



Her Duke to Seduce: Lady Be Wicked (Wayward Dukes' Alliance #20)

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Category: Historical

Description: Lady Felicity Hathaway doesn't want a season, and convinced her father that she doesn't need one. It took little persuasion, as he didn't seem inclined to force her debut. At least until her aunt decides her reprieve is at an end and arranges her launch, warranting no discussion on the matter. She's to find a husband whether or not she likes it. Which she most certainly does not... Well, if her aunt wants her to find a husband, she's in for a shock. Because seduction and ruination seem like a much better notion in her estimation...

Aiden Weston, the Marquess of Redding, doesn't want a wife. He'd much rather be the rogue everyone expects him to be. But he attends a ball at his father's behest and discovers a vision he cannot forget. Her loveliness enraptures him, but it is her passion that ensnares him. They have one night filled with everything wicked, and then she disappears.

Felicity leads Aiden on a merry chase. One that leads them on adventure, temptation, and romance neither thought they wanted.

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Lady Felicity Hathaway stared out the window of her Aunt Enid, the Countess of Winston's, library. She had been sent to spend the summer months at the Winston estate, much to her chagrin. Her father, the Earl of Sheffield, had little time for her while he oversaw some renovations to his estate, and her aunt firmly believed he ought to remarry and provide Felicity with a new mother. Felicity, however, wished her aunt would mind her own affairs and leave them well enough alone. She loved her aunt—she truly did—but Enid's opinions often clashed with her own, which only served to irritate her.

Like being sent to Winston Manor for the summer...

Her aunt had only recently married herself. Why would she wish to take charge of a ten-year-old girl at a time like this? Should she not be more preoccupied with her own new life? Felicity sighed heavily. She detested Winston Manor and being under her aunt's ever-watchful supervision. At home, she had much more freedom to do as she pleased. Her father doted upon her, which was why she had been so shocked when he agreed to send her away for the summer. Why would he do such a thing?

"Felicity, dear," her aunt's voice interrupted her thoughts. "What are you doing in here?"

As if the library were a scandalous place for her to be.

Felicity rolled her eyes and continued gazing out the window, making no effort to respond. What did her aunt expect her to say? What answer would make her leave Felicity in peace and allow her to do as she pleased? "What would you like for me to be doing?" she asked in a dull tone. She truly hated it here. She sincerely hoped that

after this summer, she would never have to endure another visit to Winston Manor.

“I have hired tutors to work with you this summer,” her aunt announced.

Felicity turned toward her, narrowing her gaze. “What sort of tutors?” The way her aunt phrased it— tutors —implied there would be more than one. What, precisely, did Aunt Enid believe she lacked in her education? Did she think Felicity’s father had failed to provide adequate instruction?

“Well,” her aunt began, “they will assist in giving you a proper education befitting a young lady.”

Felicity lifted her chin. “I assure you, Aunt, I have already had a proper education.”

“No, my dear,” Enid said firmly. “What you have had is an education befitting a gentleman. No lady need study mathematics, Greek, Latin, or any sort of science.”

Felicity bristled. “And why not? Do you suppose a girl lacks the intelligence to comprehend such topics?”

Her aunt sighed. “That is not it at all. But you must learn how to be a lady. If you insist upon discussing such things when you enter society, you will never find a husband.”

So that was it.

“Aunt Enid,” Felicity said slowly, enunciating each word, “I am ten years old. If a man wished to marry me now...” She let the thought trail off, giving her aunt a pointed look. Did she really need to explain it to her aunt? “Boys are disgusting anyway. I shall never marry one.”

She wrinkled her nose at the mere thought of it. The stable boy at her father's estate was perpetually dirty and smelled awful. She could not fathom why any young lady would voluntarily spend her life in the company of a man, let alone marry one.

"You may change your mind one day," her aunt said with a note of amusement. Felicity doubted it. "Be that as it may, your tutoring shall commence this afternoon. We shall begin with dance lessons."

She wrinkled her nose. "Must we?"

"Yes, we must," Aunt Enid replied, her tone brooking no argument. "A lady must carry herself with grace, and dancing is an essential skill. You will thank me when you make your debut."

Felicity crossed her arms. "I have no desire to make a debut. Nor do I wish to prance about for some fop who only cares about how well I curtsy or how prettily I flutter my lashes."

Her aunt pressed her lips into a firm line. "Your opinions, my dear, are far too strong for a young lady."

