



Duke of Dalliance (Revenge of the Wallflowers #53)

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Category: Historical

Description: A sweet love story

Marry a quiet one, and you wont need a mistress...

Arlington Fox, the Duke of Dallimain, had a decade-long reputation for stealing other mens mistresses. The ton called him the Duke of Dalliance. He wasnt especially proud of the label, and if the real truth were told, hed only stolen one mistress who just happened to belong to his father. She also happened to be his governess. Rumor traveled fast, and his misdemeanor had turned into a full-blown legend by the time he was twenty. Nine years later, his reputation is being put to good use, helping a wallflower teach a much-deserved lesson to a breed of catty women born into meanness.

A warning to the wise: There is a limit to what a wallflower will tolerate.

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CHAPTER 1

The London Season 1818

Arlington Fox, the Duke of Dallimain, leaned impatiently against a tree, waiting for the impudent woman to catch up with him. He'd purposely outpaced her long enough to find a clandestine spot for a confrontation that might turn loud enough to create a scandal. Something he had a reputation for. A knack. A talent—which made him smile like the rogue he was.

It was a reputation for stealing other men's mistresses, though, in truth, he'd only stolen one: his father's. A woman who was also his governess at an age when he no longer needed one. Apparently, his father had found another position for her in the household. And at the ripe age of eighteen, when Arlington returned home for the holidays, he found her one afternoon in just such a position, lying across his bed. She wasn't his first, but she was the one who brought infamy to his illustrious name, giving rise to the well-known moniker, the Duke of Dalliance, even before he inherited the title. He answered to Dalliance more often than his own name or his proper title.

At eighteen, even twenty, he found the rumor humorous, funny reminders of his youthful inability to make a good decision. Now they were a pain in his arse. And so was the woman whose dainty ankles were on display while she held her skirts high as she fled into the Pleasure Gardens after him. He dangled a pocket watch from a fob and made a mockery of checking it as she caught his eye. The ruffle of her petticoats disappeared like the tail feathers of a peacock when the dance was over.

“I’ll have grass stains for sure. Why lead me on a merry chase, Dalliance?” Miss Genevieve Rutledge took him to task as she stopped to tuck a strand of yellow hair back into place.

He swept her with a bored, arrogant nonchalance. “I didn’t lead you anywhere you weren’t already following, and if this is your plan to secure a proposal, you’ve failed.”

She stopped a yard away. A carnal smile fit with the overconfidence of a beautiful woman arched over him, resting for a spell on his groin. “Not even an indecent proposal?”

“Especially not an indecent proposal.” He slipped the watch into the little hidden pocket of his jade jacket. “Darling, your father doesn’t have the kind of influence it would take to force me to marry you. I’m not half bad at pistols and even better with sabers, so unless you’d like to see the man skewered, I’d think again before stalking me along the winding paths of the Pleasure Gardens. This place is more than a scandal in the making. It could ruin you. Is that what you want? Because if it is, I know plenty of young bucks who’d enjoy a tumble with you.” His words were frosty, rude, full of conceit, and grossly improper—not because he enjoyed it but because this particular dying star needed dissuading on several levels.

Miss Rutledge was pretty enough. Beautiful, some would say, blond hair to envy, tall enough to make bed sport interesting, and a mouth that made men of morality think immoral thoughts. But her acerbic tongue was the kind of poison he didn’t wish to wrap a kiss around.

“You don’t fool me for one second. You’re interested. I know it.”

Without moving his head an inch, his gaze drifted over the length of her body to her toes and back up. He folded his arms. “You’re interesting to look at, sweet, but that is

all.”

“If you are as crude as your name?—”

“Or my thoughts?” he suggested.

She smirked. “Certainly. Who could know your thoughts, Dalliance, except every woman who’s ever caught your eye?”

“And you think you’re one?”

She inched closer, and he stood his ground. He knew her thoughts well enough. A second year, bent on nabbing a husband. A duke? Even better. It is a bit of a curse to lose one’s parents so young when the weight of their responsibilities becomes your own. Arlington’s father had nearly run their ancestral estate into the ground. Admittedly, Arlington helped by playing the rakehell everyone thought he was until his father fell ill last year. Their relationship had not been the best, but Lucian Nathaniel Fox had been his father, and the idea of family was something he mourned. Two months later, he lost his mother to the same malady.

With ill-concealed boredom, he watched Miss Rutledge reach out her hand to touch him. Keeping his arms crossed, he responded by plucking her fingers from his forearm and dropping them an inch away. He added a grimace for show.

“You’ll have to marry someday, Dalliance, but if your name is truly your pursuit, then perhaps you should consider chasing the bastard daughter of a duke’s mistress. She would be right up your alley. And when you’re finished with her, call on me. If I’m still available.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to request that she enlighten him on the name of this bastard daughter, but he didn’t wish to encourage her any further. This one made a

life of defaming women she felt threatened by, which only heightened his curiosity if he were being honest. This illegitimate daughter must be something to look at if Genevieve Rutledge was willing to bring her name up in the worst way.

He heard a heavy sigh, reminding him that he had yet to answer. “I’m clearly not interested in you, and that is all you should be concerned with.”

“You lie. You kissed me at the Tanner’s house party.” Her hands were on her hips, and anyone with sense could see the shrewish wife she would become if given the chance, one he was not about to offer.

“That was a year ago. Do I look as if I’ve been pining away since? Because I promise I have not.”

Like every other woman he’d ever known, she started to pout, to sway her skirts back and forth, to give him a coy sideways glance. Like most men, it made him ill. With so much ammunition available, why did women choose this one? “Why not just faint and get it over with?”

“I would if there were a lounge nearby. Would you be my smelling salts?”

“Save it, Miss Rutledge, for someone truly worthy. Not me.”

“So you do know her?” She primed the question with a haughty lift of her head. He could almost see up her nostrils.

“Whom do you speak? The bastard woman?”

“Don’t play with me, Dalliance. I’m more lethal than you know.”

“I never doubted it.”

“Will you attend me at the Barstow ball later tonight?”

“Attend you? Or catch you in the library with your skirts over your head?”

“If you’re under them.”

With a fist, he tapped his folded thumb against his nose, wishing away the headache he was sure to have by evening. “I leave you to your afternoon, Miss Rutledge. Go back the way you came.”

To his chagrin, she appeared more determined than ever. “I saw you, Dalliance.” The statement was almost accusatory.

“Congratulations. Now run along.” He shooed her with his hands.

“In a mirror.”

He rolled his eyes closed, wondering what the devil she was talking about.

“It’s fate. You cannot deny it. It was in my boudoir.”

“No, no, and no. I’ve never been in your boudoir.” This little infatuation of hers was out of hand, and a story like that in the gossip rags would turn the season into a sport he didn’t want to play.

“Not in the flesh.”

“In your head, you mean? This does not improve your chances, Miss Rutledge.”

“No, but fate does. You were there. You. Not a skeleton,” she emphasized the last part as if it were of great import.

“Lord, I hope not.” He was more confused now than he’d been when he started out this morning. Women were good at that part. Their talent for manipulating confusion developed long before birth.

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“Miss Truly, this isn’t necessary. I have the cleanup in hand,” Mrs. Spencer, Truly Hancock’s housekeeper, said as Truly herself put another dish filled with untouched pastries on the moving cart.

Truly felt more like taking the plate of pastries to her room and eating the lot of them since no one showed up at her charity affair. The affair she’d given at the behest of a good friend. She questioned just how good a friend when the woman would not even deign to send a note around saying she was sick or some such malady. Any excuse, really, would have been better for Truly’s imagination because her own self-deprecating tendencies conjured up the worst excuses ever—like: Miss Rutledge preferred her other friends to the point of rudely ignoring her obligations to Truly . And that’s how she saw it. Didn’t requests become obligations to those who made them? At least they were to Truly. A bastard daughter of a duke, she may be, but her mother taught her manners and that everyone deserved kindness. Even Miss Rutledge.

“Well, I suppose St. Bishop of Ives will have to do without my infamous philanthropy skills,” Truly said tongue in cheek as she continued helping Mrs. Spencer with the leftover food and beverages despite the small reprimand.

“Ya don’t wish to hear my opinion, good lady.”

Generally speaking, Mrs. Spencer was right. “I admit that I usually don’t care for it, but I find you are correct more often than you’re not, and I am often too stubborn or silly to take heed. So, if you will apprise me, I would be most appreciative.” She did

try to sound humble, but Truly's temper preceded her pain.

"There ain't nothin' wrong with that church that needs fixin', and the lady—if one could call her that—never intended to show up here. And now yuv gone and spent time and good money on entertainin' a woman who don't deserve yer friendship. Not to mention yuv made a bad showin' with Lady Buckthorn's family."

Constance Whitmore, the daughter of Countess Buckthorn, had come to share her lovely, harmonious talent with Truly's guests. Lady Constance was on the verge of making her come out. Already quite beautiful and quite popular. Truly found her to be kind and perhaps a good ally in the future. Friends in high places were paramount for making the right financial connections, which included securing a beneficial marriage.

Lord knew Truly needed all the help she could get.

"I know you're right, Mrs. Spencer. Mama used to say that women had few choices and that using everything within their power was a fair strategy for getting ahead. I'm simply trying to get ahead."

This was her first year in society. It was also her first year without her mother and her nineteenth year without a father. Until six months ago, she didn't know if the man was alive or dead. But her mother had seen fit to leave her a few breadcrumbs as to who the man was. A duke, of all things, gone now for many years. His only legitimate son now held the title of the Duke of Justamere. That information alone had put her in fashion with Miss Genevieve Rutledge and her group of followers.

At nineteen years old, Truly didn't know how to be anything else but a hopeful echo and follower of the ton. Her mother had been a mistress to the illustrious Duke of Justamere, bearing him one daughter, Truly, whom he'd never known and probably never met. Not that she could recall unless he was there at her birth. One thing she

could say for the man was that he had taken care of her mother and her in turn. Now, however, she was left to make her own path. The house was hers, but the income would stop soon enough. Her small inheritance would keep her well for another year or two, at which time she would need a husband if she were to avoid other less palatable positions. Courtesan was not on her wish list or agenda, ever.

It had crossed her mind to request an audience with her infamous half-brother, the Duke of Justamere, Caden Landon-Scott, but there was every possibility he didn't know she existed. Unless, of course, he managed his own books. Most of the titled men she'd encountered were allergic to work. As for Truly, she was allergic to only one thing. Tobacco smoke. It kept her from the game rooms and thus out of trouble. It also kept her from getting close enough to flirt with the right men.

"If yer attendin' the Barstow ball tonight, ya best get movin'." The housekeeper straightened, holding a tray of perfectly clean dishes.

Truly didn't feel much like attending. Crowds were lonely places to be invisible. Even her five-foot-nine-inch height was not proof against those who chose to look through her. That might change when more people discovered her true identity. The information would either hurt her or help her. She couldn't be sure.

The dressmaker assured her she would be at the height of fashion for a first year, and if the height meant that she blended into the scenery of every shade of buttercream imaginable, then she was an iconic fashion plate. Her dress was demurely pretty, with a six-inch ruffle at the bottom of her long satin skirt. It shone in the right light and hugged her bosom perfectly without being too daring. It also looked completely uninspired.

She had been caught between a rock and a stone forever, battling a need to be noticed with the need to be properly behaved and witlessly flat. She hoped that her sinfully dark hair would be the right contrast with the fatigue of cream silk. That's where her

friends came in. They were kind enough to address her dilemma with honesty and with a willingness to help. She was relying on it. With no chaperone or companion, she needed the buffer and the legitimacy, for lack of a better description.

At the Barstow's ball, Miss Rutledge spotted Truly when the butler announced her name at the top of the stairs. The packed room rang with the rolling noise of two hundred people conversing, which made the booming names almost impossible to hear unless one was listening for them. Genevieve Rutledge had been keeping an ear open for her. That gave Truly some hope. Under the sparkling chandeliers, reflected in the polished marble floor cut in the design of a sunburst, the first waltz of the evening gathered. She hadn't been there early enough to get her dance card filled because the day's events had drained every good mood from her and then some.

If Genevieve had been kept from her party by circumstance, at least she was waving her over at the ball. Her life was becoming a series of failed attempts and disappointments. She suspected this little band of friends was using her for her link to a dukedom because the connection alone meant Truly received more invitations to highly sought-after events than her friends could hope for. As a result, Truly secured invitations for them to some of the loftier affairs which she attended for their sake. In truth, they rather needed each other: Truly for her name and Genevieve for the connections to the year's most sought-after gaggle of ninnyhammers.

