bloom. “But anything we plant also needs to be fed, just as any of us require nourishment to thrive.”

“What do you mean?” Harriet watched as he picked up a handful of soil to show her. “How does one feed a plant?”

“We add certain things to the soil in the spring and at times throughout the planting season. Herbert here has been experimenting with various natural elements.”

“Natural? Such as?” Harriet was truly engrossed even though she no longer had a garden of her own and would likely never have another.

“Some crops seem to invigorate the soil. Beans and turnips do wonders. Orange peels are my latest discovery,” Herbert said with obvious pride.

“Where would you get oranges? They are quite the delicacy.”

“The duke has us grow them in his orangery,” Alfred said. “I’m sure he would show you if you asked him.”

“I would, Miss Comeford,” a voice she recognized as belonging to the duke said jovially from behind her.

She had been so caught up in studying the soil, she had not heard his approach.

“Oh.” She turned in dismay, for her hair was still damp and unbound, and she never meant for him to see her like this. “Good morning, Your Grace. I did not expect you to be up at this hour.”

He looked extraordinarily handsome in his casual clothing that consisted of buff breeches, a coarse linen shirt, and scuffed brown boots. Of course, those boots were of the finest leather. “I’m usually an early riser. By this time in my normal routine, I would have just returned from my morning ride. But I skipped it today to steal a few hours of sleep. Perhaps you’ll join me when I ride tomorrow.”

She laughed lightly. “Oh, no. I do not know the first thing about horses. Nor do I have the proper outfit for it, even if I knew how to sit astride one.”

“I do apologize. I just assumed...” His expression turned to one of dismay.

“Because my brother was an excellent rider?” She nodded, realizing he must have been thinking of him and their years together in battle. “He tried to teach me once, but I was quite hopeless. An utter dunce on horseback.”

This explanation seemed to assuage him, as did her smile, for she heard him let out a soft breath and then he smiled at her in return. “Would you care for a tour of the orangery?”

“Yes, I would love it.”

He surprised her by holding out his arm to her, as though she were a fine lady to be escorted.

She rested her hand in the crook of his arm, and tried to appear unaffected by their nearness or the fact she was touching him. But this was an impossibility, for the duke was a handsome man with a rugged build and her hand rested on solid muscle.

She thanked Herbert and Alfred, and then felt her heart beat faster as she walked off with the duke.

“I watched you for a while as you walked around the flower beds with my gardeners,” he admitted. “You appeared to be so fascinated with what they were telling you.”

She nodded. “I was. Those two are quite clever and know so much about how to breathe life into everything they plant. They are as much scientists as they are gardeners, don’t you think?”

“Oh, yes. I am fully aware of their capabilities.”

She glanced up at him as they strolled toward the orangery. “I am not surprised. You seem to notice everything. This helps me to understand how you view your responsibilities as duke.”

“How do you think I view them?”

“Similar to those of a gardener,” she said, knowing he would not expect her answer.

He laughed. “How so?”

“You make it your duty to nourish the people around you. Like plants, we all need food and light to flourish.”

“And you think I provide it?” he asked as they approached the side of the house that held a glass structure connected to an outer stone wall.

“Yes, I know it for a fact.”

He shrugged, but he seemed pleased by the remark.

“In my own small way,” she said, now musing about her role in the convent school these past few years, “I hoped to do the same with my students. I think this is why I enjoyed teaching so much. It gave me the ability to guide their young minds.”

Having said that, she frowned lightly because she could have done so much more had she been permitted to encourage her students to the extent she wished. Apparently, those above her did not consider it wise to educate the girls under her tutelage to think for themselves and explore the things they loved.

“You are frowning, Harriet. Why?”

“I had to follow a strict curriculum. The abbess was not as encouraging as I would have liked.”

“Ah, I see. She did not want the children laughing or asking too many questions.”

She winced. “Quite so. I did not see the harm in it, but I was overruled. Still, I did

what I could to instill curiosity and enthusiasm in my students. But I never ignored the basic teaching regimen because how are they ever to get on in the world if they cannot read or do sums?”

She brushed back a curl that insisted on sticking to her cheek because of the light breeze blowing her hair around as it was drying.

The duke paused to watch her fuss with it. “Here, you need to tuck it more securely behind your ear.”

He did it for her, grinning as he did so. “No wonder George often referred to you as an imp. You have the look of one. Big eyes. Little ears that stick out.”

She laughed and shook her head. “I was hoping to present myself as refined and elegant.”

“No, you mustn’t try to blend in with all the other young ladies. Be your natural self.”

“Unrefined and inelegant?” Was this what he was suggesting about her? Yet, he did not appear to be rude or insulting to her.

“Not at all.” He led her into what turned out to be a large conservatory that held many plants along with orange trees and lemon trees. “To me, refined and elegant suggests fakery. People pretending to be something they are not. It is all surface. No inner depth.”

“Is this not being overly harsh on the young ladies visiting you? They are probably scared to make a wrong step and ruin their chances with you.”

“Are you going to lecture me again on being kinder to them and getting to know them better?”

She blushed. “No, Your Grace. It is merely a suggestion because I understand how they must feel. But I would never presume...well, I apologize if I offended you. Truly, I did not mean to chide you. Would you mind if I remained in the conservatory a while longer? What you have done here is incredible. I fully understand if you no longer have the patience for me.”

He arched an eyebrow. “What makes you think I wish to leave you?”

Her blush deepened as she stared up at him. “I thought I had irritated you.”

“You must think I am a very delicate creature who easily takes offense. Believe me, I am not. My hide is quite thick. You have not said anything wrong, Harry. Let me show you around, and then I shall give you a taste of my oranges. Have you ever tried one?”

“No, never.” She breathed a sigh of relief and smiled at him with heartfelt gratitude.

Nor could she stop smiling as he led her from plant to plant, explaining what each one was and why Herbert and Alfred were assisting him in growing them. She walked among herbs, spices, cabbages, and cucumbers, to name a few, never once uttering a complaint that it was too hot or humid in here.

Indeed, the conservatory had heated considerably as the sun beat down on the glass. Alfred and his son must have been in here first thing this morning to water all the plants because the floors were wet in spots and moisture filled the air.

By the end of the duke’s tour, both of them were perspiring.

Harriet also found it a little uncomfortable to breathe, but there was plenty of air once the duke opened a few windows to allow the morning breeze to filter in.

Even if he had not opened them, she would have said nothing because she did not want to cut short her time with him.

He was so knowledgeable and she enjoyed listening to him.

“And here is my pride and joy,” he said as they came upon the orange trees that lined the south wall of the glass enclosure. “Took us a while to get them right. But my gardeners know what they are doing.”

“You needn’t convince me. You came upon us just as Alfred Blunt was about to explain the value of orange peels and how he applied them to the soil. I’ll ask him about this tomorrow.”

“Why wait? I can tell you.”

She inhaled lightly. “You?”

He tweaked her chin. “Yes, me. Why do you think I would not know the answer?”

“You have a lot to occupy your time and could not possibly keep a house this well maintained unless you delegated duties to your excellent staff. An efficient housekeeper to keep the house clean and well stocked. A talented cook to prepare your meals. Do you know how to cook and clean?”

He laughed. “No.”

“See? So why should you know all there is to know about gardening?”

“Because it is of scientific interest to me. Why would I not? I am an attentive owner and want my farms and the cattle I raise to be productive.”

“That is most important, obviously. And you are not only attentive, but caring and appreciative. This was the first thing I noticed when arriving here, how proud everyone is of their role in making this estate function, and their pride in service to you. The fact that you know what your gardeners do with the orange peels says a lot about you, and I do mean that as a compliment. So, what do they do with the orange peels?”

“Grind them up lightly and mix them in with the soil.”

“And this is how they get their lush growths? Yes, it makes sense. The peels must absorb the rainwater and release it as the soil dries. There must be other properties to these peels that encourage healthy blossoms. Quite fascinating, really.”

“I think so,” he said, and she noted his chest puff up a little with pride. “I doubt any of the other ladies would think so, however.”

She regarded him with exasperation. “You are doing it again, making assumptions about these ladies without giving them the chance to prove you wrong.”

He once again arched an eyebrow, an appealing quirk that he did whenever challenged. “Do you truly believe any of them will care about orange peels as you do?”

She laughed, knowing the notion was absurd when put that way.

The ladies would probably think him touched in the head. But one or two might understand the value of this knowledge and listen with interest. Was it not worth testing out? She decided to goad him into a wager. “Oh, I think most of them will.”

She was not goading him for the purpose of exchanging money since she had none to exchange and would not be tossing it on a wager even if she had enough to spend on

such frivolities.

He shook his head as though not hearing her right. “What?”

“I think most of them will be fascinated by the use you put to those orange peels.”

He laughed heartily. “Harry, are you having me on? None of them will care a whit about their agricultural efficiency. Shall we place a wager on it?”

She nodded. “Yes, I am all in. However, I haven’t anything to wager. You know I came to you penniless.”

“That’s right. I’m sorry. I was not thinking.” He cast her a remorseful look. “It needn’t be a money wager, Harry. If you win, I shall help you clean the little chapel in the woods.”

She inhaled lightly in surprise, for this was a better outcome than she thought possible. “And if you win?”

“You must let me teach you to ride. My grandmother has several old riding habits that you can easily alter to fit you, so you have no reason to decline this bet.”

“Frankly, I do not see any risk to me. I would love to learn how to ride, but...” She cast him an impish smile. “I would love even more to see you scrubbing the chapel floor. Are we agreed that you must do it and not merely assign it to your scullery maids?”

“Hah! I knew there was a cruel streak in you,” he teased.

“Oh, do not say that. I will be on my knees scrubbing right alongside you,” she assured him because she wasn’t really going to make him do it all on his own.

He would not have to do it at all if he won the bet.

“You would work alongside me?”

She nodded.

His smile was tender as he held out his hand, expecting her to shake it. “Are we agreed then?”

She placed her hand in his, denying the tingles that shot through her as he closed his hand around hers. His were not the hands of a gentleman but a laborer, slightly roughened. Big hands that were firm but gentle in their grip. “Agreed. Get out your bucket and scrub brush, Your Grace.”

“Oh, no,” he said, his grin wide. “It is you who must get out your needle and thread to alter the old riding habit.”

They both had a chuckle over the wager before moving on to the lemon trees. The duke surprised her by leaning close, so that his nose was inches from her neck, and breathing in the scent of her skin. “That’s what I noticed on you. Lemon.”

She nodded. “It’s in the elegant Farthingale soap Mrs. Watkins provided for me. Isn’t it a lovely fragrance?”

He nodded. “Smells nice on you.”

She had purchased one of those luxurious soaps years ago while on a visit to Oxford with her brother, but that was in happier times when he was healthy and they could afford an occasional frivolity.

There was more to peruse in the conservatory, but the duke cut short their tour

because his guests would soon be rising and he had to ready himself for the day. “I wish I could spend more time with you, Harry. But duty calls.”

“Of course. You have been quite generous with me.”

“A pleasure, I assure you. What do you plan to do today? Would you like me to include you in any—”

“Oh, not yet. Please, I am in no way ready to be introduced to anyone. I’ll have plenty to do sewing hems and taking in seams on the gowns your grandmother will lend to me.”

“Not lend, they shall be yours to keep. Ah, now you look pained.”

“Because it is unnecessarily generous,” she explained.

“And I have now made you feel like a charity case,” he muttered. “It isn’t my intention. In truth, it is very little to give you. How else am I to repay your brother for saving my life? Being brothers in arms has a meaning, Harry. It makes you a part of my family. And should a man not look after his family?”

She nodded.

Still, it felt all to her advantage.

“Join us for tea this afternoon if you feel daring enough to meet my guests.”

“Maybe tomorrow.” She did not think she would have any of his grandmother’s gowns altered in time today. Not to mention, she was too cowardly to attempt mingling with this Upper Crust set and had avoided them for the past two days now.

She intended this to be the third day of avoiding that crowd.

He cast her an affectionate smile. "All right. At your own snail's pace."

She thought he would now leave her, but he walked over to one of the orange trees instead and plucked an orange off one of the lower branches. He then withdrew a knife from the lip of his boot and began to peel it.

When pieces of the rind fell to the floor, Harriet bent to pick them up.

The duke stopped her. "The gardeners will collect it later. Here, have a taste of this and tell me what you think."

Harriet had never tasted an orange before and was not certain what to expect, but it was never this sweet, juicy marvel.

Her eyes widened as she swallowed a slice. "It is delicious. I have never tasted anything so good."

"I know." He grinned and popped a piece into his mouth, then gave her the next piece.

Before she knew it, they had eaten the entire orange.

"Did you enjoy it?" He rubbed his thumb along her chin to wipe off a dribble of juice.

She laughed. "Immensely."

"Good." He dropped his hand to his side, and regarded her a long moment before speaking again. "I really need to see to my guests now."

“Oh, yes. Please do not let me delay you. May I stay here a little while longer?”