"They are merely opinions," Felicity replied. "And I fail to see why having them is so very terrible." Her aunt should really learn to be less stringent. She would probably be much happier if she relaxed her ideals a little. She would never listen to anything a ten-year-old girl would say though. She had firm beliefs that nothing would change.

Her aunt sighed heavily and sat in the chair nearest the fireplace. "You remind me of your mother."

Felicity's breath hitched. Her mother was rarely spoken of in her father's house. The few times she had dared ask about her, her father had gone silent, his expression

darkening with sorrow. It was said that her parents had shared a great love, and that her mother's passing had devastated him.

"My mother was strong-willed?" she asked cautiously. She knew so little about her mother, and any information—any fragment—was precious.

Her aunt's gaze softened. "Very. And brilliant. She could outwit any gentleman in a debate and knew more about history than most scholars. But society is not kind to women who outshine men, Felicity."

Felicity lifted her chin. "Then I shall outshine them all the same." She would never marry.

Aunt Enid shook her head, a small smile tugging at her lips. "You are still a child. One day, you will see that life is not so simple."

"Perhaps," Felicity conceded. "But I stand by my beliefs. I doubt they shall change."

Her aunt chuckled. "Very well. But for today, you shall dance."

Felicity groaned. "And if I refuse?"

"Then you shall find yourself locked out of this library you love so dearly," her aunt replied sweetly.

Felicity gasped. "You are cruel."

"I am practical," Aunt Enid corrected. "Now, shall we?"

With great reluctance, Felicity rose and followed her aunt from the library, her steps slow and dragging. This summer was going to be dreadful. But if she must endure

lessons in refinement, she would find a way to remain exactly who she was—clever, outspoken, and utterly unimpressed by the expectations of the world.

Even if she had to waltz her way through it.

Aiden Weston, the Marquess of Redding, stared out at the pond that bordered his family's estate and the Earl of Winston's lands. He could not bear to remain inside that drafty castle for another moment. His mother was gravely ill, and it seemed unlikely she would survive the disease that racked her body. She had been coughing incessantly for days. His father had locked himself in his study, unable—or unwilling—to acknowledge the looming tragedy.

Aiden could not blame him. The Duke of Templeton adored his wife. To lose her now... Aiden did not know how he would withstand such a loss. The duchess was the warmth that made their somber home bearable. Without her, what would be left?

“Who are you?”

He turned at the unexpected sound and frowned. Walking toward him was a gangly young girl with golden blonde hair tumbling to her waist in an unruly mess. Did she not own a hairbrush? Her cheek was streaked with dirt, and her gray eyes—stormy and defiant—fixed on him with unwavering boldness. She was too thin, yet she carried herself as though she ruled the world.

“Who are you?” he retorted with a raised brow.

“I asked you first,” she shot back.

Of all the things he had anticipated enduring that day, an argument with a stubborn little girl had not been among them. He sighed, rubbing his hand over his face. Perhaps this was precisely the distraction he needed to keep his mind from dwelling

on his mother's fate.

"I am the Marquess of Redding," he informed her.

She tilted her head. "You do not look like a marquess." She studied him critically. "You do not look much older than I am."

"A marquess can be any age," he pointed out, exasperation creeping into his tone. "And I am several years older than you. What are you, eight?"

"I am ten," she corrected, jutting out her chin. "And I do not appreciate your easy dismissal, as though I am insignificant."

"You use a great many large words for a little girl," he noted. "Why are you out here?" Then, narrowing his gaze, he asked, "Are you one of the tenants' children?" If so, he would have to see her safely home and likely chastise her parents for allowing her to roam about unsupervised.

She laughed outright. "Do I sound like I belong to one of the farmers?"

Aiden frowned. She had him there. The girl was well-spoken, something unlikely for a tenant's daughter. "I suppose not," he conceded. Tilting his head, he observed her curiously. "But not many daughters of the peerage sound like you either. At least, not many ten-year-olds I have met."

"Good," she said with satisfaction. "I would hate to be lumped in with all the young ladies aspiring to be normal. I plan to shine much brighter than any of them." She frowned slightly. "But I do not believe it will be for the same reasons they hope to."

"What is your name?" he demanded. "I should like to ensure you return home safely."

“I do not require your assistance,” she said airily. “I am perfectly capable of finding my own way back to Winston Manor.” She rolled her eyes. “I managed to find my way here, did I not?”