Today, after her humiliation with Lady Constance Whitmore and her mother, Truly begrudged showing up at the ball where she knew her friends would attend. Why had they not supported her when she gladly lent them whatever help she could manage? Her mother might have been a mistress—and a well taken care of one—but Truly had been taught more about kindness and humanity from her mother than these ladies had obtained from the best schools for etiquette.

It was a paradox that she should need them to help her gain an audience when it was she who garnered the most invitations. The social elite were a mystery and as

unpredictable as a rake.

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CHAPTER 2

Truly did her best to compose herself over the disappointment of Miss Genevieve Rutledge's absence from the charity luncheon she had insisted Truly give. A forced smile would have to do, but the self-centered girl wasn't likely to notice and certainly wasn't likely to care.

"Truly," Geneive called when she was close enough to be heard without shouting. The demure blonde, who would be quite gorgeous except for her tendency toward falsified friendship, took Truly's hands and gave her a short jerk like she was quieting a mare with a twitch of the reins. "I thought you'd never get here."

"I had to wait for the fundraiser to end before I could prepare for the ball."

Genevieve gasped, throwing a hand against her chest for good measure. "I completely lost track of the time. I am so sorry. Can you ever forgive me? I was dealing with something else quite important." She leaned in, looping her arm through Truly's and confiding in a giggling whisper, "It may well lead to a proposal."

Truly gave her a sideways glance, minus the eye roll she wished to give. Both women were dressed in the same shade of bleached tea, but with Truly's dark hair and Genevieve's fashionable blond, they were hard to miss. That was what Truly counted on. Eligible grown men were often taken with shining blond hair, and standing close to Miss Rutledge would put her in their shining line of sight. At her age, she was more apt to attract a fop or a dandy, but she preferred a full-grown man who knew himself and his worth. Someone settled in his income and safe, for lack of a better term. Since her mother's passing, she no longer felt protected. There was every

chance that her income would stop, and she wasn't about to wait for that. Her mother never wished for her to follow in her footsteps. That path held too many broken hearts.

Her friend led her to a small gathering of young women. Girls really. They were a mere year older than Truly. Some, like Genevieve, were brashly outspoken, older than they appeared. But most just looked like girls to Truly. She had yet to decide whether girlish or womanly was better for baiting the matrimonial hook. Youth was on her side, but pretending to be youthfully naïve exhausted her. She battled with the idea of being someone she wasn't versus someone with a dismal future.

As she drew closer to but another disingenuous ninny who had deserted her today, she wondered if it was worth all this trying. All the lavish balls and dresses, and fans, the frippery, the cost to her mental health. She wondered if there was another way out of marrying a man she had no interest in for the sake of survival. Because that's what lay in front of her. Survival.

Next to her stood two blondes, one redhead, a brunette, and then Truly. Her hair was not quite black, not quite brown, but somewhere in between, like earthy pitch—if that were a thing. It was, anyhow, appropriate to her plight. She did not fit in. She was not one of them. And she no longer had the luxury of not caring.

She gave a quick nod to each and silently repeated their names, using little expletives for their unconcerned absence from her party. There is nothing more undermining than being left out.

“Oh, Truly, look at my dance card.” Miss Tenworthy, a witless blonde, pulled a gold filigree-lined note card from her reticule and showed it to Truly. “I spent all afternoon making it. What do you think?”

“I cannot say except that it's lovely.” More like she could not say what she wished to

say, like what a selfish little half-baked fishmonger to skip her party in order to make a silly card used to tout one's popularity. Truly smiled and felt the ugly pull of her mouth. Her attitude was dying in the embers of failed friendships, and she feared it showed. She was becoming someone she did not like. Ironically, it was just the kind of person these girls adored. Hateful, rude, gossipy, jealous with a sidekick of envy. It enveloped her. It smothered the goodness her mother had inspired. Truly Ashamed was more like her name now, a far cry from Truly Loved, as her mother used to say.

She endured standing on the sidelines while her friends danced. She shot daggers at any man who even looked interested. This was counterproductive, but the truth was that she did not feel like being there. It had been a day so full of rejection that it still hurt, and she didn't know how much more her heart could conceal. When she saw Genevieve lose herself toward the library, a place for fast conversation and unladylike liaisons, Truly tore her gaze from the merrymakers and took for the terrace.

Open French doors led to a beautiful patio where stone steps and the scent of gardenias lured couples to stray along lantern-lit pathways. Older women might get away with a stroll in the moonlight, but at her age, she was pushing the bounds of propriety to sail straight for the far side of the terrace, where the torchlight and a waxing gibbous moon created concealing shadows.

She weaved through the little throng of guests enjoying the night air, careful not to spare them a glance, as she stepped into the shadow cast by the corner of the manor and almost tripped over a man's outstretched leg.

"Oh, for the love of Peter and the Apostle Paul," she huffed, barely saving herself from stepping on her skirts and tumbling into an unforgettable humiliation, not to mention a head injury.

She heard a deep, hearty chuckle, seeing the wide smile of a handsome rogue with a

cheroot clamped between his teeth.

“Put it out,” she called without thinking.

Pinched between his fingers, he removed the cheroot and flicked it over the rail.

“That’s a good way to start a fire, you know?” She brushed down her skirts, bending as far as her stays permitted. Then, without thinking, she lifted her skirts to check her twisted ankle, turning her foot, toe to stone, back and forth.

He pulled in his feet but continued leaning his backside against the balustrade, smiling at her as if she were the evening's entertainment. And perhaps she was.

She pulled herself up, giving a shrug and stretching one shoulder while shimmying her hips to settle that last flounce of her skirt in place. “It’s just that I’m allergic. It’s not you.” It wasn’t like her to be so brash or outspoken.

That rich chuckle turned his smile lethal. “Well, my love, if you’d given me a chance, I would have asked permission to light it. I’m that kind of man.”

She gave him a thorough pass. “Somehow, I doubt that.”

“You can tell by looking at me? Or is it that you know me?”

“You didn’t ask permission to caress my ankle with your lecherous stare.” Her attitude was driven by the last straw.

“Ah, but you didn’t give me a chance, did you? Besides, the cheroot was not lit.” He folded his arms. “Lecherous?” He shook his head. “Lecherous,” he repeated. “I can’t find fault with your assumption, but the word is odious.”

“In regard to you or just in general?”

He pulled his chin close to his chest in a rather believable laugh. “What is your name, love?”

“Not love.”

“Exactly.” He was still laughing. “It’s only an expression. I’m left to wonder if you’ve never conversed with a man before.”

“I’m left to wonder whether you’ve ever tamed a lady whose obvious temper has gotten the better of her before .”

“I’d never tame a lady. `Twould be a waste. Now,” he said, putting a finger to his cheek, “if you had asked whether I’d ever debauched a lady, that would be something different.”

She crossed her arms and simply stared at him, cocking her head like he was a child.

“You have to tell me who you are. I’m having too much fun.”

“I’m a distracted girl, tired of rejection, if you must know.” Truth had always been easier than fiction for Truly.

His gaze played over her, resting on all the provocative places. In response, she crossed out of the thread of light, backing up against the plastered brick wall of the house, the cold exterior permeating her gloved hands. With any hope, he couldn’t see the defeat in her eyes. Her shoulders fell away as she slumped into obscurity.

“Number one, puss, you are clearly not a girl but a woman.” He held up a hand as she opened her mouth for a retort. “I’m not simply speaking of the obvious physical

attributes. No one but a confident grown woman would curse herself onto a crowded patio.”

“It’s not crowded here, and tis not my usual behavior.”

“And a girl would have cowed away from that statement. But not you. So, why don’t you tell me what happened that made a quiet girl respond so erratically.” The statement was full of cheek, daring her not to stay silent.

Sliding her hands behind her back, she leaned in. “It’s a sad story and one I’m certain you cannot relate to.”

He shrugged, lifting his hands, palm up, in surrender. “Assumptions are dangerous, and far be it from me to ask you to do something dangerous.”

Pushing away from the house, she daringly strolled to the balustrade and turned her rump to the rail, mimicking his pose. He watched her with something akin to appreciation if she read men correctly. But without the practical education, how would she know? “Have you ever had a disappointing day where your friends let you down?”

“Of course.”

“Friends who should not be letting you down because you’ve done them a fine service, and they should at least have the decency to reciprocate once in a while?”

“This terrible thing has happened more than once, I take it?”

She nodded. “Too many times to go unnoticed.”

“Well then, puss, they don’t sound like friends.”

“They don’t, do they?” She scrubbed the toe of her shoe across the stone in front of her, wishing for a rock to kick around. She looked at him sideways, biting her cheek and wanting more than anything to confide in someone who might take her side. But she didn’t know this man. Not to mention, he was a man . The whole conversation was not acceptable, but she couldn’t help herself for wanting it.

“You call yourself a girl, so how old are you?”

“Are you asking if it’s my first year?”

He cocked his head in answer.

“I am nineteen, and it should be my second year, and the girls in question have been at this game much longer than I have. No doubt their behavior is rooted well into their youth.”

“Nineteen?” He crossed his arms once more, a slight disappointment in the shade of a grimace across his mouth. She should never have looked there because his mouth had the kind of quality that could seem demandingly hard when needed and soft as a kiss also when needed. Things only the daughter of a mistress might understand. There were some lessons her mother imparted, not because she wished the same life for Truly, but because she believed women were kept ignorant against all reason.

“My name is not Puss. It’s not Sweet. It’s not Love.”

He gave a formal bow, his arms wide. “My apologies. So, perhaps you tell me what name you prefer.”

“Yours, for one.” When he didn’t readily answer, she turned his question around. “And what are you doing here?”

“I’m hiding from someone who did not see a skeleton, apparently. Whatever that means.”

That answer sparked an unexpected chuckle from her. She flipped open her fan, hiding her face behind it. Her eyes watered, clearing a path through the depression clouding her view.

“There is obviously something here I don’t understand.”

“It’s...it’s a stupid game that girls play. How old is the girl who claimed you?”

“Definitely not a girl. And you don’t have to tell me she was playing games. That is all she knows.” Looking over his shoulder, he idly checked the garden.

“And you’re not a boy, I take it?” Obviously, he was not. His black formal jacket fitted snugly over broad shoulders, and he possessed the chiseled jawline of a grown man and a beguiling mouth that surely had seen more kisses than Adonis.

“At eight and twenty, I’m hardly a boy.” He smiled at her daring. “Now, if you wouldn’t mind explaining this girl’s game, perhaps I can avoid tripping over it again as you did my feet.”

She folded her fan, her eyes squinting with a smile. “Pointing out my lack of grace is not a good way to entice me into revealing all my secrets to a perfect stranger. Especially one determined to make an arse of himself.”

“Ah, so we have met before. Why don’t I remember you?” His tone was playfully mocking as he rested his brooding chin against his closed fist, leaving his other hand tucked in the crook of his arm.

“Miss Hancock.” She offered her hand, and he took it with a wary slant of a brow.

“Your turn,” she said.

Bent over her hand, he watched her through his lashes for a full ten seconds before he straightened. “Dalliance.”

She could no more stop her surprised gasp than she could stop herself from snapping her hand from his grasp. This was the worst gentleman she could have confided anything in whatsoever.

“I see you at least recognize the name, if not the man.”

She swallowed while her gaze made another sweep of his person. His long, lean legs, trim waist, broad shoulders, lethally handsome face, and sandy-brown hair gave his hard lines a boyish charm that no doubt lured one to trust him, as she apparently did now. “You are a little infamous.”

“A little infamous is a contradiction.”

“Then I am afraid you are a contradiction. Or perhaps I’m not that interesting.”

“If I’d known you were waiting for me to accost you, I’d have...” he paused with a devious grin and then continued, “I’d have left.” He winked. “Is that what you expected?”

“We’ll never know, will we?”

“You’re not going to allow me to win one, are you, Miss Hancock?”

She shook her head, holding onto a confident grin. “I play for keeps. I play to win. I employ all the strategies I know.”

“Would you like some advice?”

“From you?” She gave him a skeptical squint, but only in play. “Perhaps I should take it. I’m hardly graceful, as you’ve witnessed. I do not require the slow gait of a tall gentleman when I can outpace one with ease.” She wiggled a leg under her skirt. “I’m too tall if you hadn’t noticed.”

“I didn’t know a woman could be too anything. If you think so, then you don’t know men.”

“I believe that’s what I was trying to say. Now, I’m simply waiting for your unadulterated advice, but you seem to have the gift of gab, which nearly always belongs to a woman. In which case, how can I trust you?”

He laughed outright. “You don’t need much advice, Miss Hancock. I’m afraid you’re unaware of the strategic game you play quite naturally. Lose what you think you know, and just be yourself. It’s rather appealing.”

“I’m looking to win a man over with my beguiling, usually quiet and boring personality.” She fluttered her lashes.

“All right. My advice is to lose these friends of yours and to never play or reveal all your strategies at once. The game must be interesting, and that, my sweet, takes time.”