“Stay as long as you wish.”

“I won’t linger since I have quite a bit of sewing to do. But thank you for a most enjoyable tour.”

He nodded. “I’ll look in on you later.”

He then strode off, leaving her to wander about the conservatory on her own.

Harriet did not stay long after him.

Not only did she have sewing to do, but she did not want to be seen by any of his guests yet since her hair was undone, and her hands and face were sticky from the juice squirting out whenever she bit into the orange flesh.

Feeling exhilarated by the morning’s adventure and the upcoming wager made with the duke, she took a moment to wash her hands and face in the kitchen spout, and then sprinted up the servants stairs to her bedchamber.

She entered only to find the dowager duchess and several maids already there. “Oh, I hope I did not keep you waiting, Your Grace.”

She had no idea the dowager was also an early riser.

Well, it was already mid-morning but still long before noon when most others would begin to stir.

“Not at all, my dear. You are right on time. I’ve chosen several old gowns of mine and those of Pendrake’s mother, as well. I think these will suit you quite nicely and

can be more easily altered than most.”

“They are beautiful,” Harriet murmured, running her hands lightly over the delicate silks and sturdier muslins that had been finely crafted.

“The lace trim on some of them is showing age, but those are easily replaced with fresh trimmings,” the dowager remarked, turning to one of the maids. “Alice, fetch me the lace basket.”

The girl bobbed a curtsy and hurried off.

The dowager then pointed to a basket perched on the small table where Harriet had eaten her meal last night. “You’ll find needles and all the threads you might need in this basket. Measuring tape, pins, and scissors, too.”

Harriet crossed to the table and opened the lid, eager to inspect its contents. “Goodness, this is perfect.”

“If you do not like these choices in gowns, just let Alice know and she will fetch more. I’ll leave her with you to help you out for the day. However, I must warn you that she is a most pleasant girl but cannot sew to save her life.”

Harriet laughed. “I shall keep that in mind.”

“And now you must allow Millie,” the dowager said, nodding to the woman beside her who appeared to be in her early forties, “to properly style your hair. She is my own maid, but will also attend you for this week. Listen to whatever Millie recommends. She may look old and dour, but her sense of fashion is impeccable.”

“Gladly.” She cast Millie a welcoming smile, and Millie—who did not look to be ancient at all or dour—smiled back. Harriet saw at once that the woman carried

herself with the confidence and authority of an experienced lady's maid.

Harriet knew they would get along well because Millie had kind eyes.

Mrs. Watkins bustled in next, carrying a large tray. "Your breakfast, Miss Harriet."

Harriet raised the lid on the silver salver to reveal its contents, poached eggs, kippers, and bread to sop up the runny yolks. Also on the tray was a teacup and small teapot. "Thank you. Oh, that smells delicious. I shall be fat as a goose by the time I leave here," she said with a trill of laughter.

The dowager shook her head. "You are a slender, little thing. You could do with some meat on your bones."

Alice returned with the basket of laces, and set the basket beside the tray. "There, you'll find everything you'll need in here, Miss Harriet."

Harriet thanked the young maid.

The dowager gave a nod of approval. "Enjoy your day, Harriet. I shall stop by later to see how you are getting on. But do not feel you are a prisoner here. The day looks to be quite pleasant, so wander around, as you like."

"That is most gracious of you, Your Grace."

The dowager left to join her grandson and the earlier rising guests in the dining room. Mrs. Watkins also bustled off to attend to her duties, but Alice and Millie remained to assist her. "Have your breakfast first, Miss Harriet," Millie said. "Wouldn't want it to get cold."

"Have you eaten yet?"

“Yes,” Millie assured her. “We get an early start in this household, as you must have noticed. Even Her Grace is an early riser, just like her grandson.”

“Which means we must all be up and about, dressed and having eaten by seven o’clock sharp,” Alice added.

Harriet ate while the maids set the gowns out on her bed.

“Which one will you work on first?” Millie asked.

“The emerald green is quite nice, but which one would you suggest?”

“The ivory muslin with the floral embroidery, without question. I recommend adding a little silk trim here to accentuate the graceful line of your collar, and some lace here and there, but not too much because you do not want to overwhelm the design. As for the emerald gown, it is too bold a color for your complexion and will make your skin look sallow.”

Harriet laughed. “The ivory, it is. Thank you, Millie.”

When she finished her breakfast, Millie styled her hair and then left her and Alice to manage the alterations to this first gown.

Alice helped her to pin it, and then left to attend to her regular chores.

Harriet did not mind being left on her own since she had plenty to do to occupy her time. She settled on the window seat, enjoying the sunlight streaming in through the window to provide ample illumination while she sewed.

She also liked that she had a view of the garden, and it was not long before she noticed the duke strolling along the flower beds with a young lady on his arm.

Harriet felt a slight pang of sadness, for she wished to be the one beside him. Of course, it could never be so. And did she not have the pleasure of a walk with him earlier this morning? So what did she have to complain about?

She paused in her sewing and watched him as he bent down to pick up something amid one of the flower beds. “An orange peel,” she said, chuckling.

Oh, she had to watch this now.

He held it out to the young lady who took a step back as he did so.

Harriet was too far away to hear him and could not read his lips, but he appeared to be explaining the properties of the orange peel.

The young lady simply looked horrified.

Shrugging, he tossed the peel back into the flower bed. But just before walking off with the young lady, who looked ready to bolt from the garden, he looked up at Harriet’s window, grinned, and arched an eyebrow to indicate he had won this first round.

Harriet could not help laughing.

She nodded to acknowledge his minor victory.

Well, not everyone adored gardening.

Not an hour later, he strolled out with another young lady on his arm.

Harriet started laughing again as he bent down at the same flower bed and retrieved the same orange peel. The young lady’s response was similar to the first. “Oh, Max,”

Harriet said, unable to stifle her amusement. “You dog, don’t you dare win this bet.”

He looked up at her window, that smug grin back on his face as he tossed the peel back in the flower bed.

There were four more ladies to go.

Surely, one of them would come through for her.

As it turned out, two of them did. Not that they embraced that orange peel with full vigor, but they showed sufficient interest that the duke could not claim his victory.

She had just finished her afternoon tea when she heard a knock at her door. It could have been anyone, but she knew it was the Duke of Pendrake himself, and hastened to open the door. “Victory is mine,” she laughingly teased as he strode in.

“You got lucky, Harry.” But he chuckled, so she knew he was not angry.

“Not at all. You were too quick to dismiss all of these ladies without truly getting to know them. But are you not pleased that two of them found the orange peel story fascinating?”

He chuckled again. “They were hardly that. Mildly interested, perhaps. Tolerant. Willing to endure and feign interest because they had their eye firmly fixed on the prize...my dukedom.”

“Honestly, Your Grace. You are the prize.”

“Harriet, have you learned nothing yet? They would not look at me twice if I were other than the duke. Were I a second or third son, they would be pushing me out of the way and never looking back.”

“I hope this is not true. But the fact remains that...” She broke into a silly victory dance, hopping up and down while singing, “I won. I won.”

He folded his arms across his chest and watched her with a gleam in his eyes and a wide grin. “Never let it be said that the Duke of Pendrake is a sore loser. Be ready at eight o’clock sharp tomorrow morning. We’re going to scrub that little chapel in the woods to a dazzling shine.”

CHAPTER FOUR

MAX COULD NOT believe he was actually going to scrub a floor this morning.

Not only was he going to scrub it, but he was looking forward to the task because Harriet was going to work beside him and that sunburst smile of hers was simply dazzling. “Are you really going to go through with this bet?” she asked him.

He nodded. “I honor my wagers.”

Several maids and footmen on his staff followed behind them carrying buckets of water, mops and brooms, feather dusters, two ladders, cloths, rags, and polishes.

One would think they were going on a picnic, for he had never seen a cheerier group of laborers.

Of course, they were all having quite the laugh at his expense.

The mighty duke, having lost his wager, was about to get on bended knees before one Miss Harriet Comeford.

He hadn’t wanted Harriet to carry anything herself, but she had insisted on being given something. So he had handed her an apron for herself while he tucked some padded mats under his arm that his housekeeper insisted he take along to place under his and Harriet’s knees while they were on the floor scrubbing.

“Ready?” he asked Harriet as he shoved open the squeaky door that would need

greasing, but he would leave that chore for later.

She looked up at him with a gleam in her eyes. “Yes, I cannot wait to start scrubbing. What jolly fun we shall have.”

He shook his head and laughed lightly. “You are an odd, little thing.”

But he surely liked George’s sister and her winning smile.

The chapel was musty and Max coughed upon taking a step inside.

Bits of dust floated in the air now that the door was open, but he made certain the door remained propped open wide to allow in a desperately needed breeze.

“Where shall we start, Miss Comeford?” He would have preferred to call her Harry and tweak her chin, but they had to maintain formality while in the company of others. Not that scrubbing floors was in any way formal. “Will we all be able to work in this confined space?”

“Oh, yes. Would you mind if I assigned the duties?” She donned her apron and withdrew a hideous mobcap that was hidden in the apron pocket. She must have borrowed the cap from one of the scullery maids.

Gad, it was...well, she looked all big-eyed and adorable with it practically swallowing her head. “Go right ahead, Miss Comeford. Consider yourself in charge of this project.”

“Oh.” She blushed, obviously not expecting his complete subservience.

She rubbed her hands along the fabric of her gown, the same russet one she had worn yesterday. Not that he had an issue with her choice of attire, since she could not wear

any of the finer gowns his grandmother had given her. “I was thinking to partition the work, assigning a footman and two maids to each sector.”

He nodded. “Go right ahead.”

She wasted no time in issuing instructions, sending one team to clean the area of the altar, another to the pews, and teams three and four to the ceiling and walls.

“What about us?” Max asked, confused because she now led him outside. “Aren’t we going to scrub floors?”

“We are, but your staff needs to get to the dirt built up on the altar, benches, walls and ceiling crevices first. Quite a bit has piled up over the years of neglect. They’ll sweep as much of it off the floors as possible, and then will we start scrubbing. It won’t take them long. I expect they’ll finish within the next twenty minutes. The chapel is small and there are many hands at the task.”

“So we have nothing to do yet but relax?”

She nodded.

“Come with me.” He led her to a pond not far from the chapel and took off his jacket to place on a large rock by the shore. “Here, have a seat.”

“You do realize your jacket is much finer than my poor specimen of a gown.”

He grinned. “I was thinking more of providing comfort for your delicate derriere.”

She laughed. “Ah, all right. If that is the reason for your chivalry. My derriere thanks you.”

He remained standing by her side, skipping stones across the tranquil waters as they spoke. Harriet was the first to make conversation. “How was your evening? I heard music, so I suppose there was dancing.”

“Yes, it went on quite late into the night. The Upper Crust is used to these late hours. I hope we did not disturb you too badly.”

“Not at all. The music was lovely. I wish I knew some of these dances. Unfortunately, I am only familiar with country reels and none of the more elegant dances.”

He turned to face her. “Then you do not waltz?”

“No, I never have done,” she said, her eyes taking on a dreamy aspect that he found beguiling.

He turned away and concentrated on skimming stones along the water instead of concentrating on her.

The rock upon which she was sitting was more of an outcropping than a single rock, several smaller rocks forming stepping stones that reached into the water. The pond itself was surrounded by grass and bordered by reeds and lilies that grew naturally wild around its circumference.

Harriet reminded him of one of those wild lilies because she was as beautiful and natural as these flowers. “I could teach you some of those dances, Harry.”

She cast him one of her sunburst smiles but shook her head. “It isn’t necessary. I am never going to dance in an elegant ballroom.”

He was about to argue the point when one of his footmen approached to advise they

had finished their assigned cleaning.

Max reached for Harriet's hand to assist her off the rock. "Our turn. Ready?"

"Looking forward to it," she said with a lilt of laughter.

He caught the footman's grin and knew his entire staff was looking forward to the spectacle of him on his knees with scrub brush in hand.

And then he was on his knees, his staff cheering and clapping as he raced Harriet from the altar to the doorway, each taking a side of the chapel while scrubbing their way toward the door.

Harriet handily won because she had done household labor before, no doubt in the convent school.

Max knew how these religious orders kept strict discipline and everyone had to chip in with chores.

He watched her as she set a rhythm to her brush strokes that were as smooth as a swimmer's strokes. She also knew precisely how much water to spill onto the floor as she scrubbed her way down.

He was making a mess of it, not only finishing last but his trousers were soaked and he'd scraped his knees because he was too impatient to properly set out the mat that was meant to soften the impact of the hard stone floor.

It was worth all his discomfort to see the glow in Harriet's eyes as she inspected the miraculous end result.

The chapel was spotlessly clean and gleaming as the sun shone through the stained

glass windows.

It actually looked like a heavenly place of worship.

“Excellent job, Your Grace,” she said with a satisfied smile.

He never felt prouder.

Was this not ridiculous?

“I’ll join you here for prayers tomorrow morning,” he told Harriet.