It did not escape his notice that she still had not given him her name. However, she had unwittingly revealed where she belonged. He would have to pay a call to the earl and inquire about her. Perhaps she was the daughter of one of the servants. That would explain her refined vocabulary. Perhaps she had aspirations of becoming a governess one day.

He arched a brow. “And yet, you still have not told me your name.”

“I do not see why that is necessary,” she said breezily. “You are merely a stranger I encountered by the pond. I do not go about giving my name to unknown gentlemen.” She cast him a knowing look. “That would not be proper, would it?”

Aiden chuckled despite himself. “And wandering about alone in the woods is proper?”

She waved a dismissive hand. “That is entirely different.”

“How so?” He found he rather liked this girl.

“I am hardly alone.” She gestured toward him. “I have you for company, do I not?”

He could not argue with that logic, as ridiculous as it was. Whoever this girl was, she possessed an impertinence unlike anything he had encountered before. It was... oddly refreshing. Most children, particularly young ladies, cowered before a marquess—even one merely five and ten like him. This one, however, stood her ground as though she were the Queen of England herself.

“Well, nameless girl from Winston Manor,” he said, smirking, “I must insist on escorting you back. I cannot risk your coming to harm, or I will feel responsible.”

She hesitated before sighing, as if resigning herself to an inevitable fate. “I suppose you will not let this go.”

“I will not,” he confirmed.

“Very well, then,” she said, lifting her chin with dramatic grandeur. “You may call me Lissy.”

“Lissy?” he repeated. “That is all you will tell me? Surely that is not your only name.”

She shrugged. “It is all I will tell you.”

Aiden extended his arm, expecting her to take it as any proper young lady would. Instead, she eyed it as though it were an amusing relic from some bygone age.

“I would rather not,” she said primly. “I prefer my independence.”

Aiden laughed outright this time. “You are a peculiar little thing.”

Lissy shrugged. “I prefer to think of myself as extraordinary .”

“Extraordinary, is it?” He shook his head, marveling at her confidence. He found he liked her even if she were a bit frustrating. “Well then, Miss Lissy, shall we return to Winston Manor now?”

“I suppose I must return,” she said with great reluctance, then sighed dramatically. “But you are not going to escort me.”

“And why is that?”

“Because, as I said,” she replied, lifting her chin, “I do not require you to.” With that, she turned and ran off, never once looking back.

Aiden shook his head as he watched her go. He should go after her, but he did not bother. She would be fine. It was unlikely she would come to any harm between the pond and Winston Manor. Still, he found himself wondering about her. Would he see her again? If she was a servant’s child, perhaps. But he had other concerns far more pressing than a cheeky little hellion and whatever future she might forge for herself. With a sigh, he turned back toward his own home, his thoughts returning to his mother. He could not afford to be distracted. Not now.

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One

Felicity strolled into the library at her father's estate. She loved books—had always loved books. They held far more appeal than most things offered in society. She had no desire to attend a ball, a soirée, or even something so mundane as a picnic. People always disappointed her, and she did not believe that would change. Books, however, were a comfort, and one she often returned to.

She ran her fingers over the leather-bound tomes and smiled. Felicity closed her eyes and inhaled, breathing in the familiar scent of parchment, ink, and aged leather. Yes, this was where she went to ease any discomfort. It was like coming home and being wrapped in warmth.

Winter was about to come to an end, and spring was on the horizon. The warmer months would arrive soon enough, and she could enjoy reading in the gardens. But for now, she would have to be content in the library, a fire crackling in the hearth. She stared at the shelves. But what book should she choose? There were so many wonderful stories, histories, and biographies. Did she want something to study or something to become lost in?

Well, who was she fooling? It did not matter the topic—she would always become lost within the pages of any book she held in her hands. That was how she found peace, after all. She loved learning.

She nibbled on her bottom lip, then reached toward the shelf and plucked a tome at random. It did not matter what she would find within its pages. There was no book she found distasteful. All topics held merit and deserved to be read. If one hoped to

have a proper education, everything should be considered, and she had read a great many books in her years—even during the summer she had spent at Winston Manor with her Aunt Enid ten years earlier.

She had to be sneaky then, for her aunt had singular ideas about what a young lady ought to learn. Still, Felicity had managed to steal time for her books. She had gained a great deal of knowledge that summer. She had learned to dance, to use watercolors, and even a bit of cross-stitching. She had not exactly hated any of it, but neither had she loved it. She was passable at watercolors and abysmal at cross-stitching.