She looked at him askance, cocking an irritated brow.

“It also takes patience and the grace to accept some things as canon, like the little pet names men like to give. They’re not meant to be condescending.”

“Puss is condescending because it sounds like a child.”

His smirking half-grin gave her pulse a little leap. “I remind you that you tripped over my feet.”

She turned to face him completely, leaning a hip elegantly against the rail. “Your Grace, clumsiness is adorably attractive.” It was a lie, of course.

He raised both brows, uncrossing his arms. “That, my dear, is the perfect strategy.”

Her chest filled with confidence for his encouraging words, true or no. “I’m afraid your reputation is not one of selective esteem.

“I will have you know that I am a connoisseur of women. I only collect the best.”

She examined his face; the warm amber of his eyes filled with simple sincerity. Clearly, he was serious. “Let’s lose the subjective sabers for a moment.”

“And there you are again. Your knack for conversation is perfection, Miss Hancock.”

At his approval, she felt a warm feeling of acceptance. There was every chance she was overreacting to the constant rejection she had grown used to and perhaps to the charm of a rake. “And the game?”

“This one?” He circled the space between them.

She chuckled, smiling more in the last fifteen minutes than she had in the last fifteen days. “No. The skeleton in the mirror.”

“Yes.” He snapped his fingers and turned to face her. “What the living hell is that? And she said in her boudoir.”

She took his language as a compliment to the odd connection building between them.

“Were you there? In her boudoir? Not that I’m judging.” She gestured with a hand to her chest for good measure.

“According to her, I was. But no. Absolutely not.”

Truly bit into a laughing smile. “I’m trying to decide whether to torture you a little longer. You were right. This is fun.” She felt at ease and strangely rejuvenated. She could hardly wait to reveal the rules of the game.

CHAPTER 3

D alliance was shocked, charmed, and otherwise taken by complete surprise by the delightfully outspoken woman who carelessly tripped over him. Sparring with her, he felt as if he'd tripped over an unpolished jewel. Raw, beautiful, missed. While she perched a womanly hip against the rail beside him, he was calculating how long they could stay concealed before her delicate reputation was ruined by a passerby witnessing them so involved. Her proximity was not that of a respectable debutante, and he didn't wish her any more pain than she'd obviously been treated to today.

But he also wanted to know about the skeleton and why that one sentence made her laugh outright. He might have felt foolish for it, but she was too beautiful, too candid, too everything to let go.

"I would approve if you didn't care to torture me. At least not in this way. Far be it from me to turn down something so provoking otherwise."

Her laughter shifted to an inquisitive smile, forming a small vee between her dark, winged brows, making him wish to smooth it with his thumb. Against all good and reasonable judgment, given the rake that he was, he wanted to kiss her. He truly did. At least her age kept his sparring libido in check.

"I've confused you." He took a mental step back.

She gave a little thought-clearing shake of her head. The threads of her black hair caught a wink of torchlight, igniting the color with tiny streaks of fire like the fuse of a powder keg. "No." Closing her eyes, she shook her head again. "Actually, no, you

haven't. I suppose I shouldn't be shocked that you would mention such a thing, being who you are."

Now, he was confused. "And who would that be?" He couldn't help himself from asking, and he hoped to God she would answer. This little game just got intriguing.

"Dalliance," she said with conviction. "I apologize. The Duke of Dalliance." She grimaced. "Dallimain." She sighed. "Oh, for the love of Pete. You know what I mean."

"Yes, I do. Do you?"

The torchlit rosy hue of her cheeks would no doubt be radish red in the bright glow of the ballroom.

He crossed his arms, waiting. "Surely, you won't disappoint me now with silence, will you?"

"I'm trying to explain what the skeleton is." The words tripped out of her as if she were making them up as she went along.

"Yes," he said, letting her off the hook and trying to remember her age. Except how would a nineteen-year-old debutante know anything provoking about the kind of torture he alluded to? She should know nothing of bedsport. Right? He dismissed that thought in favor of the more pressing question about the skeleton. "What is this game with the skeleton, Miss Hancock?"

She licked her lips, stiffening into an awkward standing position, her arms pinned to her sides as if she didn't trust herself. "I believe I should return to the ball. My absence will start speculation that I cannot afford. Perhaps you can, but I am not a...a mistress."

Mistress? Could she really be? A proper lady would never have used such a word. “I never meant to imply that you were.”

“It’s my fault. I should’ve stopped the conversation before it started.”

Now he straightened; a measure of concern pricked his heart for some reason. “It was an innocent conversation.”

“Was it?” She lowered her gaze to his feet. “I hope your foot survived. Thank you for the distraction. Despite my foolishness, it was helpful.”

With that, she excused herself, and he watched her walk away, befuddled by her abrupt change. He looked at the cheroot lying in the grass just below the railing, proof that he hadn’t dreamed her up. Biting his lip, he followed the terrace to the stairs and retrieved the cheroot, then passed it to a footman as he re-entered the ballroom, his gaze sweeping the crowd, looking for the woman with sable hair.

The stir his presence caused in a crowded ballroom filled with hens and chicks was difficult to ignore. He felt their eyes on him, the push of the crowd as these not-so-subtle ladies began making their collective way through the throng. It wasn’t a rush but a slow, deliberate gathering of force. If he stayed in one place too long, it would close around him, bury him until he was pressed with his back against the wall.

He’d been pursued for so long that he’d almost forgotten how exhilarating chasing a contrary woman could be, which is how he found himself following a nineteen-year-old debutante into a sea of eligible vipers. Why this one? And so young. But she didn’t seem too young. Somewhere in the world, she’d gathered more experiences, more sorrow, more obstacles than a woman twice her age.

The whole conversation on the balcony had fascinated him. Even the end of it, however abrupt. Then, he spotted her—several inches taller than most women but

equal to the one woman he did not want to see. And the chit was standing next to her. One blond. One sable. The contrast could not be missed. The game just got complicated, and as if the mere thought could create a stir, Miss Rutledge caught him staring in her direction. Her beaming smile outshined her lustrous hair.

He couldn't deny that Genevieve Rutledge was beautiful, in many ways more so than this stranger, but something about Miss Hancock charged him. He felt awake, alive in her presence. Interested.

Yes, interested.

Her appeal was not in her midnight, sable hair or her pillowy lips that stood out against the warm glow of her skin. Somehow, she tackled the prim color of her gown and the woman standing beside her. Miss Hancock made him take a second look. She had an acerbic tongue, but so did Miss Rutledge. He loathed Miss Rutledge's bitterness, but conversely, he could have listened to Miss Hancock all night.

Standing in the shadow of the house, he had wanted to kiss her, no doubt about it, but first, he wanted to talk to her. And that was the difference. In his overindulgent, intimate encounters with women, he'd just as soon kiss first and talk later if necessary. He'd thought of it as living up to his reputation and didn't give much heed to the fact that perhaps he hadn't met a woman who interested him beyond the bedroom.

Until an awkward woman tripped over his feet and commanded him to throw out his cheroot. Fierce tenacity and a gall that matched his. This was a new game. One he had yet to play.

But damn it all, if Miss Hancock was not standing with Miss Rutledge.

First, Miss Rutledge's body turned toward him, then the woman looped her arm

through Miss Hancock's, and before he could bolt, they were on a path bound for him. If he left now, Miss Hancock might think he was rejecting her when it was Miss Rutledge he wished to avoid. Then it dawned on him. It must have been Genevieve Rutledge who had abandoned Miss Hancock earlier today. The not-so-promising friend she'd spoken of on the balcony. His dislike for the catty woman increased twofold.

He stood his ground. He would not meet Miss Rutledge halfway and give her the impression he wished for her company.

He took the extra time to pluck two glasses of champagne from a tray held by a serving footman. When the ladies reached him, he handed a glass to Miss Rutledge while hoping for a proper introduction before offering Miss Hancock the other glass.

"Dalliance," Miss Rutledge dared to call him. "You haven't met my friend, Miss Truly Hancock."

Miss Hancock gave a stiff curtsy. "Your Grace."

"My pleasure, Miss Hancock." He bowed his head and offered her the other glass. "If you please. What a lovely name."

She wouldn't look at him. Instead, she steadied her gaze at his eyebrows, then his nose, then his mouth, all the while holding onto a stiff, quiet expression. Restrained if not demure. "My mother liked it, I suppose. But thank you."

What an odd answer. "And how do you and Miss Rutledge know one another?"

Miss Hancock shot Miss Rutledge a sideways glance that fell to the woman's chin and failed to be a mutual greeting between the so-called friends.

“Of course, we would know one another,” Miss Rutledge said. “She’s the daughter of a duke. I would have assumed you knew her.”

“I can’t say I do.” His gaze never faltered. “Who is your father, my dear?”

“The Duke of Justamere.”

“Justamere? He’s nearly thirty. Quite young to have a daughter, don’t you think?”

Miss Rutledge tittered, tapping him with her closed fan. “No, you silly man. The late duke. Not the son. Miss Hancock has never met the current Justamere. Perhaps that’s why she didn’t clarify.”

Miss Hancock drained her glass of champagne, watching him the entire time.

He was beginning to understand. This was the woman Genevieve Rutledge mentioned in the garden. The bastard daughter of a duke. The story was beginning to make sense. “I’ve met him. Your brother is a good man.”

“Her half-brother,” Miss Rutledge mentioned, syrup dripping from her viper’s fangs like venom.

Miss Hancock examined her empty glass but said nothing.

“Is your dance card full, Miss Hancock?” From the corner of his eye, he saw Miss Rutledge throw him a caustic look. He turned a glowing smile full of inward contempt on the jealous snob. “Miss Rutledge, your card is always full. I’m certain you won’t miss your friend for a quick turn.”

“Of course not,” she said, her mouth in a hard line until Miss Hancock shot her a glance, then Genevieve Rutledge poured on the butter. “Please, Truly, dance with

him. It shouldn't hurt your reputation. Dalliance may even improve it."

"I'm not much for dancing, Your Grace. Your time would be better spent with Miss Rutledge, I'm certain."

He took a cleansing breath, full of disappointment, and looked at the viper. "I bow to your counsel. What say you, Miss Rutledge?"

There was never any doubt that Genevieve Rutledge would agree. She even did so with a wide smile and eyes that screamed I told you so .

"I knew you'd come for me," Miss Rutledge said as he escorted her toward the dancing. With a waltz already underway, he thought it better to hitch himself to half a dance with her than to wait for a quadrille and be forced to conceal his irritation with the woman for an entire set.

"As always, your confidence is unfounded, I promise."

"Dalliance, you cannot lie to me," she said as he swung her into a twirl, her ballgown reeling about her ankles like a storm in a teapot.

"And is that because you are a liar, or do you have some talent for reading minds I'm unaware of?"

"Bite if you must, but you will not find me complaining."

"You've been bitten before, I take it?" This was seasonal banter but not nearly as fun as his conversation with Miss Hancock. It lacked the same exhilaration. The same life-charging anecdote.

"You're dying to tell me, so who is she?"

“Miss Hancock, do you mean?” For the first time, Dalliance heard fear in the question. Oh, this Miss Hancock had taken something from Miss Rutledge’s usual dramatic flare. “She is the bastard daughter I referred to earlier today.”

“Ah, the one you thought I should pursue.”

“No. The one I warned you about.”

“She’s evil, then?”

“She’s the beginning of a blooming bad reputation.”

“One you’re eager for?”

“Stop it. I’m eager for you, if you must know.”

“That, my dear, is not a secret. Now, who is she?”

“I told you. The bastard daughter of a duke and the sister of a man she’s never met. Not to mention, she’s the daughter of the late duke’s mistress. Or so I’m told.”

He wanted to snap his fingers at that moment. The pieces were falling into place, and this sniping woman in his arms was jealous of a courtesan's illegitimate offspring. So much so that she’d as soon pick away at the lovely girl than befriend her. It was time to kill two problems with one duke. One to dissuade the adder’s venom from disabling him. Two, to help one well-deserving wallflower find her way into a society that would rather maim than mend.

* * *

After the ball, more precisely, after the dance with Miss Rutledge, Dalliance didn’t

see the lovely Miss Hancock again. He hardly slept last night thinking about her, trying to imagine what horrid things Miss Rutledge had planned for her and unable to stand by and watch. For reasons unknown to him, he felt responsible, like he should help. He penned her a note asking permission to call upon her.

Two hours later, he received a reply.

Your Grace,

I apologize for my rude introduction last night, but I find it would be ill-advised to be seen visiting with you in my place of residence. Your name alone begs for rumor.”