Her eyes widened. “You will? Seriously?”

“Yes, why not?” Although...

Dear heaven.

Whatever possessed him to say such a thing? He was not a particularly pious man.

She shook her head and then shrugged her shoulders. “You surprise me, Your Grace.”

He surprised himself, too.

But there was something about being around Harriet that he found uplifting.

She must have sensed his thoughts, especially his reluctance to attend to his guests. As they walked back to the manor house with an entire troupe of household staff armed with buckets, mops, ladders, and cloths, Harriet drew up beside him. “Those young ladies ought to be awake by now. I think it is time you left us and attended to them.”

He nodded, albeit reluctantly.

He wanted to spend the day with Harriet.

“Right, but I had better wash up first. I must smell like a bucket of dirty water.”

Or maybe he would simply take a seat at the breakfast table and see how the ladies responded to his pungent scent.

Harriet eyed him warily. “Don’t you dare.”

He laughed. “What should I not dare?”

“You cannot join your guests the way you are. I caught that wicked gleam in your eye. You want to test those ladies, don’t you?”

Gad, was he that obvious?

He usually knew how to hide his thoughts well. “Why shouldn’t I?”

She frowned at him. “Because it is not fair to them. No woman, no matter how much she loves you, is going to want to get near you when you smell of sweat, wood mold, and dirty water.”

He held her back a moment as the rest of his staff entered the house through the kitchen door. “Harry, I think you are wrong about this.”

She blinked against the sunlight filtering in through the nearby trees. “What do you mean?”

“I think love...true love...does not notice scents or faults. Would you refuse to hug

me if I walked in like this and strode forward to embrace you? Hypothetically speaking, of course.”

She glanced down at herself. “I would not refuse you, speaking in the hypothetical, of course. I would not refuse you because I smell just as horrid as you do. But if I had on a fine gown and had just bathed in fragrant oils? I would shriek to keep you at arm’s distance, and hit you over the head if you continued to approach me. Do you have any idea how hard it is to get sweat stains out of silk?”

She tsked and continued to explain about how easily silk was damaged as he walked her up the back stairs to her bedchamber. “But you would not think of anything so practical as that, would you?”

“Must you always be practical, Harriet?”

He led her into her chamber through the servants door since he did not want her to be seen with him in the hallway.

Harriet was still wearing her apron and that hideous mobcap which, he had to admit, made her eyes look even bigger and more beautiful than they already were.

Fortunately, there were no maids awaiting her in her bedchamber.

He lingered with her a moment and took her hand. But he paused as he was about to raise it to his lips. “Ah, this won’t do. Your hands have been steeped in dirty water, just like mine.”

“See, not even you would want to get close to a woman who smelled like a dirty rag.”

“You have made your point, Harriet. Those young ladies ought to thank you for the able way you defended their cause.” He leaned forward and gave her a kiss on the

forehead. “Enjoy the rest of your day.”

He turned and hurried out the hidden door, using the back hall to get to his own bedchamber.

His valet was waiting for him and had thoughtfully ordered a bath brought up. The water was still hot, Max realized. “Miss Comeford will require one of these, as well,” he said, tossing off his clothes and dropping them on the floor since they were too soiled to drape across a chair. “Holt, go find Mrs. Watkins and have her bring a tub up to her room.”

“Very good, Your Grace.”

“And get me a salve for my knees. I scraped the blazes out of them while cleaning out that chapel.”

“But I thought Mrs. Watkins had given you mats just for this thing.”

Max cast him a wry grin. “She did. However, I did not have time to properly set my knees on them since Miss Comeford was handily beating me as she scrubbed her way down the row of pews, and I was bloody not about to let her win.”

“So you won?”

“No,” he said with a chuckle. “She beat me soundly.”

He heard Holt’s chuckle as he walked out the door.

Max smiled as he eased into the tub and scrubbed himself clean with a sandalwood soap that would meet with Harriet’s approval.

He had just stepped out of the tub and wrapped a towel around himself when Holt strolled back in. “The tub for Miss Comeford is being brought up as we speak, Your Grace.”

He nodded in approval.

A warm feeling came over him, although he did not understand why he felt such satisfaction in the need to pamper Harriet. There was just something about her, a genuine sweetness and enthusiasm for all things even though her life had not been easy.

He quickly dressed and wanted to look in on her before heading downstairs to join his guests, but how could he when she would be in the bath by now?

Bollocks.

He was going to break into a sweat again if he thought of her shedding her clothes and easing that delectable body of hers into the water.

He hurried downstairs before he cast caution to the wind and did something utterly stupid.

The hour was still early, not yet eleven o’clock in the morning, and only a few guests were in the dining room. Fortunately, the two young ladies who had passed the orange peel test were seated at the table and chatting with the others.

They both looked up and smiled as he strode in.

Lady Annalise was a pretty brunette with striking green eyes, and Lady Beatrice had hair as dark as a raven’s wing and crystal blue eyes. He should have felt some attraction toward them, should he not? But there was a brightness lacking in their

expressions, a casual boredom in everything they said and did that dampened their sparkle.

Being pampered all one's life was not a blessing, he decided. One ought to face challenges in order to appreciate the bounties received.

These young ladies showed little regard for all they had been given.

It truly dulled them.

Lady Annalise motioned to the empty chair beside hers. "Do join me, Your Grace."

Well, why not?

Harriet would berate him if he passed up the opportunity.

Not to mention his grandmother was seated at the table and would harangue him endlessly if he ignored the young lady's request.

He drew out the chair and settled beside Lady Annalise, ordering a footman to pour him a cup of coffee as he did so.

After taking a sip of the hot liquid that felt divine sliding down his throat, he sought to converse with the ton diamond whose hair was done to perfection. Her gown was designed just for this sort of summer morning at a country house party and had just the right amount of frills and lace.

"Have you done anything of interest today, Lady Annalise?" he asked, hoping to get to know her better.

He was cursed with a five minute list of the things that went wrong for her this

morning, all completely trivial and insanely dull.

Her gown took forever to be properly pressed.

“Terribly sorry.” Max had no doubt all the women at his party had gowns that needed pressing and their maids all had to wait their turn.

Lady Annalise, daughter of a wealthy marquess, was not used to waiting in line for anything.

“Then I lost an earring,” she griped.

“A tragedy,” he intoned.

“Indeed, it was.” She then proceeded to explain in excruciating detail how her maid had spent over an hour searching for it until it was finally found snagged on the light wrap she had worn last night.

She then blamed her maid for not noticing the loss sooner.

“Why blame her?” Max asked. “Wouldn’t you have realized it when you took the earrings off?”

“It is her responsibility to take inventory of my valuables.”

“Which I assume she did this morning when she came to attend you,” Max said, irritated that Annalise was taking no responsibility whatsoever for her own actions.

Not that he blamed either of them for what was a mere accident.

Were they not both tired from their long day?

“Did you have your maid wait up for you last night? We played cards and danced until almost dawn.”

Annalise cast him a practiced pout. “She had several hours to sleep in the big chair in my bedchamber while waiting for me to retire. She always waits up for me. This is part of her duties. It isn’t as though she has all that much to do,” Lady Annalise grumbled. “I am the one who exhausted myself.”

“Yes, with all the dining and dancing and cards playing,” Max muttered.

“While she slept,” Annalise pointed out with a nod for emphasis. “She ought to have noticed the earring was missing then. But the silly cow brought the outfit I wore last night downstairs for airing and pressing this morning, and then she had to hurry back downstairs to hunt for the earring.”

“Well, she found it. No harm done.”

“I would have her discharged without references if she hadn’t. Good help is so hard to find these days. That’s what Mama always says.”

Max did not like what he was hearing. “Has your maid made mistakes before?”

“Well, no. But this was a significant error, don’t you think? Those pearl earrings are my favorite.”

“Then aren’t you the one who ought to have used more caution?”

Annalise pinched her lips. “No. Must I do everything for myself?”

Max changed the topic of conversation before he said something even ruder. As far as he could tell, Lady Annalise did nothing for herself. And while he was not completely

exonerating the maid who might have been more careful were it not the middle of the night and she was probably exhausted, it was an innocent mistake that had been corrected.

When Annalise turned to speak to her father, Max took his chance to move away and sit beside Lady Beatrice who seemed quite content to slowly sip her tea. He asked the same question about her day so far this morning and braced himself for the idle prattle he expected would spout from her lips.

However, Beatrice surprised him by giving a sensible answer.

“I slept later than usual and only came downstairs about an hour ago. Since hardly anyone else was in the dining room, I decided to stroll along your portrait gallery. I hope you do not mind.”

“Not at all. It is open for all who are interested.”

She smiled. “To my surprise, the gallery was as busy as Regent Street at the height of shopping hour.”

Max chuckled, for he was not surprised his guests would avidly peruse those portraits of his ancestors.

“Lady Marianna and her mother were there. So were a few of the other ladies. They all declared you the handsomest of the Pendrake dukes.”

“Did you, as well?”

She arched a delicate eyebrow. “No, because I could not get a word in edgewise. Lady Rose and Lady Philomena were quite enraptured and went on and on about your virtues for a full ten minutes.”

“I do not think I am quite that fascinating.”

Beatrice took another sip of her tea and then calmly set the cup down on the table. “It is your title and wealth in addition to your obvious good looks that dazzles them.”

“And you, Lady Beatrice. What do you think of me?”

“I think you are probably England’s prize catch. Do you mind that I speak so bluntly?”

“Not at all. Your candor is refreshing.”

“Well, it is best to be honest if one hopes for a successful marriage. This is what I believe, although I am not certain my family feels the same.”

“Rest assured, I always prefer honesty.”

She smiled. “So do I.”

Max decided to spend more time engaging with her over the course of the next few days. The house party was almost over and they had little time left to get acquainted because he had dawdled too long.

Beatrice seemed promising, although his heart did not lighten the way it did whenever he looked upon Harriet.

Perhaps it was in the smile.

Harriet’s was bright and openhearted.

She smiled with her eyes and her beautiful lips, and he felt all of her heart going into

that expression of happiness.

Beatrice held back.

No dazzle in her eyes.

No wide arc of her lips.

He thought her reticence was a shame, for she was in contention as a wife prospect. Having passed the orange peel test and now the breakfast conversation test put her in the lead as of now.

However, she did not appear to be particularly enamored of him.

Was it merely shyness on her part?

There was no fault in being cautious in one's friendships.

In fact, he considered it prudent to tread carefully.

He thought it showed common sense on her part.

Yet, she appeared undecided about liking him. How difficult a decision was it to make? Perhaps he was making too much of her reluctance.

All the others were throwing themselves at him, and he did not like that at all.

But he couldn't have it both ways.

It was not fair of him to dismiss the debutantes who overtly sought to gain his favor while also being irritated with the ones who held back.

Lady Beatrice was the only one who held back, and could not Harriet help him with her situation?

Would Harriet be indignant if he asked her to strike up a conversation with Lady Beatrice? Harmless, really.

All she had to do was find out what Lady Beatrice really thought of him.

It would not be considered spying, would it?

CHAPTER FIVE

HARRIET HAD TAKEN several hours to finish altering two of the dowager duchess's gowns. The work was detailed and left her stiff while hunched over her sewing, so she decided to take a moment to stroll to the pond for a much needed stretch of her legs and ease of her aching back.

Since the duke and his guests were on the terrace enjoying the light breeze as they had their afternoon tea and cakes, she avoided them by darting through the conservatory and onto a nearby wooded lane. She hadn't walked far before the duke caught up to her. "Is something wrong, Your Grace?"

He was frowning. "No, but I have a favor to ask of you."

She tried not to wince as she smiled at him. "Of course, if I can help."

"Before you berate me, Harry...let me just say that I have tried my best to like these ladies."

Dear heaven.

Now she tried not to burst out laughing.

He seemed so painfully sincere.

"I see," she said, coaxing him to continue. "You have tried, and?"

The sun shone down on them and felt quite strong even while they stood under the artfully designed row of shade trees that protected the lane from the relentless afternoon heat.

She resumed her walk to the pond, knowing they could talk while strolling.

He appeared lost in his thoughts as he strode beside her. “I have ruled them all out save for Lady Beatrice. But...there is something not quite right about her, Harry. She is hiding something from me.”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded. “It is in her eyes and in her smile, you see. She looks at me, but does not see me. She smiles at me, but it is forced.”

He paused and raked a hand through his hair. “No, not forced but...secretive. That’s a better word for it. Her smile is not one of pleasure but more of a smirk, as though she knows a secret that I do not.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes, quite. I know you think I am behaving like a boor toward those ladies, but I assure you that I am not. I have been politeness itself.”

She guffawed.

He wasn’t angry and joined her in a quiet laugh. “Do not chide me, Harry. I am doing the best I can. But it all feels so unnatural with these ladies, even Beatrice. I want to like them, truly I do.”

“What are you asking of me?”