Dancing, however—she had discovered quite the aptitude for it, much to her aunt's delight. Aunt Enid had claimed that through dancing, she would win a gentleman's heart. Felicity had merely rolled her eyes. As if dancing could solve any dilemma.

“Lady Felicity.”

She turned and smiled at the butler in the entry way to the library. His silver-streaked dark hair was trimmed neatly. Wrinkles had begun to form at the corners of his soft blue eyes, and that stern expression had become a fixture Felicity had come to expect. “Hello, Bivens,” she said. “What is it?”

“Your father wishes for you to attend him in his study,” he said.

“Now?” she asked. That was unusual for her father. He never summoned her. There was no reason to. She never left the estate, and they saw each other at meals. She understood that her father, as the Earl of Sheffield, was busy. He had a lot to oversee in the earldom.

“Yes, my lady,” Bivens answered. “He said it is most urgent.”

She frowned. “I suppose I should make haste then.” She handed him the book she had

been about to read. She never had determined what it was about. "Can you put this away for me?"

"Of course, my lady," he said. Bivens took the book and bowed. "It will be my pleasure."

Felicity strolled out of the library and headed toward her father's study. Her heart beat rapidly inside of her chest. What reason could her father have had for summoning her to his study? She had a feeling it would not be for something pleasant. The last time they had a meeting like this one... She stopped short. Good heavens surely it could not be for the same reason? Aunt Enid had always wanted her to learn how to be a lady. She had been sent to Winston Manor for instruction. Surely, Aunt Enid would not want to do anything like that again?

There was only one way to find out. She marched forward and stopped outside of her father's study. Felicity lifted her hand and rapped against the wood frame. "Father," she called out. "You wished to see me?"

"Yes, dear," he said. "Come in."

She went inside and stopped in front of her father's large mahogany desk. His hair had gone all gray in the past few years. Strain filled his eyes as he met her gaze. His eyes were so like hers. It was one of the few traits she had inherited from him. She had overheard them as described as a stormy gray. Like dark clouds hovering on the horizon.

"Please have a seat, dear," he said.

She had not realized that she had stood there like a ninny, staring at him for several moments. Felicity had been so lost in her own thoughts she had not spoken or done anything. "What is it?" she asked. She was uncertain about sitting until she knew why

he had called for her. Felicity had an uneasy feeling she could not shake.

“Sit, Felicity,” he demanded.

“I do not wish to,” she told him.

He sighed and rubbed his hand over his face. “This is not the time to be difficult.”

“Is it ever a good time to be difficult?” she retorted.

“There is always a time and place for everything,” he replied sagely. “We have much to discuss and you will find it more comfortable if you are seated while we do so.”

That feeling of dread returned. Felicity sat. Not because he asked her to, but because her legs suddenly seemed weak. She would not like any of this. She knew it without him uttering a word. “Now will you tell me what you summoned me for?”

“I am sending you to Winston Manor,” he said.

“No,” she said vehemently. “I do not want to go there.”

“Be that as it may,” her father said. “You are going. Your aunt has arranged for a house party. You are going to have a debut ball at the end of it and then you both will go to London for the season. It is time that you entered society properly.”

It was the last thing she wanted. “You promised me that I would not have to do that.”

He sighed. “I know what I promised.” He leaned back into his chair. “But I was being selfish. I did not want you to leave me, but you deserve more than to be at my side. You should find a husband and have a family of your own.” He smiled softly. “I would not mind having a grandchild or two either.”

Felicity wanted to scream and rail against it all. She did not want a husband, and she doubted she wanted any children either. What would she do with a child? She knew nothing about children and raising them. She certainly did not wish to tie herself to a man. In all her years that had not changed. “Does it not matter at all what my wishes are?”

“Of course it does,” her father said. “I do want you to be happy.”

“Then do not make me go to Winston Manor.” This had to be Aunt Enid’s doing. She had always believed she knew what was best for Felicity. Thank heavens she had only been subjected to one summer in her aunt’s care. Unfortunately, it looked as if she would have another time where she had to endure her aunt’s ideals.

“One season,” he said. “I want you to experience society and see what else there is in life.”

She jutted her chin out. “I do not need to do any of that.”

“Well,” he said. “You are going. My word is final.” He shook his head and drew in a deep breath.