Sincerely,

Miss Truly Hancock

Miss Hancock,

Let me begin by saying it was a charming introduction. Adorable, I’m told. Where you believe my name fits me, I also believe yours fits you. Truly, I do. A pun for you to enjoy today while you wonder about the truth of our first meeting. Besides, I believe I can help you find your way through this season of friendships.

As was appropriate, the good woman did not return an answer. He was driven to either stalk her at her home or follow her—which only reminded him of Miss Rutledge stalking him to the Pleasure Gardens.

Or he could send her flowers like a besotted fool.

As it turned out, he was a fool.

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CHAPTER 4

T ruly had accomplished little more than thinking about the Duke of Dalliance for two days. When she first received his note to call upon her in her home, she had responded with the heart palpitations of a girl's crush. It was too foolish by half to wish for his attention, but she could not help her pulse from outpacing her lolling wisdom and shoving it aside, especially when a full bouquet of yellow hothouse roses showed up in her foyer with another note.

I've thrown out all the cheroots and promise never to smoke another if you'll agree to meet me. I only wish to converse.

There had been no greeting. No salutation. And no doubt it was from him.

Was she flattered or scandalized?

Neither, but she was intrigued, very much so. This time, she answered.

If you are so inclined, I will be shopping on Corkspur Street, specifically at the Sunrise Art Museum, the lending art studio. I cannot hope to keep you from visiting whichever shop you're apt to patronize, nor, it would seem, can I keep you from patronizing me.

She sent the note as he'd sent the flowers, with no greeting and no salutation.

* * *

As the rented hack approached the art studio, Truly registered every vehicle and every male over the age of twenty wearing the fine-spun clothes of an aristocrat. She dismissed the ones with women on their arms though the Duke's moniker alone spoke of a man never in want of a woman by his side. Part of her didn't expect him to show. Part of her hoped he did not. But on the off chance a duke would deign to show up for an afternoon of shopping, she straightened her bonnet and smoothed her pale pink muslin skirt, tucking in the lace fichu where the bodice hugged her curves. She patted the swell of cleavage, reminding her he'd taken notice, claiming her a woman because of it.

When she didn't see him waiting at the studio's threshold, the disappointment calmed her rattling nerves. She took the time to secure her reticule to her wrist and clutched the paper-covered painting of a girl playing the harp. The driver kindly offered his help, but the package was neither heavy nor too large for her to manage on her own. Unfortunately, she hadn't counted on the door being shut tight. With the painting braced against her bent knee, she barely got her fingers around the doorknob, her gloves sliding over it, making the grip a difficult purchase, and then it rotated just enough to push the carved oak away from the frame. Her reticule bounced against the outside of the door while a little bell on a string clanged against the inside.

A shop aid hurried forward, rescuing her from embarrassing herself further. The boy relieved her of the painting as well.

"Thank you, kind sir. Is Lady Davies here today?"

"Yes, miss. She's by the pottery. I'll take this to the counter for ya."

Truly smiled, nodded, and turned her attention toward the corner of the shop where pottery by local artists lined the shelves. One could not miss Lady Davies's beautiful red hair or her sunny smile, which befit her name, Sunshine. The woman waved her over.

“Truly, I would have sent someone around for the painting if you’d sent word.”

“And miss visiting? I think not.”

“How was the fundraiser?” Lady Davies unboxed an earthenware pitcher glazed in blue and carefully placed it between a plate and a matching bowl.

“It went as I expected.” She didn’t have the heart to tell her the truth. Her friend had been out of the city at the time, or she’d have been the only one to show. That was one thing Truly was certain of.

Lady Davies pushed a strand of hair from her eyes, distracted by something over Truly’s shoulder. “Dalliance,” she exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

“I came for a vase.”

Truly turned to see the man she’d been looking for standing three feet behind her, a smile on his face, a dimple in his chin that she’d carelessly missed at the ball, and a rather unruly wave of sandy brown hair behind his ear. He removed his hat, pressing it to his chest as he dipped his head toward Truly.

“Do you know my friend, Miss Hancock?”

“We’ve met,” Truly said, giving him no chance to tell a lie that would put her in an awkward position later. “Two nights ago at the Barstow Ball.”

“How could I forget? You ordered me to toss my cheroot on the lawn.” He turned to Sunshine. “It nearly started a fire,” he finished with his amber-lit eyes outrageously wide.

“Oh, you stop,” Sunshine said, a smile in her voice.

“He is telling the truth, which I guess is not his custom. But I don’t recall the part about the fire.”

He looked to the ceiling, tapping his forefinger to his finely chiseled jaw. “You said I was liable to start a fire.” He turned his lethally mocking gaze on her with a grin that rivaled the Cheshire Cat and asked, “Did I?”

She pressed her mouth into a hard smile, trying to look stern, but couldn’t manage it. “You most certainly did not.”

Lady Davies cleared her throat. “A vase, did you say?” That question was a bit telling, but it was Sunshine’s smile that said it all. “We’re unpacking several of interest in the back. I’ll look into that for you if you have time to wait. Perhaps Miss Hancock will keep you company.” Sunshine left before Truly could recommend otherwise.

A tremor worked its way through her chest as she dodged eye contact with the duke. “This looks to be a nice sampling,” she said, tilting her head toward a blue vase that matched the pitcher, afraid to reach a hand toward it in fear she’d lose her balance and tumble into the window of fine pottery. It didn’t matter, though, since his presence had shattered her composure already.

“I believe I didn’t come here for pottery but to meet a young lady who was too afraid to meet in private.”

“Or too wise.”

“There is that. So here we are, on your terms, Miss Hancock.”

She glanced at him without moving her head. “I honestly didn’t think you’d come.”

“Is that why you invited me?”

Her head snapped up. “I did no such thing. I simply offered a more appropriate place since you didn’t seem to think it prudent to stop sending me notes.” She leaned in, whispering the last part.

His cheerful countenance disarmed her. “Now that we’ve got that bit of business settled. I only wished to join forces.”

She gave him a quick once over, then let her gaze dart over the room as she took a step toward a wall of paintings. Most of them small enough to take home and hang on the wall for a period of time. More than a gallery, it was a library for art. As such, the paintings were arranged from floor to ceiling.

She tapped her lip as if concentrating on the art. “I didn’t ask you here for pointers or advice, Your Grace.”

“I might disagree, but I don’t expect you’d like an exchange here in such a public place.” Now his arms were behind his back, and he rolled on his heels and toes like a buffoon in contemplation over a portrait of dying lilies. “I believe I must have this one.”

She looked at him askance, forcing down a sigh with an embarrassing grunt for the effort.

“No? What do you think the artist was thinking?”

Returning her focus on the dying lilies, she took a severe breath. “It is a self-portrait.”

“How so?”

“Obviously set upon when they realized the futility of a love match.” She turned fully toward him. “This is obviously the bouquet of a jilted man.”

He laughed out loud. “A man? Not a lady?”

“No. It is, however, the bouquet he had ordered for their wedding night, and since she left him at the altar for greener pastures, he could not part with the lilies, and they, therefore, became his prose. His representation of self.”

“Ah, I see. Very sad.”

“A tragedy.”

“Probably deserved.”

She bit into a smile. “Did you paint them or merely know the man who did?”

“On some paranormal plane of existence.” She laughed as he put his forefingers to his temple, closing his eyes and concentrating with his eyebrows squinched. He sighed, dropping his arms. “Your presence seems to be disrupting my stream of thought.”

Did she hear a feather of truth there? “Regardless, I don’t imagine your infamous self will remain invisible to this small crowd forever, so if you’d like to continue, I am open to suggestions.”

“You’d risk being seen with me?”

The words caught in her throat, and she fought to move her lips around them.

“I could use a visit with your brother today. Now, that’s a place we can both attend

without censure.”

“No. I...I could not. He...he doesn’t know me.”

The duke snapped his fingers, his gaze shooting over her head. “This one,” he said to the shop boy. “Tell Lady Davies I should like this delivered to her home, where I’ll pick it up later.” When he finished, he pulled her back into focus. “What other errands have you today?”

She swallowed hard. She had only half expected him to show up here, and now she found she didn’t wish to leave. “You cannot accompany me.”

“I don’t intend to.” At that moment, Lady Davies appeared again. “My lady, Miss Hancock wishes an invitation for tea.”

A hasty glance at Sunshine Davies turned up a gleam in her friend’s eye as understanding dawned.

Lady Davies replied, “I would love that. I’m all but done here. What say you, Miss Hancock?”

Truly shifted between her friend and the duke. “I would love nothing more than a visit with you.”

“And, Dalliance, you’re welcome to pick up your perfect vase when you see fit.”

“Not the vase. The painting.” It was the lilies. He wanted the dying lilies. Truly did not know what to make of that.

* * *

“Sunshine?” Truly asked as she and her friend shared a carriage ride back to the Davies’s London townhome. “Why did you do it?”

“Because he’s a handsome rogue, and I think you like him. I know I do.”

“What will the viscount say, I wonder?” It was a question full of mockery because she knew theirs was a love match. The two had met at a masquerade and instantly fallen in love.

“He’ll say I should stop matchmaking.”

“It’s not a match. Don’t say that. You know who he is.”

“The Duke of Dallimain.”

“The Duke of Dalliance. And I am the daughter of a courtesan.”

“The daughter of a duke.”

“It doesn’t count.”

Her friend shifted in the seat, the brim of her sage bonnet meeting Truly’s yellow bonnet, creating a tunnel between them. “Truly, it counts. It all counts. And I see the way he looks at you.”

“I don’t trust him.” She shrugged her mouth. “At least I shouldn’t. Should I?”

Sunshine chuckled, looping her arm through Truly’s, facing straight ahead like it was Truly’s future that Sunshine saw. The action to take Truly’s arm was much the same as Genevieve Rutledge’s had been nights ago, only this hold was from a friend. It felt different in every way. It felt like trust. It felt like family.

CHAPTER 5

Dalliance was shown to the family parlor of Viscount Davies's London townhouse. Through the open doors, he could see the telltale shimmering black hair coiled softly upon Truly Hancock's head. He wanted to see it down, wrapped around his hand like the lead rope of an unbroken mare. It was a task he would find great pleasure in. Not to tame her. No. But to feel the force of her unbridled nature before she tore away with wild abandon.

"Dalliance." A mischievous voice, years in the making, came from his right, followed by another happy chirp, "Dalliance, you devil."

It was the two elderly aunts of Phineas Davies. The women were gold, fine gems full of laughable conversation and wholly inappropriate most of the time.

"My dear ladies," he turned to say just before they took up on either side of him like bookends, sliding an arm under his, one a mite shorter than the other. "It's always such a pleasure."

"You missed out on our Sunshine. Don't be a dullard and pass over this little mouse," Miss Nora said.

"No," Lady Vada added. "Truly, is absolutely ravishable."

Lady Davies and Miss Hancock did not miss that comment as the elderly women on either side of him led him into the parlor.

“You mean ravishing, Aunt Vada,” Lady Davies said quickly.

Dalliance eyed Miss Hancock, who did not look stricken by the comment. She gave him a knowing smile, which he took to mean that she knew the aunts well enough and suffered no offense.

“She is a beauty, my dears,” he said, hoping to placate them and halt their thread.

“Like an Arabian mare,” Miss Nora said, a bubbling pitch to her voice like something she’d only just discovered.

He helped them find a seat on a gold-striped settee, like a gilded cage, as he grimaced apologetically at Miss Hancock.

“Don’t you think he’s a handsome rogue?” Lady Vada asked Truly.

“I wouldn’t say so,” Miss Hancock said with a beaming smile. “Not out loud, anyhow, because I fear he knows it too well.”

Lady Vada leaned forward, whispering louder than a strike of thunder just before a hail storm, “Dalliance is a well deserved title for him. Any woman who weds him will be lucky for all his practice.”

“Aunt Vada, the tea is cool enough for you to sip. Perhaps it’s a good time to test that.”

“She’s afraid we’ll say something we regret,” Miss Nora said.

“I cannot imagine,” Miss Hancock said with mock severity. “I find you the height of propriety.” Then Truly Hancock turned her beguiling smokey-gray eyes on Dalliance.

“I took the liberty to hang the painting in the little salon so you might consider whether it’s something you’d like to keep,” Lady Davies said, directing him with a slight jerk of her head. “I believe Miss Hancock had some ideas as well.”

Having not taken a seat, Dalliance bowed over the older women’s hands, gave an appropriate nod to Lady Davies, and then offered his arm to Miss Hancock.

The little salon looked out over the front walkway, the window draped in sheer silk, allowing in light and keeping the room privately cozy at the same time. The painting hung by a nail and twine against a burgundy wall.

“Will you keep it? Or was this simply an excuse?” Miss Hancock said, standing before the modest painting.

Dalliance sidled up, his hands behind his back, his gaze focused on the work of art on the wall and not the work of art next to him. “I’ll keep it as a reminder.”