“I am taking them on a picnic tomorrow and would like you to join us. I expect you have altered one or two suitable gowns by now. No subterfuge necessary. You shall be exactly who you are, the sister of one of my dearest friends, George Comeford. I’ll introduce you around, including to Beatrice. It is past time that I did. They must have seen this mysterious lady lingering in the shadows and been wondering about you. Hopefully, you can get more information out of her.”

Harriet had been concerned it would come down to this, that he would use her as a spy. But how could she refuse him after he and his grandmother had been so generous with her? The young lady was probably too smart to spill anything important to her, a stranger, anyway. Nor was he asking her to sneak into Beatrice’s room and rifle through her belongings.

It was just a conversation or two he was asking of her. “Will I be expected to participate in your house party activities after this?”

“And not remain cloistered in your bedchamber?”

She nodded. “Dining with you and your guests. Participating in lawn games and taking tea with all of you. Joining in the evening entertainments.”

“I hadn’t thought much about it...but yes, I suppose. Once you are introduced to everyone, would it not appear odd if you returned to hiding in your room? Others might think I am holding you captive.”

She laughed. “It is quite the loveliest prison to be held in captivity. Soft bed, silk coverlets, excellent food, maids to attend to all my needs, and the loveliest grounds filled with excellent walking paths. Who would ever want to leave?”

He grinned. “Glad you are enjoying your stay.”

“Seriously, Your Grace. You and your grandmother have been so generous with me. I do not know how I will ever repay your kindness. This is why I worry about disappointing you or ever embarrassing you. I am so ignorant about your rules since I do not go about in Society. I do not know your dances or your card games. I do not know how to make flirtatious conversation.”

“Nor do you need to know any of it,” he insisted. “My grandmother and I will teach you anything we deem important. In truth, I do not see any obvious lack in you that requires improvement. You will enchant everyone just by being yourself.”

Harriet thought that was quite an exaggeration.

He was only saying this to allay her fears.

“Then there is the matter of my gowns, Your Grace. I have altered two of them so far and can quickly finish a third. But this would only get me through one day of activities.”

“All right, I see your point,” the duke replied. “We shall deal with this problem later. Right now, all I need is for you to gather as much information as you can from Beatrice during tomorrow’s picnic excursion.”

“Do you really believe she will confide anything in me upon a few minutes of acquaintance? It would probably take several days before Beatrice and I conversed about anything more serious than the weather.”

“I beg to differ. You have an engaging way about you, Harriet. People immediately take to you and trust you.”

“Which makes it more awful that I would betray their trust,” she muttered, not eager to leap into this favor.

Yet, she felt even more awful about spurning his generosity. “All right, I will try.”

“Thank you.” He glanced toward the distant terrace. “I had better return before my guests wonder about me. Until tomorrow then.”

She watched him walk off, his stride purposeful as he marched back to his friends.

Would they all see through her? Snub her?

It did not matter since she was never going to be friends with any of them. Her fate was to be a governess to children or companion to elderly ladies. It wasn't a terrible fate, although perhaps giving her some moments of embarrassment if she were later to encounter any of these guests at another party while serving as the hired help.

She was not ashamed of her reduced circumstances and could bear any ridicule, assuming anyone even bothered to notice her.

After a lengthy walk around the pond, she started back toward the house to finish her sewing. She would have to work into the night to complete the alterations on a third gown that was fancier than the others and suitable for evening wear.

Her only break would be for supper, but that was hours away. It would only be a short reprieve and then it was back to her task.

Since darkness fell late in the summers, she knew she would be able to work until ten o'clock in the evening and get much accomplished. In addition to the lovely ivory muslin with the floral embroidery suitable for teatime, and the charming pale rose muslin that would be perfect for tomorrow's picnic, she could also finish her current project, the exquisite ecru silk evening gown designed for formal wear.

As she reached the house, slipping in through the conservatory and breathing in the

lovely scent of oranges, lemons, and limes, she also realized there was another problem.

She had those lovely gowns but needed their accompanying accessories.

Had the dowager duchess, Millie, or Mrs. Watkins thought of this? No matter, she would bring it up to them when she saw them next.

After all, what a pity if she had to miss the picnic and an introduction to Lady Beatrice because she had no proper shoes to wear.

The duke might be frustrated, but how was this her fault?

He would know she had worked into the night to complete her sewing.

But every lady present at his party would notice immediately if she wore her old boots beneath these beautiful gowns. Not to mention the bigger problem of having to wear an outfit twice, which she would have to do because she was never going to alter twelve gowns in a matter of days even if she worked through the night every night.

And the guests would all be gone soon anyway.

But right now, shoes were the most obvious problem.

She tried not to reveal her dismay when Mrs. Watkins came striding in with a bag full of shoes the dowager no longer wore. "Here, Miss Harriet. Try these on."

It turned out the dowager's feet were the same size as hers. "Oh, what a fortunate coincidence," she remarked with some dismay.

Mrs. Watkins laughed. “And now you have no excuse to beg out of tomorrow’s picnic.”

Harriet smiled at her, knowing she had been caught. “I should have known you were too clever to overlook any detail of my wardrobe.”

“Take a moment to enjoy your supper while I sort through this collection of shoes and buckles. Some are a little out of style, but nothing that a shiny new buckle cannot not mask.”

Most of the shoes looked as though they had never been worn.

Mrs. Watkins was still digging through the bag when she pulled out the prettiest pair of walking boots that buttoned at the ankles and were of the softest leather. “Aha! You are going to love these, Miss Harriet.”

Harriet ran her hands over the soft leather. “They are beautiful. It is a treasure trove, Mrs. Watkins.”

She went to bed quite pleased with her haul of stylish footwear and three fashionable gowns. But her trepidation returned the following morning while she ate her breakfast in her chamber. Millie scurried in shortly after Harriet had washed up and readied herself for the picnic. “Oh, Miss Harriet,” she said with a shake of her head.

“What is wrong?”

“Your hair...sit back down and let me do it up in a more artful manner.”

“Is it necessary?” Harriet honestly thought she looked quite suitably made up and could pass as someone who traveled in elite circles.

Apparently not, if she read Millie's expression accurately.

But she had to agree the wise woman was right.

Harriet smiled when looking at herself in the mirror and viewing the end result. In truth, the changes were subtle but important. Her hair was no longer simply pulled back but had a gentle wave to it and a few curls placed to frame her face and show its heart shape to greatest advantage.

Her hair even looked more lustrous, and Harriet had no idea how such a thing was possible. "You are a wonder, Millie. A genuine miracle worker."

Millie smiled in approval. "Not at all, Miss Harriet. It is all you, and you look so beautiful."

Harriet laughed. "Now all I have to do is keep my mouth shut and not embarrass the duke and his grandmother."

Millie gave her hand a gentle pat. "You could never embarrass them. You are too kind and clever."

Once more left alone, Harriet debated whether to walk downstairs or wait for the duke or his grandmother to escort her to the waiting carriages. Upon glancing out the window, she could see several young men and ladies gathered by a row of carts and more stylish open carriages.

A moment later, someone knocked at her door.

She rushed to open it and found the dowager duchess standing on the other side of the threshold. "Are you ready, Harriet?"

“Yes.” She nodded with enthusiasm even though she dreaded meeting everyone. Still, it was an adventure. When would she ever have such an opportunity?

They walked downstairs arm in arm.

Harriet was more concerned with the duke’s response than that of any of his guests.

Would her supposedly stylish appearance meet with his approval?

Everyone turned their gazes on her when she walked out beside the dowager duchess. The duke strode toward them, his smile noticeable as he approached. “Harry, you look like a princess,” he whispered.

She blushed. “Do not study me too closely or you will see me for who I truly am, a mere schoolteacher.”

“No,” he insisted. “You are a princess.”

“One in disguise,” his grandmother added in jest.

But the words ‘princess’ and ‘disguise’ must have been overheard and obviously misconstrued because the duke’s guests suddenly began to whisper among themselves.

Oh, dear.

They could not possibly believe she was a member of the royal family here incognito. But it seemed they did, for several gentlemen suddenly approached to assist her into one of the open carriages. “We have all been wondering who is this vision Pendrake has kept hidden,” one of the men said.

The ladies looked on curiously.

Some smiled and some frowned, depending on whether they regarded her as a good connection to have at the royal court or competition for the duke's affections.

"I shall properly introduce all of you to this young lady of mystery upon our arrival at the picnic grounds," the duke announced, and then hopped in the lead carriage with his grandmother, Lady Philomena, and the young lady's father.

Harriet was not greatly surprised to find herself seated beside Lady Beatrice and across from two gentlemen who introduced themselves as the Duke of Folkstone and the Duke of Ware. When one of them referred to her as Lady Harriet, she quickly corrected them. "Oh, I am merely Miss Comeford," she assured.

Lord Folkstone then cracked a jest about his companion. "He is Ware, but we call him the Duke of Beware or simply Beware because he is a shameless womanizer."

"Indeed, beware of him," Beatrice intoned, "for his smile is quite dangerous."

They grinned, and Ware turned the force of his rakish gaze on Harriet.

Uncertain what to do, she simply smiled back.

"Ah, will you look at that? The princess smiles at me." He was obviously willing to play along with what he believed was her ruse. After all, if this princess wished to pretend she was a commoner, who were they to deny her?

Harriet would discuss this misunderstanding with the duke after the picnic, assuming they could manage a moment alone during this busy day. Ware was a handsome man, but he was being solicitous of her because he thought she was related to the royal family.

Ugh , he kept looking at her and smiling.

He thought she was one of their ilk and perhaps a marriage prospect for the Duke of Pendrake like these other young ladies.

She resolved to remain polite but distant with him and Folkstone who was also being quite attentive to her.

What would happen once they realized she was a person of no consequence?

The carriage ride provided Harriet with an opportunity to converse with Beatrice. They chatted about harmless topics, namely the weather and the day's planned activities since Harriet did not want to ask anything personal while the two dukes were listening to her with rapt attention and tossing inane compliments.

Her opportunity to converse more seriously with Lady Beatrice arose while the duke's footmen set up their tables and food under several shade trees in a meadow bordered by a gentle stream. After the duke and dowager duchess had introduced her all around, Beatrice took her arm in hers and suggested they take a walk while the picnic tables were being set up.

"Yes, a lovely idea."

"Good, come with me," Beatrice said, quickly leading her away while Ware and Folkstone were waylaid talking to Lady Philomina, Lady Annalise, and several others.

Harriet was surprised by Beatrice's friendly gesture and further surprised when Beatrice was the one to begin a more serious discussion. "Miss Comeford, am I to assume you have been added to Pendrake's list of potential wives?"

Harriet shook her head. “No, not at all. I am decidedly not a marriage prospect for him. I hope he makes that clear, for many of the ladies are now scowling at me. Not that I blame them, for my appearance must have come as a surprise.”

A light wind blew across the meadow and wafted over the stream, causing the crystal waters to ripple as they flowed in a southward current. The sun was at its height, but both she and Beatrice had parasols to shade them and the air to cool them as they walked along the bank of the stream.

This was another thing Mrs. Watkins had thought to provide, a lovely parasol that matched the pale pink of her gown.

“Your arrival was a surprise to us all.” Beatrice pursed her lips. “But you say that you are not for Pendrake? Does this mean you are betrothed to another?”

Harriet stifled a lilt of laughter. “No, no betrothal.”

“Are you already married?”

Harriet shook her head. “Not married either.”

This appeared to confuse Beatrice. “Then you are not attached at all?”

“Nor do I expect to be any time soon,” she admitted, or not ever since her fate was to be a governess or companion. “So, you needn’t worry about my designs on the duke since I have none. What about you, Lady Beatrice? What do you think of him?”

She shrugged.

This was not quite the informative answer Harriet had hoped for.

“I sense you are his favorite,” Harriet prodded, hoping Beatrice might open up to her just a little. There was no deceit in making the comment since she was only stating the truth. Pendrake did like Beatrice best of all.

“His favorite?” Beatrice laughed wryly at the remark.

“Yes, I am serious. You do not seem pleased. Do you find something lacking in him?” Who, unless they were in complete loss of their senses, would ever find the duke lacking in any regard? The man was obviously perfect. Perfectly handsome, perfectly clever, kind, and witty. Perfectly wealthy and titled.

How could any woman not fall in love with him?

Unless... “Lady Beatrice, has someone else already claimed your heart?”

Beatrice paused in their walk and turned to her with a guilty blush. “Why would it matter whether my heart lay elsewhere? My father will never approve of any man while Pendrake is on the marriage hunt.”

“Pendrake has also invited his two friends, Ware and Folkstone.”

“Yes, they are also dukes and marriageable. I suppose my father would not mind if one of them proposed to me, either. So, these three are the ones I am expected to enthrall in the hope I will gain an offer of marriage.”

“Of the three, which would you prefer?”

She arched an eyebrow as though the answer were obvious. “Pendrake. He is the best of this lot.”

Harriet would agree.

All were excellent matches, worthy of better than being described as ‘this lot’.

Certainly, there was something about the Duke of Pendrake that elevated him above the others. Perhaps having fought in the war gave him that gravitas , a dignity and solemnity of manner the other men lacked.

No one could question his bravery or valor.

He also had a protective nature.

Harriet melted every time he asked her how she was doing or whether she needed anything.

But she shook out of the thought and pressed on because Beatrice was obviously holding back something more.

“I am hoping to eventually make a love match for myself,” Harriet remarked, “but circumstances might never allow for it. I am probably better off not wishing for love.”

Beatrice laughed softly as they resumed their walk, but her gentle trill was tinged with bitterness. “Oh, I do not wish love on you. Not when such a union would never be permitted. It can only lead to heartbreak.”

“Not permitted?” Had Beatrice been denied a love match? If so, Harriet truly felt sorry for this diamond. It had to be awful to be caught up in a love match that would never be fulfilled.

Harriet knew better than to ever allow herself to fall in love with such a man.

Was not the Duke of Pendrake just this man for her?

She would love him wholly and completely if she ever gave her heart free rein.

But she wouldn't.

As for Beatrice, how cruel to find one's true and perfect mate and then be denied him for the rest of one's life. And would it not be the most terrible fate if the man who had won Beatrice's heart worked for her father and she had to see him every day?

"Lady Beatrice, if you ever wish to talk or ever need a shoulder to cry upon, I am a willing listener. I assure you, it is no trick. I am not in contention as a marriage prospect for the duke and only wish to see him happily settled. He is a very good man and deserves to have a wife who will treat him with kindness and respect."

Beatrice cast her a smile that was almost genuine, but not quite. "I fear that will rule me out, Miss Comeford. He does deserve such a wife, and I can never be that for him. In truth, I would be more inclined to pursue him if he were a hound such as Ware. My conscience would not bother me when betraying my marriage vows because Ware would never honor them himself."

Oh, dear.

This was turning quite serious.

"Then you would refuse the Duke of Pendrake if he proposed to you?"

"He must not propose to me," Beatrice said, now sounding a bit agitated.

"All right, understood." Harriet frowned. "Do you wish me to convey your feelings to the duke?"

Beatrice cast her a cynical look. "Are you not going to do it anyway? Is this not why

he has set you upon me?”

Harriet blushed. “I would not betray our conversation unless you wished me to do it.”

“Then I forbid you to tell him anything of our discussion.”

“As you wish.” The duke would not be pleased, but Harriet could quietly steer him toward another prospect without revealing Beatrice’s love for another man.

Beatrice’s eyes widened. “You surprise me, Miss Comeford. Would you not report this conversation to him the moment we are done walking?”

“I would never tell him anything unless I had your permission,” she reiterated.

She sighed. “Then you may tell him, but not before tomorrow night.”

Tomorrow night?

What was so important about that particular evening?

Dear heaven .

Was Beatrice planning to elope with the fellow who had captured her heart? Or was she merely playing games and making up lies to tease her? In truth, Harriet hoped it was just a game, for an elopement was a very serious thing. What if Beatrice’s father disowned her? She and her true love might be left penniless.

Well, she did not think Beatrice would fall in love with a man of no account. She seemed too sensible for that. But Beatrice had been raised in splendor, having servants to attend to her every need, governesses and tutors, finest clothes, never a lack of food, and the most magnificent shelters.

She might have no understanding of how difficult an impoverished existence could be.

Would she know how to cook or shop or wash her own clothes, assuming this man she adored could not afford servants?

Harriet took a deep breath, knowing what she would say next might give away her own plight and subject her to ridicule. “Lady Beatrice, before you make any move to irrevocably set the course of your life, please consider what I am about to tell you. I do not mean to dismiss your love for another as foolish. But have you considered what might happen if you eloped with him? Does he have the means to support you?”

Beatrice laughed but made no comment, so Harriet continued. “Can he afford to provide a servant for you? Because if he cannot, then you will be the one to do all the housework.”

“You assume my father would disown me.”

“Wouldn’t he?” Harriet asked. “Do you really think you would survive a year of hard work running a household? Assuming your gentleman had the means to provide you with a proper house. And what if he got you with child? You would then have the housework and an infant to care for.”

“Do you really believe I would run off with a wastrel?”

“No, you seem too intelligent for that. But I have had to face being suddenly alone in the world without anything to my name or anyone to turn to for support. It can happen quite quickly, the loss of an entire family and all your possessions, and you are suddenly alone in the world. It is terrifying. Were it not for the Duke of Pendrake and the dowager duchess, I do not know what would have become of me,” she said with heartfelt sincerity.

“Surely, you would have found some royal court to welcome you.”

“No, Lady Beatrice. I would not, for I am not a princess.”

Beatrice cast her an indulgent smile. “That your father was overthrown as king does not make you less of a princess. I am sure our royal family would recognize your status even if your own country has rejected its monarchy.”

Oh, gad.

“Truly, you are mistaken,” Harriet insisted. “And you must not repeat this to anyone.”

Beatrice smiled again. “If you say so.”

If Beatrice still believed that nonsense about her being a secret princess, then everyone at the duke’s party would believe the same, no matter how vehemently she denied it. Unfortunately, it was also possible that the more she denied it, the more the idea would embed in their heads because was it not more exciting to accept she was a fabled princess hiding out with the duke after the downfall of her family?

And all of this came about because of some misconstrued words.

She sighed and gave up her protest. “All I am saying is that life can be very harsh when you do not have the means to feed and clothe yourself.”

“Miss Comeford ,” Beatrice said, stating her name as though it was wholly made up, “let us get serious now.”

Weren’t they being serious during this entire walk?

“You strike me as the perfect match for Pendrake,” Beatrice said, now taking it upon herself to dish out advice. “May I ask, why would you not be in contention?”

“As a prospect for marriage?”

“Yes, I saw the way he looked at you while helping you into the carriage. Even now, he keeps looking your way. Ah, he is now coming toward us. And he is smiling. Tell me, Miss Comeford, is he smiling for me...or you?”

CHAPTER SIX

MAX STIFLED HIS concern when he saw Harriet's distress.

What had she and Beatrice said to each other? And why in heaven's name had he been so arrogant as to put poor Harriet in this position?

The grass was soft beneath his feet as he strode toward them. There was a gentle breeze to cool the air, and he heard the gentle rush of water as he reached them where they stood beside the stream. "Miss Comeford, are you all right?"

"See, he is asking for you ," Beatrice said and laughingly skittered off.

"What is she talking about?" Max muttered.

Harriet sighed. "She noticed you were smiling as you approached us, and questioned whether the smile was for her or for me."

"And she thinks I smiled because of you?"

Harriet nodded. "I tried to tell her this was ridiculous."

"But she did not believe you," Max added knowingly, concerned that his attraction to Harriet was obvious.

He needed to exercise more care when around her.

She was not one of his marriage prospects.

Nor would he ever be so disrespectful as to take her on as a mistress.

That was completely out of the question, and not only because it would betray the friendship he'd had with her brother. Harriet herself was lovely and decent, and deserved better than to become some man's convenient bed partner.

"The two of you were talking for some time. What did Lady Beatrice say to you?"

The question seemed to add to Harriet's distress. "How were the other ladies?" she asked in response, her own smile too bright as she purposely diverted his attention. "You rode in the lead carriage with Lady Philomena. Was she pleasant and entrancing?"

"No, the girl has not a drop of brain matter between her ears. She also has the most irritating giggle. But we were not talking about Philomena. I asked you about Beatrice and you immediately changed the subject to the other ladies. Is this your polite way of telling me Beatrice has no interest in me?"

"I think you are better served looking elsewhere, Your Grace."

"All right," he said, surprised he was not more put out.

But Harriet still looked quite pained.

"Harriet, is there something more going on that I should know?"

"I cannot say." She released a heavy breath. "Perhaps you ought to talk to Lady Beatrice yourself and..."

Why had her voice just trailed off?

“Harry, you are worrying me.” Something was amiss. “Is it that you cannot say...or will not say?”

“Both.”

“You’ve promised to keep a confidence? Then Beatrice has something to hide? I knew it.” But he did not feel triumphant about the revelation. “Is she going to do something foolish?”

“I don’t know. Please talk to her,” Harriet said and ran off toward his grandmother who was ensconced in a chair under a shade tree with several of their elderly guests.

Sighing, Max approached Beatrice. “Come walk with me.”

She cast him a sardonic smile as he did not await her reply but simply placed her arm in his and led her away from the others. “Why the interest in me, Pendrake? Has your little spy told you all about our conversation?”

“She has told me nothing, but she is obviously upset. What did you say to her?”

“I did not insult her, if this is what has you concerned.”

“I never considered that you would say anything cruel to her. My concern is for you since she is obviously worried about you, and yet, will not betray your confidence.”

“That speaks well of her,” Beatrice remarked, her manner still irking him because she would not simply tell him what was wrong.

“She is a very decent person.”

“A secret princess,” she said with a nod. “Her English accent is perfect, no doubt acquired at one of those fancy boarding schools on the Continent. Or did she have tutors at court? Was her father deposed and this is why she came to you?”

Max laughed.

By heaven, is this what all his guests thought?

“Miss Comeford vehemently denied any royal blood, of course. But one cannot hide quality.”

“She is quality,” Max admitted. “But I wish to know more about you , Lady Beatrice.”

She paused when they had walked past shade trees and beyond the carriages. “No, you really ought not get to know me better.”

“I see.”

She hurried back to the others.

Max watched her put a cheerful mask on her face as she took Harriet by the hand and led her to the young ladies and bachelors now taking seats around the long tables. With Beatrice having befriended Harriet, the sweet girl with a genuine sunbeam smile was assured acceptance by the others.

Still, he did not wish to stay too far from Harriet.

It might take only an instant for something to go wrong. Should he not remain close to protect her? As everyone well knew, marriage was a cutthroat business, and any missteps were to be pounced upon in order to destroy competitors.

These diamonds would view Harriet as a competitor no matter how loudly she proclaimed otherwise.

The elders settled around one table while the bachelors and diamonds occupied the other. Were it just him and Harriet, he would have brought her out here alone and simply set out a blanket for them to sit upon while they dug into a basket of cold chicken, cheeses, and fruits prepared by his cook to be eaten with their fingers.

But this excursion was more of an outdoor dining affair rather than a true picnic that he knew Harriet would prefer. Odd that he knew this about Harriet, but she took delight in all things natural. Sticking china plates, crystal glasses, and silverware on a lace tablecloth, and having servants run back and forth to fetch their elaborate menu of dishes, was never going to impress her.

He assumed his seat at the head of the table, enduring the chatter of Lady Marianne and Lady Winifred, both of whom were once again making improper advances toward him. At one point, both of them happened to slide their feet up along his legs, one on the right leg and the other on the left.

Blessed saints.

He considered moving his legs back and letting them flirt with each other. How long before they realized they were not playing with him but with each other?

Lady Philomena did not stop giggling.

Lady Annalise did not stop complaining.

Lady Rose appeared to be sensitive to grasses and sneezed continually.

Actually, he felt bad about that.

Lady Beatrice sat beside Harriet, perhaps having taken a liking to her and wanting to protect her just as he did. But that mocking expression of hers truly irked him.

Harriet sat quietly and said very little, but her smile was quite radiant, and the men at the table were easily enchanted by her.

The rest of the afternoon passed enjoyably and uneventfully, save for Harriet's quiet distress.

Max finally had a moment alone with her once they returned to the manor and the others retired to their bedchambers to prepare for the evening's entertainments. "Harriet," he said, knowing he should not have followed her into her bedchamber or shut the door behind them for privacy, but this was gnawing at him, "what is really going on? You have been pale and distracted since you and Beatrice took that walk."

"Did she not tell you anything?"

"Other than to tell me to get lost? No."

She sank onto one of the chairs by her small table and let out a breath. "She hasn't told me anything, either. However..."

"What, Harriet?"

"That's just it...I don't know what she means to do. Probably nothing and she was just toying with me because she thinks I am your spy. I am not suited for these ton games. I do not know how to play them. I rather like her, but felt completely manipulated by her."

"It is that smug look she has had all day. It irked me, too."

“But what does it mean, Your Grace?”

They had no chance to discuss it further before there was a knock at her door.

Harriet’s eyes widened in panic. “You cannot be found in here.”

He put a finger to her lips to motion for her to be quiet, and then he stepped through the servants door, giving her a nod to allow the person in.

Harriet’s heart was beating fast as she opened the door to find Beatrice’s maid with a note in hand. “For you, Miss Comeford.”

She placed the note in Harriet’s hand and then scurried back to Beatrice’s chamber.

Harriet closed her door and stared at the neatly folded missive.

Max stepped out from his hiding place. “Open it, Harriet.”

She nodded and unsealed it. “She wants me to meet her by the stable at six o’clock.”

“That’s two hours from now. Does she give a reason?”

“No, this is all she wrote. It doesn’t make sense.” She handed the parchment to him for his perusal.