She turned. “Of what?”

He faced her. “Of you.”

“Dead lilies. What a compliment.” Her eyes sparkled, and her mouth held a delicious smile. “I suppose we shouldn’t waste time on triviality. So, why did you wish to call upon me at all?”

“Is it possible I may simply like you?”

“No.”

His eyebrows struck a pose. “You fear my reputation.”

“I fear you read too much into our first encounter.”

“Not nearly. Would you care to sit?” He motioned to the settee, taking the seat beside it so they might speak more quietly. “My intention was and is honorable, I assure you. I only hoped to offer my help.”

“I don’t remember asking for your help. But I’m curious what you have in mind?”

He sat forward at an angle, cupping his fist and resting his elbows on his knees. “Miss Rutledge is the woman who jilted you.”

She nodded, saying nothing but watching him with curiosity like she had at the ball. He wondered at this quiet side when she’d been so verbal after tripping over him on the balcony.

“May I inquire if there were others who failed you as well?”

She nodded again.

He didn’t need to guess at that since he knew most of Miss Rutledge’s friends. “If you want to teach them a lesson, you must play them at their own game.”

* * *

Truly, sat there stunned. Did she hear him correctly? This high society duke of dalliances sat almost knee to knee with her on a cozy settee, suggesting she mete out some kind of revenge on Genevieve Rutledge and her kind. What was in this for him?

She continued, “And what game is that, exactly? Shall I outdress them? Invite them to all the right gatherings from the right people and then deny them entrance?” It all sounded childishly silly, but if she accepted that line of thought, then she must

consider her pain an insignificant thing.

“No. Find out what they want. Fight them with that.”

If Genevieve had seen him in a mirror and not a skeleton—a game girls played when imagining who their husbands would be—then Truly knew what her friends wanted.

“They want you.”

“Exactly.”

She pulled back, examining him because she hadn’t wished to believe what she already knew. His ego was renowned for the title itself. Dalliance was not a minor slur; it was a badge of honor among men and a challenge for women to conquer. She banished all hope that he might inhabit some kind of humility. She gave him a dubious look, folding her arms and then unfolding them when his eyes were drawn to her bosom.

“It’s not conceit,” he said as if he read her mind.

“I see. It’s only that you know what you’re worth and what women value. Is that it?” Her heart pounded, and she wanted to throw him off course. This was new ground.

“I simply know what a title is worth.”

“And I know what the bastard daughter of a duke is worth.” She gave him a self-deprecating smile.

“When we have more time, I’ll argue that comment. Right now, you’re missing the point.”

That didn’t help her galloping pulse. Did she hope to have another encounter with

him? Was she as much a ninnyhammer as her friends? Or was she responding to his heady, handsome, good looks? They didn't call him Dalliance for no reason. She filled her lungs, gave her brain the oxygen required for comprehension, and sat forward, ready to listen.

“How many young eligible dukes are there?”

“Not many,” she answered. “But I promise age is of no concern to them. Title is everything.”

He gave her a slow, blinking stare.

“But if they have a choice?—”

“They'll take young.” He raised a brow. “Or old and frail,” he added with humor.

“Except the only way I can think to make that work is to be seen in your company. On your arm, I suppose.”

“Courted.”

“You can't court me.” Her brow creased, her mouth drawn in a half-frown of confusion. “What's to happen when I'm jilted?”

“You're still thinking like a nice girl. Open your mind and think like a mindful woman.”

She shook her head, a rattle between her ears. “When we discuss my earlier comment, let's add this one of yours, shall we?”

“Don't be distracted by my idiocy.”

She chuckled at that. “All right. Then what happens, Dalliance?”

He smiled, a satisfied, almost surprised look in his eyes. “I like that. Dalliance. Please keep that up, it fits.”

“With what? You are a cauldron of confusion.”

“I won’t argue there. What I’m trying to say is I don’t jilt you. You jilt me.”

She sat back. “What do you get from all this? You barely know me.”

“I know your brother.” Now he sat back, topping the backrest with his arm, his hand inches from her shoulder, a roguishly confident position if she ever saw.

“And I know him not at all. What does the one have to do with the other?”

He sat forward again. “Nothing, I only meant to make you more comfortable. It wasn’t a good turning point. Let’s just say that I have a lesson to teach someone, myself.”

“And the scandal sheets? Are they true?”

“Does it matter?”

Her gaze darted between his eyes, searching for truth. Not his, but hers. Did it matter to her if they were true? This plan of his worked better if he were indeed a scoundrel, but first, she needed to admit to herself that she was dangerously attracted to him. Emotional distance was called for.

“This will take more planning than can be done here right now.”

He tilted his head, his arm draped again across the back of the gold silk settee.
“Which is why I asked to see you in your home.”

She allowed a heavy sigh to escape. “I’ll accept that.”

“Is that an invitation?”

“Yes.”

That remarkable half grin of his sent her into a coy, head-dipping, debutantish shyness that she could not replicate if she’d tried. She felt a friendship growing, and she wasn’t sure it was wise.

CHAPTER 6

He had yet to move into his father's London address, mostly because he preferred his own place. It had been his safety net after university when his nickname struck a goldmine of scandal. Ballerinas, opera singers, several widows, and an affair or two with a woman half in love with him.

None, however, were mistresses of any kind, despite what rumor would have the masses believe. The exception was one foolish encounter with his father's mistress, which was all it took to set his persona of clay into the kiln of popular opinion.

He took another overindulgent look in the mirror, checking his shave and the cut of his navy blue jacket. It was as dark as midnight with a hint of blue. A rich fabric and color with notability stamped across the well-tailored shoulders. The waistcoat, a dusky rose brocade outlined with gold thread, called for attention.

He dressed for her. The woman who'd called him Dalliance yesterday. The woman he was on his way to meet this afternoon. If all went as planned, he'd have Miss Rutledge off his last nerve, and if the benefit was a budding attraction with Miss Hancock, then he counted himself lucky.

When he arrived at her townhouse, it took all his energy to tamp down the urge to bound up the steps two at a time. He was greeted by her butler, properly turned out but not as stately as his own. The man seemed more relaxed, more like a family member than a servant.

"Miss Hancock is awaiting you in the upstairs parlor."

Dalliance followed the butler up the single, polished oak staircase, slowing his gait as they reached an open doorway. Soft winter blue silk hugged the walls, and a rich walnut chair rail encircled the room three feet from the floor. A modest décor of several small paintings and a lovely ormolu clock on the hearth mantle. It was a pretty room completely outdone by the beautiful woman who stood in the middle, her hands clasped at her waist and a tentative smile on her blooming lips. Locking gazes with her, he absently handed the butler his hat and moved forward to greet her properly.

“Thank you for having me today, Miss Hancock.” He bent over her hand as her gaze shifted from him to the butler. She gave the man a hint of a nod, and they were left alone.

“I’m not in the custom of having gentleman callers. You understand?”

“There’s nothing untoward about a friendly meeting.”

“There is if a crowd was gathering on my stoop when you knocked on the door.” She waved him into a wingback chair covered in fine leather.

“No crowd.” He nodded for her to take a seat before he got comfortable, although he would be the first to admit he felt anything but comfortable. His heart raced, and his mind was suddenly flooded with a desire to sweep his nose up the nape of her neck and smell her. The scent of lavender was put to memory.

“I’m on pins and needles to hear your ludicrous plans, but first, let me say I’m not certain why you think I wish to humiliate these women.”

“For one, because you don’t need them.”

“What makes you think that? Because my half-brother is a powerful duke?”

“No. You don’t need them because you’re good at making friends. Better friends.”

She made a face. “No. I’m good at knowing the right people. Making friends is different than knowing people.”

“Miss Hancock, these women are not your friends. They are gossips climbing society’s rung and stomping on whomever they need to in order to achieve their goals. Or, as in your case, using whomever is convenient to get there.”

“I may be young, but I am not a ninnyhammer. I realize they are not my friends.”

“But I’d like to think that we are.”

“Are we? If so then I would call you by name and you by mine.”

“All right, Truly, my name is Arlington.” He gave her a look of triumph, daring her to say it, smiling ear to ear with the dare.

“Your name is Dalliance. I doubt even your mother called you Arlington.”

He chuckled. “Like I said. Friends. You treat me as an equal, and it’s rather nice, actually.”

“Only because everyone should be equal. Titles are fluff.”

“And that, my dear, is your problem.”

She folded her arms tight, straightening her spine and wriggling her shoulders into place. Her nostrils flared slightly, and he knew he had hit a nerve.

“The idealism, not the idea. As much as equality should be an unremarkable social

practice inherit in all humanity, it is not. If you truly thought so, Truly ,” he paused after emphasizing her name, “I would not be here in your home, discussing plots and schemes to bring a gaggle of ill-mannered ladies of lesser value to heel.”

“You mean greater value.”

He sat forward, making tsking sounds with his tongue. “We must work on your inclination to disregard yourself at every turn. I am not amused by it. I don’t agree with it, and you do a poor job of convincing me that you believe it.”

She coughed after a gasping hiccup that soon turned into a chuckle. “Perhaps your nickname should be Daring instead.” She surprised him with a smile more lethal than any he’d seen. “You’re correct. I don’t believe it. I think the nobility are less than they believe, and I am more than they shall ever know. But it does not change the rules they follow or the ones I must. Let me help you understand.”

“I cannot wait.” He cocked a brow, sitting back and knuckling his chin.

“I have never met my half-brother. I have no inkling to become...hmm...a broken-hearted female or, more to the point, a woman dependent on payment for services rendered.” She held up a hand even though he had not interrupted. “I realize the argument could be made that marrying is closely related to the same thing, but at least it’s legally permanent.” She braced her hands on her knees and held him prisoner with a steady gaze. “The current Duke of Justamere still pays my bills as a lifelong agreement with my mother, except that agreement is now void, and I will eventually run out of money. There’s little else I can do but marry well, and though I may garner invites to prestigious places, I lack the acquaintances that these ladies who call themselves my friends have. I need them, and they need me.”

“You have a business arrangement with them?”

She tilted her head in thought, searching the corners of the room. “An unspoken one. Yes. Also, one I believe they think I’m too dimwitted to comprehend.”

He chuckled, a low rumble in his chest. “They take you for a fool, but you are anything but that.”

“I’d like to think so. I’ve been quiet, and besides my outburst on the terrace a few nights ago, I remain quiet, but I admittedly have grown weary of the whole affair. Now, if I do as you suggest and allow you to court me in theory only, then jilt you, I may find some satisfaction in that, but at the expense of myself. Pride comes before a fall.” She shrugged. “And what does the infamous Dalliance get out of this?”

He rubbed the space behind his ear, squinting one eye. “Rid of a particular problem that’s been nipping at a proposal for too long.”

“Genevieve Rutledge,” she said under her breath, but loud enough for the room. She looked up at him slowly. “She’s the one who saw the skeleton?”

“Precisely. And what the God-forsaken hell does that mean?”

She started to laugh; a hand clamped over her mouth. “I’m sorry. I just can’t help it. As I said before, it’s a childish game girls play. One stands in front of a mirror or anything that makes a reflection, then asks whom shall I marry? At which point the girl then looks in the mirror, and if she sees a skeleton, she will forever be a spinster.”

“And if she sees a man, she finds a husband.” He rolled his eyes. “For the love of God. That’s what she meant when she said I was in her boudoir.”

Truly nodded. “She told me that she was expecting a proposal from someone special.”

Dalliance rubbed his hands together. "This will work out better than I expected."

"Why not just simply tell her you're not interested?"

He stared at her in disbelief. "You think I haven't tried? The night of the ball, did she look dissuaded?"

"No."

"Exactly. And I'd spoken quite rudely and openly with her hours before that. She'll never give up. But if I'm seen with you, attracted to you, dancing with you, engaging myself to you...eventually, the humiliation will be too great for her to continue. And if, by chance, it ends up in the gossip rags. Even better."

"No. Not the paper. I cannot risk losing any more time."

"If you don't mind me saying, to make you the romantic obsession of my heart's desire and then for you to give me the cut-direct would make you the most sought-after female of the season."

"What conceit," she said without any real malice.

"But true."

She bit her lip and nodded. "But true."

"Two birds," he said.

"One stone." And just like that, they had an agreement. As if on cue, refreshments arrived. Miss Hancock arranged the teacups, poured, added a dollop of cream, then came around the little tea table and sat on the edge directly in front of him. Her smile

was infectious. She handed him a cup. “A toast to a successful partnership and a jilting worthy of the papers.”

He raised his cup in salute.

“To Arlington,” she said, beaming. His heart did a little tickling tap dance at the sound of his name on her lips.

“To Truly,” he returned.