Max did not like this one bit.

Was this another game to be played, an attempt to ruin Harriet by having her found with Ware or Folkstone in the stable? Had Beatrice forged a note to one of them pretending the writer was Harriet and she wished for an assignation?

Surely, Ware or Folkstone would know it was a trick. Harriet was not the sort to steal into a stable for a quick tumble in the hay.

“I’ll go in your place,” he said, still staring at the note as possibilities jumbled in his brain. “I want you to stay here and prepare yourself for tonight’s supper and entertainments.”

“I think I would rather be in the kitchen assisting Mrs. Paltry.”

Max laughed. “You shall be the brightest star of the evening. You charmed everyone at the picnic.”

“Because I kept my mouth shut and smiled like a simpleton. One cannot get in trouble when one says nothing. But I shall be found out the moment I mix up my forks at supper or when the dancing starts and I do not know any of the steps.”

“I’ll get you through the evening, Harriet. Never you worry.”

“And this six o’clock clandestine meeting? I ought to go with you.”

“Absolutely not. What if she plans to have you abducted?”

Harriet’s eyes widened once more. “Why ever would she do such a thing? I have made it quite clear I am not competing for your affections and that I have nothing to my name. Of course, she thinks I am an exiled princess...they all do...but the point is, I’ve made clear I am penniless. Why would you have an interest in a penniless exile?”

“I wouldn’t.” But he knew it was a lie. He did not need an heiress’s coffers to save an estate since his holdings were all profitable and he was a wealthy man. He had the luxury of marrying for love.

But he dared not admit his growing affection for Harriet.

Blessed saints.

What he felt for her was more than mere affection.

He could not get her out of his thoughts, day or night.

Especially night, for his dreams were all about her and the improper things he wished to do to her.

She would dump her ewer of water over his head if he ever gave her the specifics.

All this, and he hardly knew her.

But he knew her skin was soft and lovely.

That her smile lightened his heart and her body made him ache in places...

Best left at that.

He needed to figure out what game Lady Beatrice was playing.

Once again, he studied the missive in his hand. "Harriet, this is not open for discussion. You are to stay here and I shall have Mrs. Watkins sit with you until I return from this supposed meeting."

"Then take a footman with you, especially if you think something nefarious is going on. In fact, take two."

"It is not necessary."

“This is not open for discussion, Your Grace,” she said, frowning at him as she tossed his words back at him. “You are taking those men with you for your protection.”

“Are you giving me orders, Harry?”

She tipped her chin up, looking quite defiant. “I would never presume to order you around. No, this is purely concern for your safety.”

He placed a hand over his heart. “I am touched. Or is it that you are just protecting your investment?”

“What do you mean?”

“You need me to get you settled in a secure position, do you not?” And what would be more secure than as his wife? Too soon to make mention of it, he once again reminded himself.

Harriet was on her feet with her hands curled into fists at her sides. “How could you think I would be so heartless as to worry for your safety only for that reason? It is not a consideration for me at all. I am worried about your safety because I want you to be safe .”

She held out her hand. “Give me that note.”

He tucked it in the breast pocket of his jacket.

She gasped. “Your Grace, it is mine and I want it back.”

“No.”

He noticed the rise and fall of her nicely shaped bosom as she grew irritated with

him. What would she do if he kissed her now?

Gad, no.

What was he thinking?

Well, he was obviously thinking that she had the sweetest lips he ached to taste and an even sweeter body that he would very much like to explore.

But exploring the reason for this note came first.

“Harriet, I’m going to do a little investigating beforehand, talk to Ware and Folkstone to see if one of them received a missive they believed came from you.”

“And if they deny receiving anything?”

He shrugged. “Doesn’t really matter. I’ll bring them to the stable with me for protection whether they received a note or not. They are trusted friends and good fighters. I can count on them to watch my back. This is what we do for each other.”

“Some unwritten duke code? Or secret club that only wayward dukes may join? I noticed the three of you have similar signet rings. Is this by purposeful design?”

He smiled. “Something like that.”

“All right. That is acceptable.”

He gave an exaggerated bow. “I am glad to have Her Highness’s permission.”

She let out a breath. “Please, Your Grace. Do be careful. I shall never forgive myself if you come to harm.”

“I will be, Harriet.” He groaned. “Are you crying?”

She nodded. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to, but the thought of your getting hurt truly terrifies me, and it is not because you think I have some vested interest in keeping you alive. Can I not worry because you are a good man and I am afraid you might get hurt?”

She looked as though she wanted to throw her arms around him, so he opened his arms to her in encouragement.

She flew into them.

He hugged her, loving the way she melted against him and into him. “Oh, Harry. I shall use all caution.”

He loved the way she sincerely cared for him.

This was her nature, was it not?

Softhearted to a fault.

George had always said this about his sister.

“It is likely nothing at all, Harry. Beatrice may just want to show you one of my horses. I keep several fine racers here.”

She leaned her head against his chest and nodded. “I hope this is all it is.”

He kissed her on the forehead, afraid to kiss her as he truly wished.

The hallway clock bonged to mark the five o’clock hour. Had he been with Harriet

almost an hour? It felt like only minutes. “I had better go.”

He would take her in his arms again tonight.

Why not?

And kiss her tonight...really kiss her with scorching heat and passion.

Why not that, too?

And why not ask her to marry him?

Was she not the obviously right choice?

CHAPTER SEVEN

HARRIET'S HEART WAS in her throat as the large clock in the hallway marked the six o'clock hour. "Oh, Alice. I do not like this one bit," she said, pacing across the elegantly carpeted floor of her bedchamber.

The carpet was blue, of course.

So were the drapes.

Which is why the duke had named it the Blue Room.

He had sent Alice up to assist Harriet, or perhaps it was to keep watch over her and stop her from following him into the stable.

"His Grace knows what he is doing, Miss Harriet. You mustn't fret."

But how could she not?

She went to the window to peer out, craning her neck to catch a glimpse of the stable. Her bedchamber overlooked the duke's beautiful gardens, but also provided a sliver of a view of his stable if she leaned out the window and looked to her right.

"Oh, do be careful," Alice said, her voice strained with worry as Harriet stuck her head out for a better glimpse.

Harriet inhaled lightly. "The duke is walking into the stable with his friends."

“Do they have weapons drawn, Miss Harriet?”

“Oh, I cannot tell.”

Alice came to her side and held her by the waist. “Careful, or you’ll fall out.”

“I have a solid grip,” she assured the maid, but did not mind having the extra support.

“Wait, they are walking out already.”

“Good, that was quick.”

“No, Alice. This is bad. All three of them are frowning and now hurrying back to the house. I’m going downstairs.”

“Oh, no! Please don’t, Miss Harriet. His Grace said to—”

But Harriet was already rushing out the door.

She was merely going to meet them as they walked in. But Lady Beatrice’s father, the Marquess of Covington, was also standing by the door, hovering beside Flint and looking quite dour as the three dukes marched in. “Did you find my daughter, Pendrake?”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, Covington. I did not.”

Lord Covington released a deflated breath. “Then she’s finally done it, run off with that bounder, Arlington.”

“He’s hardly a bounder,” Pendrake replied. “The man is a Royal Navy captain and commands his own ship. He distinguished himself during the war, and his family is reputable.”

“But he is a commoner,” her father hissed, now turning to stare at Harriet who had paused on the bottom step of the staircase, now hesitant to approach. “My daughter sent that note to you . And the two of you were chatting up a storm throughout the picnic. What did she tell you?”

“Nothing, my lord. I promise you, she told me nothing at all.”

“And you expect me to believe this? You had to know she was planning something.” He advanced on her. “Foolish girl, did she trick you into helping her? Tell me what she told you.”

Pendrake immediately got between them, creating a secure barricade as he made certain to keep her tucked behind him. “I am sorry you are in distress, Covington. But this does not give you permission to accost my guests. Miss Comeford never met your daughter until today. You have known Beatrice for her entire lifetime. Do not think to cast blame on anyone but yourself and Beatrice. This is between father and daughter and has nothing to do with Miss Comeford.”

Harriet was surprised when Ware and Folkstone also defended her.

But she felt wretched when Lord Covington broke down in tears. “I have to find her, Pendrake. She is my dearest child. I must stop her before she marries Arlington.”

Was Beatrice of age? Or would she and this Arlington fellow need to run off to Gretna Green? Or perhaps all they needed was to get on a ship and have the captain officiate their ceremony?

She feared to ask these questions.

“Miss Comeford,” the duke said gently, “please return to your bedchamber. My friends and I will assist Lord Covington from here on out.”

“No! The chit stays with us. I know my Beatrice told her something, and I shall have it out of her if I—”

“Do not threaten the lady.” Pendrake once again nudged her behind him as he glowered at Beatrice’s father.

“She knows where my daughter fled!”

Harriet’s heart was caught in her throat. “Upon my honor, Lord Covington,” she said hoarsely. “I do not!”

How could he think such a thing?

This was a disaster.

“She told me nothing. However, I shall come with you into the study and gladly help in any way I can. Believe me, my lord. I wish I knew where she has gone.”

“It is obvious she sent her note to Miss Comeford as a distraction for her elopement scheme,” Pendrake said, motioning for them all to follow him into his study.

He paused a moment to instruct Flint. “Have tea brought in for all of us.”

“Very good, Your Grace.”

“Tea?” Covington scoffed. “I need a brandy.”

“Yes, I’m sure we shall all need a stiff drink. But let us try to remain sober while we establish a course of action.”

“What action is necessary other than finding that no-account and shooting him down

like the dog he is?" Covington growled.

"Viscount Arlington will not appreciate your murdering his son, even if he is merely a fourth son," Pendrake said dryly.

Harriet stood silent and took in all the conversations.

Beatrice's father had referred to her beloved as a commoner. Perhaps he was considered that under strict adherence to succession rules, but no commoner would ever consider a Royal Navy captain in charge of his own vessel a common man.

It struck her then just how rigid the rules of privileged Society were.

Her brother would have been delighted to welcome such a man as Captain Arlington into their family, for a captain in command of his own ship could claim a captain's share of any plunder gained from his capture of an enemy vessel and perhaps make himself a wealthy man.

But Lord Covington considered such men as not worthy to shine his boots.

This was a lesson to be learned.

Covington was a marquess, but the three other men in the study with her were dukes and could claim even higher rank than this exalted marquess.

What did they think of her?

A dead soldier's penniless sister.

How stupid of her to insert herself in this situation and not run upstairs to her bedchamber as Pendrake had advised.

Too late now.

“What about Lady Beatrice’s maid,” Harriet asked. “Has anyone questioned her? Would she not be the person most likely to know where Captain Arlington has taken her?”

“We would ask, if she were here,” Ware said.

Pendrake nodded. “She rode off with Lord Covington’s daughter hours ago. Must have been immediately after she delivered the letter to you. My head groom confirmed she rode out with Beatrice.”

This is why the three dukes had rushed out of the stable mere minutes after entering. The Pendrake head groom must have told them the two ladies had taken horses and fled.

Harriet groaned. “Of course, how clever of her. Lady Beatrice sent me that note asking to meet me at six o’clock to purposely put everyone off until that hour. She was never going to meet me, and she now has a two hour head start. Oh, heavens. How easily I was taken in.”

“She obviously planned this ahead of time,” Pendrake said to Beatrice’s father, “perhaps before ever arriving at this house party.”

Harriet’s heart was in a jumble. “Would you like me to search Beatrice’s room with Mrs. Watkins? She may have left a clue behind as to her whereabouts.”

“No, Miss Comeford. That is not necessary,” Pendrake said, regarding her quite sternly. “You’ve involved yourself enough.”

Despite defending her to Beatrice’s father, was he now blaming her for this incident?

How could he when he had just suggested this might have taken days of planning?

Yet, the way he looked at her.

“We’ll search in the village next,” he continued, his expression growing darker as he now scowled at her. “I know you wish to help, but there is nothing you can contribute.”

She swallowed the knot of sorrow now wedged in her throat. “Yes, of course.”

She hurried out of the study, feeling all eyes upon her retreating back.

Why had she inserted herself in the discussion when she clearly was not wanted? Nor did she have anything to offer the investigation.

All she had done was fix Covington’s rage on her, for he believed her to be a liar.

She saw it on his face and in the expressions of the three dukes.

Did they all believe she knew where his daughter had gone?

Not only did they believe her to be a liar, but they regarded her as useless.

She hurried back to her room and found Alice waiting for her. “Oh, Miss Comeford...”

“This is all my fault.” Harriet finally let the tears she had been holding back now flow. “Why did I not see it? I could have stopped Lady Beatrice.”

“Did you know she was running away?”

“No.”

“Then how are you at fault?”

Harriet sighed. “I felt she was not telling me everything. I felt it in my bones. She smirked throughout the picnic, as though she knew something the others did not.”

Alice shook her head. “Then everyone must have seen her smirking. Why blame yourself when she fooled everyone?”

“I spent much of the picnic talking to her, sometimes in private conversations.”

The girl shrugged. “Her father has known her all her life and he never saw it coming. And I’m sure she was friendly with several other young ladies, and—”

Harriet gasped. “Of course, we should be asking them. Oh, Alice. You are brilliant.”

She giggled. “What did I say, Miss Comeford?”

“A lady would know. Wait right here.” She quickly dried her tears. “I am going to ask His Grace for permission to questions the other diamonds.”

She ran downstairs and caught the men as they were about to ride to the nearby village bearing the same name as the duke, Pendrake. “What is it?” he asked with marked impatience as she rushed out of the house and called to him.

“The other ladies may have been told something. Do you mind if I question them?”

He appeared ready to growl at her, but must have realized it was not a bad idea. “Have my mother do it. I want you to keep out of it.”

“All right. I’ll speak to your mother right away. It is wisest to have her conduct the questioning since she is the highest in authority and I am...”

Nobody.

That’s who she was.

Nobody.

She had been fooled into thinking she was worthy of notice, but she was really nothing more than a charity case.

With a final frown at her, the duke rode off with his companions.

Harriet wasted no time in running upstairs to the dowager’s bedchamber. She knocked softly on the door, hoping the dowager was not napping.

Millie let her in. “Is something wrong, Miss Harriet? Do come in. Her Grace was wondering what all the commotion was about. Do you know what has happened?”

She nodded, and then related all she knew to the dowager. “Your grandson would like you to question the other ladies in the hope one of them might know more about Lady Beatrice’s plans.”

“Very well. Harriet, be a dear and ask them to meet me in the drawing room immediately. You come, too.”

“But I’ve told you all I know.”

“My dear, I must have you with me, for you have a good sense about people. You will know who is lying and who is telling the truth.”

“All right, but I do not think your grandson has the same confidence in me.” In truth, she was convinced that he blamed her as Covington did.

Losing the duke’s trust and respect devastated her.

How could she stay if he now loathed her? And yet, where could she go?

She would make the offer to leave, of course.

It was the proper thing to do.

But then, she would have to beg him for the fare to London and a little more to tide her over since she would also need a place to stay while she searched for employment.

It all seemed hopeless.

“I’ll summon them right away,” Harriet said and hurried off to gather the ladies.

Within the quarter hour they were all seated in the drawing room.

“What is all the fuss about?” Lady Marianna asked.

The dowager left it up to Harriet to tell them what had happened. “This is why the duchess has asked you all here. Do any of you have any idea where Lady Beatrice has gone? Her father is frantic with worry for her safety.”

Lady Annalise and Lady Winifred found the situation amusing.

“If she has run off with Captain Arlington, then I expect she will be in no danger,” Lady Annalise said with a dismissive air. “The man is an honorable prig. He’ll marry

her, I have no doubt. Less competition for us all.”

Winifred agreed. “She’s a good one to have knocked off Pendrake’s list since she was his favorite. But good riddance to her. She’s made her choice and must deal with the consequences. It is not our concern if her father disowns her. She’ll have to get used to living on a captain’s wages.”

All the ladies tittered at the notion.

The dowager did not look amused.

After asking a few more questions to which she received unhelpful answers, the dowager dismissed the diamonds. “Stay, Harriet.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“I have never been treated with such insolence in all my days,” she intoned. “These ladies are shockingly cold-hearted.”

Harriet nodded. “I do not believe Beatrice would have confided in any of them. I think we will get more out of Lord Covington’s valet or his coachman. Beatrice’s maid would have been most helpful, but she seems to have run off with Beatrice. Your grandson dismissed my suggestion to have her room searched for clues, but I do not see how this can hurt. Would you mind if Mrs. Watkins and I searched her room?”

“It is good idea. Go to it, Harriet. But first ask Flint to summon the coachman and valet. I shall question them in the meanwhile.”

Harriet did as the dowager asked, however her room search yielded nothing, just as the duke expected.

When she returned to the drawing room to report to the dowager, the dear lady appeared equally glum. “The valet and coachman knew nothing.”

Nor could any of the Pendrake maids offer anything.

Harriet thought they might have overheard a whisper or two, but none did. Lady Beatrice and her maid were quite careful and had fooled them all.

Harriet said as much to the dowager.

“Yes, my dear. We were all completely taken in.”

This ought to have made Harriet feel better, but it did not. She could not forget the angry scowl on the duke’s face as he left for the village with Ware, Folkstone, and Beatrice’s father.

Supper was delayed until nine o’clock that evening in the hope the men would return in time. As the hour approached, Harriet thought to simply remain in her bedchamber, but the dowager would not hear of it and sent Millie to assist her. “Wear the lovely ivory with the floral embroidery tonight, Miss Harriet. This will be a casual evening, one that might end shortly after supper if the gentlemen do not return.”

Since she was not going to ignore the dowager’s wishes, she thanked Millie for her assistance and joined the ladies downstairs. There were several gentlemen present, as well. But the dukes were the ones the young ladies were hoping to see, so supper turned out to be a subdued affair.

They were just finishing the meal, enjoying a lemon syllabub, when the dukes and Lord Covington returned. Table manners fled as everyone jumped from their seats and raced into the entry hall to hear the latest news.

Harriet's heart sank because the men appeared defeated.

"No, we did not find her," Pendrake confirmed in response to everyone's question. "Not a trace. However, we did receive confirmation that a man matching Arlington's description was seen in the area shortly before Lady Beatrice disappeared."

"I'm so sorry, Covington," the dowager said with sincerity. "If there is any good to be found in this sad situation, it is that your daughter might find happiness married to this man."

"I hope their marriage is blighted," he growled, and strode into the duke's study muttering something about needing a drink.

As others began to follow Covington and the dukes to the study, Harriet remained in the entry hall because she did not think Pendrake wished to set eyes on her ever again.

"Miss Harriet?" Flint said politely.

"The study is crowded enough. I shall be in my room should His Grace ask. I'll come down if he requests it, but I doubt he will."

As they stood by the front door which was still open, a young boy walked up. "Sir."

Flint turned to the lad, somewhat surprised. "What are you doing here at this time of night, Simon?"

"A lady gave me this letter earlier and told me to deliver it to Miss Harriet Comeford at sundown."

Harriet gasped. "That's me."

She took the letter from the boy, her hands trembling as she held it. “This has to be from Lady Beatrice.”

Flint gave the boy a coin.

But as the boy turned to leave, Harriet held him back. “No, wait. I think His Grace will want to speak to you. Flint, please escort the lad into the library. I’ll ask His Grace to join us. Are you hungry, Simon?”

He nodded. “Thirsty too, m’lady.”

Harriet cast Flint a wincing smile. “Could you please...and I expect His Grace will also want something to hold him over since I doubt the gentlemen have eaten yet. And someone ought to take the boy home afterward. He should not walk alone to the village in the dark.”

Darkness fell late in the summer, and sundown did not arrive until ten o’clock at night. Much too late for a boy of Simon’s age to be out and not abed.

Flint grinned. “I shall attend to all of it at once, Miss Comeford.”

“Thank you.” She knew she had overstepped her authority, but Flint did not seem to mind.

She hurried to the study, hoping the duke would not ignore her.

Everyone had gathered around him and Lord Covington, and were tossing questions at them. The duke glanced up when he saw her enter and she tried to discretely motion to him. She was afraid he would ignore her, but he excused himself and motioned for the other dukes and a sadly broken Lord Covington to continue responding to the questions.

“What is it, Harry?” he said gruffly, obviously still peeved.

“This.” She showed him the second letter “A lad called Simon just delivered it. He said it was for me. I had Flint put the boy in your library since I thought you might want to question him.”

The duke nodded. “Good thinking. Come along, let’s read that letter and talk to the boy.”

Once in the library, the duke shut the door behind them to allow for privacy while he engaged the lad. “But let’s read the letter first.”

Harriet’s hands were still trembling as she carefully unsealed it.

Dearest Harriet,

Please forgive me for embroiling you in my escapade, but I hoped you would be the voice of reason and allay my father’s fears. Captain Arlington is an excellent man and will take good care of me. I know you were worried for me, but be assured my captain has a charming estate on the Exmoor coast, fully staffed with servants, so I shall want for nothing. I turned one and twenty last month, and am now of age to marry without my father’s consent. My dear captain and I have waited for this moment since I was sixteen years old and he, two and twenty. Please let my father know he will always be welcome into our home, provided he is polite to my husband. Yes, he is my husband. We secretly married the day after my birthday, so please do not blame yourself. You are without fault. I am truly sorry I involved you in my scheme. But I hope you can understand why I had to send the first missive asking you to meet me at the stable at six o’clock. I was long gone by then, but how else was I to delay others from following me? I had to make them think I would meet you at that hour. I hope you find it in your heart to forgive me, my dearest Harriet. I think we would have been great friends had we spent more time together. Wishing you every

happiness.

With fondest regards,

Beatrice

Harriet turned to the duke, uncertain what his response would be to this letter. “Well, Your Grace. She is safe and that is what matters most.”

He shook his head. “Do you really think so? Her father is going to fly into a rage when he sees this letter.”

“Must he see it?”

“I am not going to withhold it from him, Harriet.”

“Of course,” she said, wishing the duke would stop scowling at her. Did the letter do nothing to exonerate her? “His daughter is now happily wed to a good man who has the means to provide for her and loves her. Do you think Lord Covington will eventually see reason and accept their marriage?”

“No. You are deluded if you believe this will end well.”

This saddened her. “I hope it will. I want Lady Beatrice and her father to be happy and reconcile. Life is too short to be wasted on resentment and bile. I do not know Captain Arlington. Is he honorable or a no-good rascal?”

The duke let out a long breath. “He’s a good man, from what I know of him. Whether he will be a faithful husband, only time will tell.”

“Time, and no interference from her father. Love is a precious gift that should never

be squandered. I would give anything to make such a match for myself. But as we know, I shall be fortunate to find a position in a good household and not end up begging on the street.”

The duke said nothing.

Harriet stood awkwardly beside him while Flint rolled in a tea cart and then hurried off to attend to the others. Harriet did the honors and poured tea for the duke and Simon, and then cut each of them slices of ginger cake. “Thank you, m’lady. This is delicious,” Simon declared, his eyes wide and smile even wider.

She laughed lightly. “I am glad you like it. Mrs. Paltry is His Grace’s cook and she baked this marvel of a cake.”

“I know,” the lad said between mouthfuls. “She’s my grandmother.”

That got a grin out of the duke. “Forgive me, Harriet. I should have mentioned who Simon was. He’s a regular visitor here.”

He now knelt beside the boy. “Simon, did Lady Beatrice say anything more to you?”

“No, Your Grace. She just handed me the letter, and the gentleman she was with handed me a shilling for delivering it to Miss Comeford at sundown and no sooner. Are you going to ask me for the shilling?”

The duke shook his head and smiled. “No, it is yours. You have earned it.”

He then went on to question the lad about who else was with Lady Beatrice and her gentleman, and whether they mentioned where they were headed.

“No, m’lord. Just the captain and the lady, and the lady’s maid. The captain had a

carriage at the ready and they rode off in it right after the lady handed me the letter. They rode north, that's all I saw. Oh, and the captain gave me another shilling to return the horses the ladies took. I put them in your stable before coming to find Lady Harriet."

"I am not..." Harriet sighed because it was not worth insisting she was not a lady. "Did they look happy?"

The duke arched an eyebrow upon hearing her question.

"Oh, yes," Simon said with a nod. "The cove could not stop smiling. Nor could the lady, although she shed a few tears because she was sad about leaving her father. But she thought he would come around in time. That's what she told the captain."

"I hope so." Harriet cut the boy another slice of cake and held back a chuckle as he devoured it in two bites.

"Your Grace, may I go now?" the boy asked after taking a last sip of his tea. "My ma will worry if I'm not back soon."

The duke had remained on his haunches beside the boy and now rose to his full height. "I'll have my coachman deliver you home in my carriage, Simon. Are you still hungry? Shall I have your grandmother pack you a supper basket?"

"Yes, Your Grace. That would be just fine. May I go now and ask her?"

The duke nodded. "Yes. Flint will fetch you once my carriage is ready."

The boy ran off, leaving Harriet alone with the duke.

She handed him the letter. "I suppose you'll want to show it to Lord Covington. May

I be excused? I don't think you need me for the rest of this discussion."

"Go ahead. There's no need for you to stay. The crowd will disperse after this and want to resume the planned entertainments. You do not play cards and you cannot dance, so I do not think you will enjoy yourself if you remain with us."

"Will there be dancing tomorrow night, as well?"

He nodded. "But you need not join us for anything more."

"All right." She did not know how to dance their elegant dances.

The duke knew this, too.

By his nod, was he telling her to stay away from him and his friends?

She assumed so, and would plead a headache tomorrow morning and keep to her chamber from now on. Was it not safer than joining these privileged elites who did not want their house party tainted by her company? "Good night, Your Grace."