She took their cups and put them aside, sliding the tray farther away from her delectable hip. “Now,” she said, clapping her hands once. “What is the plan?”

He couldn’t help himself. He leaned in, close enough to smell the lavender in her hair, to see the faded girlish freckles on her nose. “Leave the details to me. In the meantime, we’ll attend as many affairs as possible.”

“We’ll only have eyes for one another.” The excitement coming from her was greater than he expected and fed his already burgeoning attraction to her.

He memorized her face, the smile, the way her dark hair curled around her ear. He let out a sigh, felt her hands on his cheeks, and met her gaze. The moment caught in his throat. He could see she was about to kiss him. “Don’t do it.”

“Don’t you think we should practice a little? I’m sure you don’t need it, but I do.”

“You think we’ll be kissing in public?”

“No, but don’t you think we should have a reference?” Her hands remained on his cheeks, and he covered them with his hands. “Arlington?” When her gaze moved to his mouth, he knew.

It wasn't the attraction or the connection they had. It was that he would never be the same. That's the thing he knew.

As her mouth drew close, he felt her lips like a whisper of breath just before she touched them to his. He watched her eyes close, and instinct took over. Sliding his palm around her neck, he brought her closer, sealing their deal, their fate. The heated thud in his chest was like a branding iron on his heart as he moaned against her mouth, and she opened for him for a taste too wicked to be true.

Dalliance pulled her hands from his jaw, cradling them against his chin, and kissed her trembling knuckles.

"Don't say it, Dalliance. I wanted to kiss you."

"I thought it was Arlington." He softened his voice, adding just enough cheek to lift the awkwardly erotic mood. The erotic part was all him, and he was only mentally surprised at his response. He should not feel anything for her, but he did. The game was a tiny bit dangerous if one considered the painful ending to such a sweet, emotional caress.

"Now we won't have to lie. We'll appear closer than we are because we've been closer than we are. Do you understand?"

"I hear what you're saying, and if that's what you needed to make this look real, then I'm not complaining. But I am serious about the name."

"If you don't mind, I'm more comfortable with Dalliance." She wobbled a smile as she sat on a tea table in the middle of a formal parlor, trying to convince him it was nothing.

"Whatever you wish, Truly."

She dipped her head with a shy smile, contrary to the bold move she'd just made minutes before. "You are more accomplished at this game than I."

"I don't need the distance of title, if you don't mind."

She shook her head, indicating that her name was not off-limits.

He liked her too much and allowed his curiosity to imagine their next kiss because, damn it all, if that would be their last.

CHAPTER 7

She could have kissed him into the night. The heady feeling of initiating the intimate contact flooded her with little tickling butterfly wings in her belly and a warmth she could only imagine was desire. But desire wasn't a commitment. It wasn't love. It wasn't even friendship, although she did feel as if she and the duke were friends.

During the week that followed, Arlington called on her twice for a walk in the park. He asked her to dance at a ball where Miss Rutledge stood on the sidelines with a stiff countenance, her mouth drawn into an unattractive sneer and her women-at-arms surrounding her self-regarding opinions. Popularity often worked that way. Even those close wouldn't dare upset someone like Genevieve Rutledge unless they were akin for a tongue lashing or a tribute to them in the gossip rags, which is precisely what happened to Truly.

Just as she prepared to accompany the duke to the theater, dragging Mrs. Spenser in tow for good measure, she caught the sight of newsprint carelessly shoved into a rubbish can. She pulled it out, catching her name instantly at the bottom of the local scandal sheets. At least it wasn't in the Times. She was bent over the words when the butler opened the door, and the duke strolled into the foyer.

"I see you're ready. Nothing like being seen at the theater."

"At the theater, you say?" Truly, shook the paper as her fist tightened around it. "We've made the sheets."

"I've seen it." He didn't look upset or shaken in the least; he just put his arm out for

her as he smiled and winked at Mrs. Spencer. “I am thrilled to be hosting two of the loveliest ladies this evening.”

A woman in her forties, a hint of gray showing through her nut-brown hair, Mrs. Spencer blushed and giggled under her breath like a woman half her age. It brought a positive, festive joy to the outing.

Truly didn’t speak a word until they were seated in the duke’s box, and since Mrs. Spencer was privy to everything, she didn’t see the need to mince words.

“You haven’t said a word about the column,” she said as the duke smiled and nodded at someone in the gallery. “Arlington,” she pleaded.

The charming smile he turned on her only irritated her. “Yes, Truly?”

“The column.”

“Yes?”

“We’re not going to speak of it?”

He sighed, taking her hand. “I saw it. I read it. I thought it was brilliant.”

“It makes innuendo about my whereabouts and what sort of ties we have. It all but announces an engagement forthcoming.”

“And it dares to ask when the beautiful sister of the Duke of Justamere will be jilted.”

She reached behind her, fanning her hand in the direction of poor Mrs. Spencer. The housekeeper handed her the paper. Truly scanned it and read. “One would generally suspect the family had blessed the couple, except for one small detail. The Duke of

Justamere is the only legitimate child in the brood. No one is quite certain how many children the late duke and duchess bore, but we have it on good authority that Miss Truly Hancock is the bastard daughter of the late duke and his mistress.” She looked up, expecting what? That he would appear as appalled as she? If so, she was disappointed because he simply beamed with pleasure.

“As I said, it is brilliant. It has us practically engaged.”

“And announces me a bastard.”

“I believe that is not a secret.”

She let out a loud sigh, her shoulders defeated by what was true. It was a matter of time before her identity and the subject of her birth became the Season’s self-indulgent recreation. She simply had not expected to see it so soon in the papers, or, more to the point, she had not expected to care so much. “I’m looking for a husband, not a benefactor. You do understand the difference, don’t you?”

“No one faults you for your birth.”

“You’re an idiot if you think that’s true.”

“Correction. No eligible male faults you for your birth.”

“No, but now they’ll be dreaming of the kind of proposal I’m not looking for.”

He took the paper from her, folded it neatly, and quietly handed it back to Mrs. Spencer. “Try to enjoy the evening. If you must look angry, then turn it toward me. It’s liable to help our cause.”

When the red velvet curtain fell at the first intermission, Truly didn’t wait for

Dalliance; she sprang up and headed for the foyer, hoping for a gust of cool air every time the lobby doors opened and closed.

“If the papers are correct, then you’re already engaged.” The jealous, grating sound came from her right. “How can that be?”

“Genevieve,” Truly said, her throat raw like she’d swallowed sandpaper.

“So, is it true?”

“I can’t imagine what you’re talking about.” Truly did a poor job of lying. It was a game she never mastered. Miss Rutledge arched a brow. “Oh, you mean the gossip sheets?”

“What else.”

“I believe it’s called gossip for a reason. So much of it is rarely true.”

“Except that I’ve seen with my own eyes how he attends you. How he looks at you. I know that look, my dear. Quite intimately.”

“How could the duke have proposed to me when he was on the verge of offering for you but a week ago?”

“I’m not sure what your game is, but I admit that I’m a bit impressed with your daring. Everyone expects you to succumb to him. Not as a bride, of course, but as his paramour. Or less. He tires easily.”

“I doubt that.” Truly would not take the bait. One thing she had learned early was the wisdom of remaining quiet, aloof, without opinion. It made people uncomfortable. She needed Genevieve Rutledge to be too uncomfortable to make a scene. She

counted on the woman's selfish ambition to distract her from spewing venom in such a public arena.

Truly returned to the duke's box. Without a word, she allowed Dalliance to seat her. With eyes only on the stage, she reached beside her and grabbed his gloved hand. The action was not meant to be seen. Her hand trembled in his, and she had to admit that the encounter with Genevieve shook her. He didn't allow a glance at her. The man seemed to understand her, and that was something Truly had not considered. She liked him more than she should. More than was safe or wise.

CHAPTER 8

Arlington suspected something more than the tabloids had upset Truly. They hardly spoke for the rest of the evening. The coach ride back to her address was silent as a tomb. Every time he glanced across the expanse of the coach seats, he caught the eye of Mrs. Spencer, who watched him as if pleading for an answer. Finally, he shrugged at the woman and turned his focus to the street.

When they reached Truly's home, he helped the ladies alight, squeezing Truly's hand for attention.

"You don't need to walk me to the door," Truly said, sparing him an uneasy glance.

"Invite me in for a drink."

She stopped as her left foot met the cement walkway. She paused, taking in a deep breath. "It's not wise."

"I don't care."

Her gaze snapped to his. Her brow knit.

"Please, Truly. Offer me a drink. We'll walk in with your companion. No one will think a thing."

"Not when you enter the premises, but they will when you leave." He could see the moment she gave in, the telltale sign of her defeated exhalation, the droop of her

shoulders, and the drop of her gaze. In the short time he'd known her, he'd seen her do this three times.

He stood as she stepped away without a word. He watched her until she reached the steps, then she turned and tilted her head adorably chagrined at her own weakness to comply. She gave a short nod, then rolled her eyes to the sky when his face bloomed into a smile.

Handing his coat to the butler as he passed him in the foyer, he followed Truly up the stairs to the parlor. She closed the doors. This was her house. The servants were loyal to her without a fault.

"Brandy?"

"I'll pour," he said. As he sought out the cut crystal decanter, she sat on the sofa. He handed her a glass and asked, "What happened between the first and second acts?"

"Genevieve Rutledge." Truly took a hearty sip. "She's a viper, and you're right; she's not my friend."

"I'm sorry." He sat next to her, bending his knee on the cushion beside her bum, giving her his full attention. "What did she say?"

"She made reference to the gossip sheets, of course."

"Do you think she knows who wrote it?"

Truly looked at him. "Does it matter? I've little doubt she had something to do with it. I've known her to sell a few well-timed secrets."

"You are not a secret. It's no more than people already know if they choose to look.

This cannot hurt you.”

“But it does.” She swallowed. “My whole life, I’ve shied away from girls who might call me names, shame me, or speak ill of my mother. I had tutors at home, and when I was older, my mother spent good money to see me properly turned out so I could hold my head high.”

“What would your dear mother say to you now?”

He was drawn to the well of tears in the corners of her beautiful, smoky gray eyes. “She would say the best revenge is success.” She smiled weakly, sniffing back the tears before they fell. “She would also say that success is not measured by a person’s faulty perception. It is measured in the heart. Then she would say no one knows your heart better than you do.” She put her glass on the table before them. “I suppose it’s all stuff and nonsense because my heart isn’t searching for a man who will love me. At least my mother had that much. No, I’m seeking a man of means.”

“You’re seeking a future, and no one can blame you for that.”

“Except me.” She sat back, tilting her head like she dared him to challenge her thinking.

He set his glass aside. “Why did you take my hand tonight, Truly?”

“Because I needed a friend. I’ve had very few. People like Geneieve and her gathered geese leave me exhausted and empty. I’m discovering I don’t want a husband from this crowd, but I don’t know what else to do.”

He reached for her hand and massaged her gloveless fingers, distracting her from the brevity of her truth. “Why don’t you speak to your brother? I’m sure he’ll take an audience with you.”

“And what?” She pulled back. “Beg him for money? Ask him to continue paying the deceased mistress of his late father? It’s absurd. And here I am without talent or training of any sort. At least Lady Davies knows art.”

“She was a widow without means who took innocent refuge from a kind older gentleman. The father of her husband’s friend.”

“I know the story, and I know what you’re trying to say, but she knew the man.”

“She was married to his son’s friend. That’s all she knew. There are some people in the world whose hearts are bigger than propriety or reputation. Perhaps Justamere’s is as well.”

She licked her lips, and he watched the action. Against his better judgment, he wanted to kiss her. Sitting in the parlor where she’d surprised him with a kiss just made him wish for it more. And he wanted more. The thought disturbed him. After so many years of dealing with conniving women, he was drawn to Truly’s unpracticed sense of self.

She broke him, shattered his ability to carry a persona he had not created, but neither had he dissuaded popular opinion. It had served his rakishly adolescent brain and that of his friends as well. Those male friends close enough to call him friend benefited from his company and, therefore, the company of women who were more than gracious with their charms.

They’d all been lovely, but none held a candle to her.

She looked at her now folded hands in her lap. He hated that look. One of defeat. He wanted her to fight, to teach them all a lesson, because she was stronger than she thought she was. He, however, was not strong enough to stop the attraction he knew they both felt. He reached for her hand, bringing her knuckles to his lips. Their gazes

locked. The desire clear. But she was hurting, and he couldn't press it until she pressed into him.

* * *

Truly sat in the parlor with the man she'd stolen a kiss from a week ago, glad she'd invited him in and about to do something reckless.

With his warm breath on the tips of her fingers, Truly scooted closer. She nestled her head into the crook of his neck and shoulder, breathing him in, musk and sandalwood as spicy as his personality. "Stay with me, Arlington." Her words were slightly muffled by her position, but she didn't have to see him to know he had heard her. She could feel his heart pick up tempo as he pressed her hand to his chest.

"Why?"

She gazed up at him, still leaning into his side. "Because you're the best friend I've ever had."

"And that's enough?" He was giving her an out, denying his own attraction. She could feel it under her palm.

"It is today." She could see him battling with his conscience. She reached up and drew her thumb over his lips.

It didn't take much to glean his compliance when she moved to kiss him, and he answered with an involuntary moan just before he crushed her mouth with his. It was an erotic explosion filled with whirling feelings of something more profound. She loosened his cravat. Everything she did, everything she said, was a yes and more.

"You're sure?"

She nodded.

He lifted her with ease like she was a feather. How he carried her in his arms, nuzzling her neck with his nose, whispering in her ear how beautiful she was, made her feel alive and safe. She felt steady, relaxed, and a little giddy as she directed him to her room. He pampered her with kisses. Her skin tingled wherever he touched her.

It was a sweet encounter, and he made it easy to find her pleasure, to share his, and falling asleep next to him felt like home. It may have been that she was in such need of companionship, but come morning, she had no regrets, and neither did he, it seemed. When she opened her eyes, he was staring at her.

“Does this complicate things for you?” she asked.

He watched her for a moment, studying her face, his gaze soft. “Perhaps, but nothing I can’t handle. Are you all right?”

“I have no regrets. Would you like me to go back to calling you Dalliance?”

“No,” he said quickly, pinning her to the pillow with his hands on her wrists. She laughed outright. “Your Grace would be more appropriate.” He teased her and then kissed her soundly.

“One thing must be clear,” she said as he laid back on the pillow beside her. “I am not anyone’s mistress.”

“But your own, you mean.” He pressed his elbow into his pillow, his fist holding up his head as he turned to look at her. “I don’t need a mistress, Truly. I don’t need this to be anything but what it is.”

She mirrored his position. “What do you think it is?”

“The beginning of something wonderful?”

“Don’t get sappy.”

He sucked a deep breath through his nose. “Two very close friends who like to greet one another with a wanton kiss?”

She nodded once. “Exactly.” But she knew he was right. There was something wonderful between them, though she wasn’t ready for the truth. Not yet.

CHAPTER 9

Dalliance knew he was the answer to her problems, and she was a problem for his answers. If he had only waited to consummate his feelings for her after he admitted what he'd done, their relationship might have had a chance. But he was the one who triggered the post in the gossip sheets. They'd been seen together at enough affairs to validate their attraction. It was a ploy to dissuade and perhaps embarrass Miss Rutledge to guarantee her retreat from Dalliance as well as from Truly. Two birds with one stone. No one would expect a woman to jilt him, especially the daughter of a courtesan.

The plan was to lift her credibility while teaching Miss Rutledge a much needed lesson. He should have included Truly in the plan. He meant to tell her but thought it better to ask forgiveness than permission, which is rarely a good idea.

They were to meet at a charity ball supporting blooming artists. It was given by Lord and Lady Davies and supported by none other than the Duke and Duchess of Justamere. Dalliance knew Justamere as a political ally. He'd had plenty of conversations with the man, but he'd had few interactions with him socially. Justamere wasn't the sort to attend the frivolities of the season, and with a wife and babe at his country seat, Dalliance didn't expect him to be there. Thankfully, he was well acquainted with Viscount Davies and his wife. It was obvious that Truly and Sunshine were also good friends. It made for a promising evening.

"Champagne is the best I can do," Viscount Davies said to Dalliance, who hovered near what should have been the cardroom but tonight housed various sizes of sculpted art from modest terrace ornaments with lions' heads to ivory carved knick-knacks for

the mantelpiece.

Dalliance made a saluting toast to his friend. “Two, maybe three glasses, and I won’t care anymore.” They both chuckled.

“Meet me in the library later, and I’ll bring Irish whiskey.”

“You planning on pilfering it from Justamere’s coffers?”

“Of course. Where else.”

Dalliance eyed him, sizing up whether he spoke true.

“Not to worry, I asked ahead of time.”

“God help you if you’re not serious.”

They both laughed again.

There was no butler shouting names tonight. This evening would showcase the art and the artists and not the upper echelon or those trailing on their coattails.

He waited to catch a glimpse of Truly but instead caught the eye of Miss Rutledge as she descended the stairs, a gaggle of silly women behind her. He looked away, but not before he saw her lift a brow in his direction. He turned his back to the entrance and excused himself from his friend. Right now, he needed to get lost in another room, away from Miss Rutledge.

* * *

Truly arrived on the heels of Genevieve. Without the usual announcements made at

the top of the stairs leading to the ballroom, Truly snuck in without much notice. There were a few men who seemed to gawk at her, but even she admitted to falling prey to a rash of paranoia. She watched Genevieve command the space around her and Truly set her sights in the opposite direction, scanning the room for one handsome devil with sandy brown hair and a cynical grin.

Lady Davies waved as she approached, dodging a woman making a gesture with her wine glass as she talked.

“Sunshine, the place is beautiful, and I love that you left room for dancing.”

“The breakable stuff is in the side rooms. I figure if there’s enough champagne and an orchestra, people will stay long enough to see and speak with some of the artists and perhaps purchase something.”

“At the very least, it’s a wonderful way to promote the studio.”

“I think so, too. Phineas planned the whole affair, if you can believe that. The duke and his duchess have been wonderful friends, and even though she’s home in the country with a little one, they both insisted on hosting the event here since the ballroom was more than adequate.”

Truly had not allowed herself time to consider that she was standing in the ballroom of her half-brother. The grandeur of the marble floors and the beautifully decorated cardroom and billiard room, now decked out like an art gallery, were nothing compared to Truly’s preoccupation with running into Justamere himself. The man had been practically absent from the current season, and Truly hoped her luck would hold.

Sunshine smiled at someone over Truly’s shoulder. “Please, Mr. Lister, allow me to introduce my friend, Miss Truly Hancock.”

“Miss Hancock, it’s an honor.”

Mr. Lister was the first eligible gentleman to approach her that night, followed by a half dozen others, most of them excellent candidates for her future. These were men who had not given her a second glance. Dalliance had been correct. The bit of gossip had not hurt her chances. It had tripled them. An hour later and Truly needed a break. She had yet to see Dalliance, although Sunshine assured her he was there.

“Phineas sent me a message that he and Dalliance are holding up in the library, helping themselves to the duke’s stock of whiskey,” Sunshine said.

“Do you think it would be unwise to join them? I could use the respite.”

Sunshine linked her arms with Truly’s. “As can I.”

The personal library of the Duke of Justamere was set apart from the ballroom. It was not a place where someone might wander. It was a place where one was invited, so there wasn’t much chance of running into anyone except Lord Davies and Dalliance. But as Truly and Sunshine drew closer to what must be the library, she heard raised voices. Both women stopped three paces from the closed double doors.

Truly cinched in her arm, holding onto Sunshine for balance.

“I don’t hear Phin,” Sunshine whispered, turning her ear toward the door.

“I don’t hear Dalliance,” Truly countered. She tried to swallow her imagination, but it sidled back up her throat with a knot.

“Please say it again, and I will lay you low, so help me God!” The shout permeated the raised panel doors. It was neither Lord Davies nor Dalliance.

“I don’t know this voice. Perhaps we should return to the ballroom.” Truly tried to pull away, but Sunshine took another step closer.

“I think that’s Justamere. Though I don’t believe I’ve ever heard him raise his voice, so I can’t be sure.”

“He sounds too angry for an introduction.” Truly pulled her arm free and backed up two steps while Sunshine took another toward the door. Her heart hammered. She did not want this to be the first time she met the man who happened to be her half-brother. If she could avoid ever meeting him, it would suit her fine. Before she could speak another protest, the door swung open, and she witnessed Sunshine stumble forward over the jam and into the arms of a very tall man with dark hair and a stiff, set jaw. It had to be the Duke of Justamere.

“Lady Davies,” the man said, setting her upright. “I apologize.”

“It’s nothing,” Sunshine said as her husband approached, placing his hands on her cheeks and checking her face for injury. “Darling, I’m fine.” Then to the man, “It was all my fault, Your Grace. Just unfortunate timing, I believe.”

“Nicely done, Justamere.” Dalliance’s voice was an accusation.

Truly shrunk back, wondering if anyone had noticed her yet and wishing she could run. Dalliance looked angry. Justamere pivoted, a look of disdain pulling his mouth into a taut line as he sized up Dalliance. At that inopportune moment, Dalliance caught sight of her. He swallowed, trying to hide his obvious irritation with Justamere as Truly backed up a step, ready for retreat.

“Miss Hancock,” Dalliance said loud enough for everyone to hear. The mood jumped like a skipping rock from one man to the next. Their gazes nudged the other like falling dominoes until they were each staring at her. A feeling of frozen shock settled

into her, and she dared not look anywhere but at Dalliance. Dalliance strode forward, taking her hand. “Allow me to introduce you to the Duke of Justamere.”

“Caden to you, my dear lady,” Justamere bowed toward her as she fumbled through a curtsy. “I apologize. This was not the way I wished to meet. Let’s get you out of the hallway.” He kindly ushered her into the library. The others followed, and Justamere motioned for Lord Davies to shut the doors once again.

The room was charged, but no longer with loud voices. It was teeming with the kind of static that comes after a storm.

“I only wish my wife were here. Freddie can’t wait to meet you,” Justamere said, leading her to a comfortable place on the settee. He eyed Dalliance with a hard glare when he looked as if he would take a place next to Truly. “I’d like to speak to my sister alone.”

“Too bad I won’t allow it,” Dalliance shot back.

Truly looked from one man to the next, then behind her where her friend stood. “I think I’d prefer if everyone stayed. Lady Davies is my friend.”

“And so am I.” Dalliance appeared annoyed with Justamere, not with her.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace. I didn’t plan on us meeting this way, either.”

“What she means to say is that she didn’t plan on meeting you at all,” Dalliance added.

“You speak for her now after the stunt in the papers?”

Truly watched the volley between Dalliance and Justamere, both standing opposite

the other at either end of the tea table in front of her. If she could sink into the floor, she'd have conjured it up in a moment.

Thankfully, Sunshine stood behind the settee with a reassuring hand on Truly's shoulder. "I believe Truly can speak for herself. I find her conversation rather stimulating if given the chance."

Truly's mouth twitched when all eyes turned her way. "Your Grace, Dalliance was not responsible for the paper."

Dalliance grimaced, which gave Truly pause. "Regardless of how it happened, it has naught to do with you." Dalliance would not be cowed.

"No? It has everything to do with me," Justamere said. "I take care of my family." He turned to Truly. "And you, my dear, are my family. The circumstances are not new to me." He smiled softly. "Your family is about to get a whole lot bigger." The duke glared at Dalliance. "And I don't mean him."

"Not an issue," Dalliance said, peevishly calm. "I'm not likely to be alive much longer." Dalliance made the last statement to Truly, rolling his eyes when Justamere let out a heavy sigh. As odd as it seemed, it was that one action that calmed her.

"I take it you plan on killing him?" she asked Justamere, and she couldn't help the chuckle that followed.

"I assure you it would be my pleasure."

"I'm his second," Lord Davies leaned into her view, a hand pressed to his chest.

Sunshine squeezed Truly's shoulder. "He's teasing."

“He’s not.” Dalliance approached the settee again, this time with a menacing glare for Justamere that brooked no argument. He sat beside Truly, then gave a nod to Lord Davies, who took that as an invitation to leave them alone.

Truly patted Sunshine’s hand, glancing over her shoulder. “With a duke for a brother, I think I’m safe from Dalliance.”

That produced a curse from Dalliance and a chuckle from Justamere.

After her friend left, Truly set the tone. “Dalliance, I’ll be your second if you need one.”

Rich laughter erupted from Justamere. “If I had any doubt you were a Scott, that comment proved it. And please, call me Caden.”

“I thought your surname was Landon-Scott.”

“Landon is my mother’s family name, and Scott is my father’s.”

“This is all very touching, but do your sister a kindness and tell her what we spoke about.”

“You were yelling, not speaking.”

“Truly, just listen,” Dalliance said. And then to Justamere, “And leave out the part about a duel.”

“Sabers?” She smiled cheekily at the handsome rogue beside her.

“No. Your brother is afraid of knives.”

When Truly turned her gaze back to Justamere, he looked confused, like he'd lost the conversation. Truly smiled. "As you can see, Dalliance and I are friends."

"As I tried to tell him."

Justamere rubbed his jaw and took a seat. "Even after the paper?"

"I was angry about the gossip sheets at first, but Dalliance explained that it was more likely to help than to hinder."