He grunted distractedly, his attention on the letter she had left with him.

She walked upstairs feeling cast out.

Alice came up to attend her, but she barely had time to undo the lacing of her gown before rushing off to attend to the other ladies. Not that any of them had retired yet, but several wanted to change into proper evening gowns now that the dukes had returned.

"His Grace ordered the card tables set up for those who wish to play cards. And the pianist arrived earlier, so His Grace will have him stay on so that the ladies and

gentlemen may dance.”

“What of Lord Covington?”

“He’s seated in the study with His Grace. They are having brandies and conversing about Lady Beatrice.”

“Just the two of them?”

Alice nodded. “Yes, he’s sent the others off to enjoy themselves now that everyone has calmed down. I’m glad Lady Beatrice is safe. But what a scandal! To be secretly married all the while. Good thing the duke did not fancy her.”

Alice rushed off.

Harriet was left alone with her thoughts.

But the duke had fancied Beatrice.

He had referred to her as the best of these diamonds. Would he remain angry? Was he hurt by Beatrice’s deception?

Would he blame her for Beatrice’s actions when all she had done was talk to Beatrice this afternoon at his urging?

What right did he have to blame her when he was the one who had goaded her to approach Beatrice in the first place?

Feeling rather exhausted, she changed into her nightgown and also donned her robe, for her insides were shivering. How long before the duke burst into her chamber, roused her out of a fitful sleep, and moved her into the servants quarters?

That would be a cruel humiliation, but she was prepared for it.

All she needed from him was assistance in securing a respectable position, and then she would be out of his life forever.

Would he renege on that promise now?

Dear heaven.

What would she do if he sent her away?

He was going to do it, she felt it in her bones.

She was the outsider and unwitting accomplice to Beatrice.

He would never forgive her.

He would never love her.

How could he? A duke and a schoolteacher? The match was laughable.

And yet, she had fallen in love with him.

How could she have been so foolish?

But there it was, she had lost her heart to the Duke of Pendrake.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MAX KNEW HE should have said something to Harriet earlier this evening to allay her concerns, but his head was in a muddle after dealing with an angry Covington, and exhausted friends who had scoured the village of Pendrake along with him in the hope of finding Beatrice. Upon returning home, he then had to face riled debutantes who expected to be entertained, and then to have Simon show up with a letter for Harriet that further infuriated Covington who was insulted his daughter had not written the letter to him.

“Who is she to my daughter? Some penniless princess from an inconsequential royal house. I am Beatrice’s father and deserve better than no word at all.”

Max wanted to clarify that Harriet wasn’t a princess, but the matter wasn’t worth raising again. “Covington, meaning no disrespect...you have thwarted your daughter’s heartfelt desire for years now. What did you expected her to do?”

“Obey the father who loves her and knows what is best for her. I raised her and gave her everything in life. After all I have done for her, she runs off and betrays me by marrying some fourth son. Have I not been outrageously wronged?”

“If you wish for my honest opinion, my answer would be no, you have not been wronged. Arlington is a good man and has loved your daughter all of his adult life. Is that not worth something?”

“She could have been happily married to you, Pendrake. Why should she settle for less?”

“She does not consider Arlington less. Would it be so awful to let them make a life together? He is decently set up, has a house and servants. She will be cared for even if you cut her off. Why do it when she loves you and wants to maintain contact with you? She is your only child, Covington. I am not saying what she did by defying you and going behind your back was right, but it is done. Accept it and reconcile with her. You only spite yourself by rejecting her love.”

And he ought to do the same with Harriet, for Max knew he had given her the wrong impression.

Harriet.

Of all people, Beatrice had confided in George Comeford's little sister.

He knew why Beatrice had chosen her.

Harriet was the true diamond among these ladies.

But this incident had taken a toll on Harriet's gentle heart. She had made her excuses and retired early because she was distraught and thought he blamed her for Beatrice's misdeeds.

In truth, he wasn't blaming her at all.

He was in love with Harriet.

The frown she'd noticed on him had nothing to do with casting blame on her. He was perplexed and debating what to do about his feelings for her.

His head was telling him to be cautious.

Had he not spent his entire life being trained to be wary?

But Harriet was a gem.

Why not declare his love?

After all, in a sense he had known her for years.

Perhaps that knowledge came only through her letters to her brother, but George had also spoken of her quite often, his heart swelling with pride and affection as they sat around a battlefield campfire to warm their frozen hands.

Was she not exactly as George had described her?

In truth, even prettier than he had described.

He went to bed thinking of Harriet, and had hardly closed his eyes by the time morning came and his valet strode in to toss the drapes aside and let in the blinding light. "I'm going to have you drawn and quartered, Holt."

"Very good, Your Grace," he responded, completely unperturbed.

"And boiled in oil."

He set out Max's shaving gear. "Of course, Your Grace."

Max laughed. "Would you happen to know if anyone else is awake yet?"

"I do believe everyone else is sleeping still. Quite some excitement yesterday."

"Yes, an understatement. I'll look in on Lord Covington once he is awake. I'm sure he passed a difficult night."

"Indeed, the poor man. I'll ask his valet to alert me once he is up and dressed."

“Thank you, Holt.” Max got out of bed and readied himself for the day.

The person he really wanted to see was Harriet, but she was not at the breakfast table when he strode into the dining room the next morning.

He had his coffee, thinking she might soon come down. But when she did not, he returned upstairs and knocked lightly at her bedroom door.

Alice opened the door and informed him that Harriet wasn't there.

“Do you know where she is, Alice?”

“No, Your Grace. She was already up and out of the house when I came in to assist her.”

He spotted his housekeeper bustling down the hall. “Mrs. Watkins, have you seen Miss Comeford this morning?”

“I saw her go out earlier, but I cannot say where she went. Perhaps you will find her in the garden or in the chapel you so excellently scrubbed clean the other day.”

“Ah, yes.” He turned and hurried to the chapel, hoping he would find her there.

The air was warm and laden with moisture, an obvious sign of impending rain. He hurried his pace, hoping to square things with Harriet and get her back to the house before they were both caught in a downpour and drenched.

The chapel door was open, so he quietly walked in.

His heart hitched.

Harriet sat in the first pew, handkerchief in hand and sobbing.

He strode forward and settled beside her. “Why the tears, Harriet?”

She regarded him with trepidation. “I’m so sorry I’ve let you down. I don’t know how to make it up to you.”

He frowned.

Did she believe he was blaming her for Beatrice’s elopement?

“And then to find out Beatrice had been married all along,” she said, her breath hitching as she cried and tried to talk at the same time.

“How can it possibly be your fault?” he asked gently.

“I don’t know. But you were so disappointed in me.”

He saw so much pain in her eyes as she glanced at him.

“Your Grace, I do not need to stay on if you wish me to go. Only, I haven’t a shilling to my name. I don’t know where I would go or what I would do. I haven’t even the funds to get to London. It shames me so much to beg for your assistance.”

“Harriet,” he said with a soft growl, raking a hand through his hair. “Do not ever beg me for anything again.”

“Oh.” She now looked as though he had stabbed her through the heart. “You are that angry with me?”

Angry? What had he just said to make her think so?

Bollocks.

Do not ever beg me for anything again.

She had taken those words as a rejection of her when he'd meant the opposite. "No. No, I am not angry with you at all. You never need never beg me for anything, Harriet...never need beg me because..." He sighed. "Because I will gladly give you all that is mine to give."

She stared at him, obviously confused. "What do you mean?"

He let out a breath. "I am in love with you, Harriet. My secret, incognito princess from an unknown realm. I am completely and thoroughly in love with you, and have been ever since I set eyes on you in my courtyard the day my guests arrived."

Her mouth gaped open, but as his words penetrated, she smiled as only she knew how to smile and leave him breathless.

He took her hand in his. "What shall I do about this situation, Harry?"

She said nothing, just stared at him and looked as though she was about to cry again.

Oh, gad.

Did she think he was asking her to be his mistress?

Good work, Max.

Leave it to him to make a bollocks of his marriage proposal.

He gave her hand a light squeeze. "I do not want you to leave, my lovely Harriet. In fact, I'd like you to stay with me forever and be my wife."

She gasped. "What?"

“I wish you to marry me.”

“Marry you?”

He grinned. “Yes, and perhaps I ought to thank Beatrice for showing me the importance of grabbing happiness when it is offered. Why should I follow ton rules and be miserable just to please lords and ladies who do not care a fig about me? So, I intend to follow my own rules and offer for the one lady who makes my heart swell with joy, who beat me handily at scrubbing floors, and who has the kindest, most generous nature. Is this not a perfect foundation for a marriage?”

“Scrubbing floors is a must,” she said with a gentle laugh as she used her handkerchief to dry her tears.

And then she cast him another of her sunbeam smiles that was bright enough to light up the entire chapel.

“What’s your answer, Harry? Do you think you could love me?”

She laughed. “ Dear heaven . Since we are making our confessions, then I shall tell you mine. I have been in love with you since before I ever met you. However, I did have a moment of panic when I saw a stunningly handsome fellow striding toward me from the stable as I stood in your courtyard and felt I could fall in love with him . Then it turned out he was you , so I was quite relieved that I was no fickle miss.”

He shook his head and laughed.

“I do love you so very much, Your Grace.”

“Max,” he said with insistence. “Surely, you can now call me Max.”

“All right...Max.” She let out a soft sigh. “I tried hard not to admit my feelings.

Dukes do not marry schoolteachers.”

“Well, this one does. Will you have me, Harriet?”

“Yes, and if this is a dream then do not ever wake me,” she said, throwing her arms around his neck and hugging him. “Yes again with all my heart.”

He wrapped his arms around her, something he’d ached to do from the moment he’d set eyes on her. “Good...and now I have one other request of you.”

She looked up at him. “A request, Your Grace?”

“The name is Max. Have you forgotten it already?”

She smiled and cast him a sweet apology. “No, Max. I shall never forget you or your name, for you are etched in my heart.”

“Good, because I consider us bound from this day forth. You shall be my wife and partner in life. Of course, you may call me your beloved, or any other endearment you see fit.”

She nodded. “Oh, I think I shall have many of those for you. My love. My darling. My dearest. I am so much in love with you. But it cannot come as a surprise. All women fall in love with you. Well, except for Beatrice. But I think you would have won her over had she met you before Arlington.”

“Oh, of course,” he said with a laugh, not quite so prideful as to believe every woman would want him.

“Truly,” Harriet insisted, joining in with a light laugh before she grew serious again. “I do love you with all my heart. If this is enough for you, then I accept your kind offer of marriage with all my gratitude and my sacred promise to always be honest,

faithful, and loving to you.”

“Excellent. Now there is another thing we must do.”

She nodded again. “Oh, yes. Tell your grandmother.”

He chuckled. “She already knows. I spoke to her before coming to find you because she deserved the courtesy and I also wanted to make certain she would accept you. Not that I needed her blessing or ever doubted she would approve.”

“Did she? Does she?”

“Yes, she claims to have known all along that we were meant for each other, especially once she learned we were cleaning the chapel. She knew I had to love you if I was willing to get down on my knees and scrub floors for you.”

Harriet laughed again. “It seems this is a necessity when one is truly in love. But you needn’t fear I will ever ask this of you again.”

“But that’s just it, Harriet. You can always ask it of me. I would do it because I love you. But to get back to the point.”

“What was your point?”

“I must do one more thing...and that is to kiss you. Close your eyes, love.”

She gasped, smiled, and then allowed her eyes to flutter shut.

As he pressed his lips down on Harriet’s and felt their soft give, Max knew he had chosen the right gem to take as his wife.

She responded with ardor and acceptance, with innocent yearning and an unawakened

passion that he longed to fulfill upon their marriage.

He sank his mouth deeper onto hers.

With this kiss, he gave her his heart together with the promise of a wealth of years in happiness and faithfulness. As her body pressed closer to his, her curves molding perfectly to the hard planes of his body as though they had been cut from a single bolt of heavenly cloth, she promised the same in return.

The kiss was deep and endless, their mouths warm and hungry as they sought each other and pledged their hearts.

The rain began to fall outside the chapel and was soon a downpour. "Looks like we're stuck here, Harriet."

She laughed softly, looking up at him with sparkling eyes and so much love in them that he knew there could never be anyone else for him. "Oh, dear," she said. "Whatever shall we do?"

Harriet was perfect for him.

"I could continue to kiss you until the rain stops," he suggested.

She nodded. "I like that idea."

"Good," he whispered and kissed her again as the rain gently pattered against the stained glass windows.

Had George known he would fall in love with Harriet? Is this why his friend had sent his sister to him?

Was he smiling down on them now?

He would make certain Harriet's brother was honored during their wedding ceremony.

As thunder now roared overhead, Max kissed Harriet again.

Even as the rain finally slowed to a light mist, he took his time escorting Harriet back to the house. There was little left to do but announce to his guests that he was no longer available.

This duke was decidedly and irrevocably taken.