"With finding a husband, as I understand." Justamere took a hardy breath. "Truly, if I may call you that. You don't need a husband. No one should marry for anything other than love. It's a pity that women find themselves in such a predicament too often. Men are not immune to marrying for money either. But, my dear, you are not in need, I assure you. I plan to honor my father's agreement with your mother." He sat forward. "May I ask you a personal question?"

Truly was too busy trying to absorb what her newfound brother said to worry about the question. She nodded.

"Did you ever have the pleasure of meeting our father?"

"No." She shook her head; a hint of sadness snuck into the conversation, and she thought about her mother. "My mother didn't tell me who he was until just before she passed. He never came to visit or made himself known. I wasn't certain whether you knew of me or not."

"I didn't, or I would have sought you out before now. I have a trusted steward who manages the household accounts, which is where your income has been hiding. I meant to approach you after the season died down until I became aware of the scandal sheets. I wasn't pleased to find that your name had been disparaged."

“There is no limit to meanness, I believe.”

The duke turned his gaze on Dalliance. “How good a friend are you, Dalliance?”

“There are circumstances you aren’t aware of, and I’m not in a position to explain myself.” Dalliance stiffened.

“I told you, Arlington had nothing to do with it.”

“Arlington, is it?”

“Yes. As I said, we are friends. Good friends.”

The duke smirked at Dalliance. “We’ll see.”

* * *

Truly could not say that meeting her brother had been a pleasant experience, but neither had it been terrible. There was definitely some tension between Arlington and Caden that she had yet to discover. Something happened before she arrived at the library. For now, she was happy to let it go in lieu of celebrating the evening with Sunshine. One thing, however, was different. She no longer felt the burden of trying to salvage a friendship with Genevieve Rutledge. Even dancing was less stressful now that she knew her future was intact and would not change.

Except perhaps she wished it would.

CHAPTER 10

“Maybe it’s time to pension me off.” Truly spoke with little censure the following morning after inviting Dalliance for breakfast.

“Except I never paid for you,” Dalliance said. “I didn’t just come for breakfast; I came to tell you the truth. Truly, I posted it for the both of us. I wasn’t thinking clearly, and I didn’t expect us to be...us. And, yes, I know how that sounds. My only defense is that I knew it would help you as well as me.”

She chose to ignore everything he was trying to say. “If I use the current price of a worthy courtesan, that would come to a sum total of...” She paused, looking toward the ceiling and calculating the sum.

“Five thousand pounds.”

“Nicely done. Of course, you would know.”

“That should have been my statement, love.”

“I’m not your love. I never was.”

“Is that what this is? You question whether I love you?”

“No, I question your motives. I doubt love ever played a factor.”

“And what were your motives?”

She shook her head, tears threatening her with a sharp, cruel sting. “You’re name is well earned no matter what you say. You made me a mistress, Dalliance. If that is so, then I’ll expect an accounting and a bank note delivered tomorrow.

He scratched his head. “And jewelry, I suppose.”

“Don’t be an arse.” For a flicker of a moment, she thought she saw pain in his eyes. She wasn’t ready to give him a chance to explain. He spurned her love, her trust, her everything. The stakes had always been high. She found herself wondering if this was what her mother had felt like, except Dalliance was not married. “Shall I call you out for a duel? Or just torture you?”

“You may do whatever you want with me, Truly. But if you must know, I’m a little tired of the game. I’d like for once to be loved, adored, cared for, instead of chased as entertainment.”

Her heart melted a little. “Can you deny that you didn’t think about it? The daughter of a courtesan? She must be easy to please or at least biddable.”

He leaned against the sofa, his arms braced, his biceps more than she could handle to look at, although he wasn’t hiding the fact that he was looking at her entirely, everything, from her head to her feet. Subconsciously, she pulled her peeking slippers under her dress.

“You’re not denying it.”

He cocked that infuriating brow at her, and his mouth did that crooked little smile that drove her mad. “Have you looked at yourself in a mirror?”

“What?”

“A mirror. Have you seen yourself lately?”

“Why? Do I look like a shrew?”

He unfolded his arms and strolled toward her, the chiseled smile gone, his footfalls beating like a drum in her heart. “A mirror.” He twirled her about by the shoulders, leading her like a misbehaved child out the parlor door and up the stairs.”

She felt shaky inside. “I’ve seen myself.”

“Lately?” He continued past her, taking her hand and now pulling her along up the staircase, her dress catching under her feet. He turned quickly, gripped her skirt, and shoved a handful of fabric into her hand, then, without a word, continued on as she scurried to keep up with his lead.

She swallowed as he threw open the door to her bedchamber. “I’ve looked.”

“And what did you see?” He turned abruptly, his hands on his lean hips, his eyes searching hers without menace or even anger. He simply looked frustrated. “A skeleton, perhaps?”

“Don’t tease me. I’m angry with you, Arlington.”

“Finally.” He threw up his arms before they landed on his hips again. “She calls me Arlington.”

“You don’t think I have reason to believe you saw me as a courtesan?” She could hardly think with him standing there, the self-loathing facade lost to her confusion and the telltale beat of her heart.

“You have all the reason, my dear. You are bloody beautiful. Fortified to the gills

with womanly attributes that men would lie, cheat, and steal to get a peek at. And you don't believe it. You don't see it because you are so distracted by this silly game. You told me once there is no vengeance in you. Is that still true?"

Subconsciously, she felt behind her for an emotional place to fall when all she wanted to do was fall into his arms. "I'm...I'm not sure."

"You want to take revenge on me?"

She tried to nod but only accomplished a small hiccup.

When he took a step forward, she didn't wait for him to wrap her in a hug; she slipped her arms around him, and he brought her in. His warm palm cradling her cheek, his heart beating wildly beneath her ear were like a balm to her searching soul.

"Arlington, what are we doing?"

"I have my suspicions, sweet."

"Are we falling in love? Or is it just me?"

"It's not just you, love."

"I said once that I wasn't your love, though I admit I like thinking otherwise. But I don't need you to make everything right. I don't even need my brother for that. It's all so demeaning."

* * *

Dalliance understood her better than she thought. "I know you don't want to be rescued by a man, but I challenge you to ask why. Who is of stronger character? The

one who refuses to find refuge in someone she trusts and loves? Or someone who uses every weapon in her arsenal against unhappiness, pain, hurt, and people who think those with an important name are fair play. Don't sell yourself so short that you believe that love is a weakness."

"Oh, Arlington, I don't believe it's a weakness. It is the greatest strength and the greatest pain one can know, and because of that, it's all the more worth it. Don't you see? You're right when I say I don't want to be rescued by a man, and maybe it's because of my mother. Or, perhaps it's because I want to do the rescuing for a change."

He smiled then, his heart bursting, his soul screaming to be loved by her. "Then rescue me, Truly. Rescue me from myself, from a world I didn't have a choice in either. There are those who think I have everything, but I was nothing until you. I had no greater purpose until you strolled into my life."

"You tripped me into it." She smiled, running her hands up his arms and around his neck.

"I think I was the one who fell first, for a woman who made me laugh and didn't give a damn who I was."

"I love you, Arlington Fox, and I cannot wait to marry you if only you'd ask."

He started to laugh, and then he wanted to cry when she held his hand over her heart.

"Right here. You live right here." She kissed him softly, a promise greater than a frenzied libido. This was patience and goodness and life.

He pulled away and strode to the secretary. He primed a quill and scribbled a note on a piece of paper.

“What are you doing?”

“Asking someone to be my wife.”

“I’m standing right here.”

He looked over his shoulder, a mischievous smile stretched across his face. “Did I say it was you? I looked in a mirror this morning.”

“And what did you see?” Her tone was playful, full of joy. “A skeleton?”

“No. I saw four hardy sorrels.”

She giggled. “I’ve heard women compared to horseflesh, but that’s ridiculous.”

He handed her the note, grinning ear to ear.

Truly opened it, watching him as she unfolded it, and then she read it. “This is for the footman.” Her lovely brows were knit.

“Read on.” He fanned his fingers toward the note.

“Have the horses put to and ready to leave for Gretna Green by noon.” She looked up slowly.

“Is it shameful that I don’t want to wait for a godawful circus of a celebration here?”

She shook her head silently, and he was surprised to see a tear forming in her eye and a little quivering frown.

“It’s whatever you want, Truly.”

“I just want you, Arlington. I’m not upset.” She shook the note. “I’m happy.”

With his thumb, he wiped a tear from her cheek. “Are you certain?”

She nodded, throwing her arms around his neck, then pulling back just as quickly. “We need to get this to your coachman poste haste. And while they ready everything, I am writing a piece for the scandal sheets.”

“And what will it say?”

“It is rumored that the Duke of Dalliance has run off with his mistress to Gretna Green. But that is of no surprise to his soon-to-be Duchess since he was, and is, the only Dalliance she ever wanted.”

EPILOGUE

Mrs. Spencer, would you mind finishing the packing? I have something to do before we leave.

Truly rushed off a note to Genevieve Rutledge asking to pay a call upon her before noon. Instead of a reply, the woman showed up at Truly's address. It made for an awkward moment, but nothing could be done for that now. She would hope to finish her discussion with Genevieve before Arlington drove up to leave.

"Genevieve, I was hoping to come to you."

"I thought I'd save you the trip. I'm sure we have things to say."

"I only wished to tell you before you heard it elsewhere."

"Don't tell me. You think you're in love." The words were harshly said. Truly could see that Genevieve was worried, and the words were more pain than anger.

"Perhaps I am."

"You wouldn't know what love is if it bit you like an adder," Genevieve spat. "You knew that I wanted him, and you went after him to hurt me."

"Me?" she pointed a finger at her chest. "I have done nothing but try to help you."

"I don't need help. It's you who needs me."

That was once a painful truth, but one Truly needed to hear. She'd told herself that she had done them a kindness by lending her prestigious name to their cause. A cause she had ignored within herself because courtesans should never fall in love. Her mother's heart had been broken. Love did that, which, of course, was the lie. But if the ton saw her as just another conquest, then she was, at least in their eyes, a courtesan as well. A bastard daughter had few options in this industry of flesh and blood. But she was more than that, and looking into the eyes of pure pain and envy, she started to understand it.

"You're right, Genevieve. I did need you, but no more. I am worth more than a title, name, finance, or flesh, and so are you."

Genevieve raised the tattler in her fist, gripping the crumpled edges in her palm and shaking them in Truly's direction. "This is the only truth they'll believe, and do you know where it came from? From the lying lips of your lover." She crushed the paper, giving it another stab in the air, her eyes demanding, her fury searching for the response she came for, but Truly would not give it. "Did you know he kissed me last year?"

"You cannot hurt me anymore, Genevieve. This rage in you is ugly. It turns stomachs, not heads. I used to be afraid of girls like you. Mean and discontent with their frivolity. Girls who control others with fear. Gossip is the heart of popularity, which brings fear and causes those who are generally kind to be manipulated into doing their bidding. Your bidding. But you've forgotten one thing. My mother was the courtesan of a duke. She was not afraid of gossip, and she taught me what love is. Truly loved is what she called me."

With a curving sneer of her lips, Genevieve dropped the crumpled gossip rag at her feet. "You think you're good and fair."

"Not at all. Fairness and goodness had nothing on the deep love already blooming in my heart. It's true, you know. Love conquers all; it pierces through the heart of

fairness and goodness, and it doesn't care what it must lay low to win. He was never yours." Truly strolled forward and picked up the rubbish. She reached for Genevieve's hand, giving a little squeeze before letting her nemesis go. "Believe it or not, I never wanted to hurt you. I was simply unwilling to give up my happiness for yours because we both deserve to be loved. Both of us, Genevieve."

Truly believed that with her whole heart. Even Genevieve, as vindictive as she was, deserved happiness. Miss Rutledge left angry but Truly suspected the woman was beginning to understand. There was a sadness about her, and Truly hoped there would come a day when they would both heal from the experience.

An hour later, the love of her life arrived on her doorstep, and she forgot everything else. Without a bit of shame, Arlington swung Truly up in his arms and carried her to his coach for all to see.

"I sent your note to the Times," Arlington said when they were settled in the coach.

"You did not."

"I absolutely did. I added that when the honorable Duke of Dalliance offered to pension off Truly Hancock, she made him a better offer. She offered him a duel at sunrise to be met at Gretna Green in a fortnight. Then I invited the leading journalist to join us so that the nuptials would be recorded for posterity."

Truly laughed, snuggling into Arlington's side. "I think you're telling the truth."

"If you had an ounce of vengeance in you, you would jilt me there."

"My vengeance will be to love you and to make your moniker a blessing."

"That is not vengeance."

“When I leave you tied to our wedding bed, you may feel differently.”

“I look forward to every minute, my love.”

“As do I.”

THE END