She wanted to scream and throw a tantrum like a child. Why did life have to be so difficult. Her aunt would not allow her to roam the library and take comfort in books. She would want her to do all those lady-like activities she had insisted she learn all those years ago. “What if I do not find a husband.”

“That is a topic we will discuss later.” He folded his arms over his chest. “I fully expect you to take part in everything that your aunt has planned. You will do your best to become acquainted with all the gentlemen she presents to you. If I find that you are not behaving as a lady should, I will be forced to take drastic actions.”

Her adoring father had never spoken to her in such a manner. What did he mean about drastic actions? She nearly snorted. As if her father would ever hurt her. “I do not wish to marry.”

“You may change your mind.”

That was unlikely. She would have to do something to convince the ton she was unmarriageable. Perhaps she would find a way to ruin herself. What would a lady have to do to accomplish such a feat? Would she be willing to take things down a path she might not be able to undo? Would she allow herself to be seduced just to court ruination? Felicity might do just about anything to avoid marriage. But she would not go so far as to trap a gentleman. If she wanted to be seduced it would have to be with a man that would never ask for her hand. It had to be a rake who did not believe in marriage any more than she did.

Felicity’s mind spun as she sat stiffly in the chair, her father’s words reverberating in her head. A season. A house party. A debut ball.

She felt trapped, as if the walls of the study were closing in on her, hemming her into a fate she had never desired. It was not enough that she had dutifully played the role of an obedient daughter, that she had never caused him scandal, that she had accepted her life as it was. Now, she was to be paraded before society like a prize and—if her father and aunt had their way—married off to some insipid gentleman who cared only for her dowry.

The very idea made her stomach turn.

“I see little point in this,” she said at last, struggling to keep the bitterness from her voice. “You know well that I am not suited for the marriage mart, nor do I desire to be.”

Her father's gaze softened, but his tone remained firm. "You are young, Felicity. You may think you know what you want now, but life has a way of surprising us." He exhaled heavily, as though bracing himself. "I will not be here forever, my dear. I need to know that you are settled, that you have someone to care for you should anything happen to me."

A pang of guilt pricked at her heart. She did love her father, even if she did not always understand him. He had been everything to her since her mother's passing, and she knew, in his own way, he only wished to see her secure.

But marriage was not the solution.

"I do not need someone to care for me," she countered. "I am quite capable of managing on my own."

He arched a brow. "And what do you propose to do? Remain unwed and buried in your books for the rest of your days?"

Her lips parted, but she had no answer. It was precisely what she had intended, but hearing it spoken aloud—voiced with such exasperation—made it sound ridiculous. Society would never accept an unmarried woman without purpose. Eventually, she would be seen as a burden, an oddity, something to be pitied. "I will find another way," she said stubbornly. "There must be some alternative to this ."

"There is none," he said simply. "Your aunt has already begun the arrangements. You are expected at Winston Manor in a sennight."

Felicity inhaled sharply. A sennight. She had no time to prepare, no time to formulate a plan of escape. "I see," she said at last, her voice steady despite the storm raging inside her. "Then I suppose I must make the best of it."

Her father's brows drew together in suspicion. "That is... an unexpected response."

She managed a small smile. "Would you rather I throw a tantrum?"

"No," he admitted, eyeing her warily. "But I know you, Felicity. I know that acquiescence does not come so easily to you."

"I simply recognize the futility of arguing." She shrugged. "You have made your decision, and I must abide by it." For now. She had many plans to make. There was no way she would willingly allow herself to be married off to some insipid gentleman.

Her father studied her for a long moment, as if trying to decipher her thoughts. Finally, he nodded. "Good. I am pleased to hear it."

She rose from the chair, smoothing her skirts. "Is there anything else, Father?"

He hesitated before shaking his head. "No, that will be all."

Felicity curtsied with impeccable grace and turned toward the door. She felt his gaze on her as she left, but she did not falter. Not until she reached the hallway, where she pressed a hand to her stomach, steadying herself. She would go to Winston Manor. She would attend the house party. She would suffer through the debut ball. But she would not marry.

If her father and aunt expected her to become a proper young lady and obediently secure a match, they would soon learn how very mistaken they were. Felicity Hathaway had no intention of submitting to society's expectations. No, she would do something far more scandalous. She would ensure that no respectable gentleman would dare to offer for her.

And if that meant finding a rake—a true libertine—to assist her in her ruination, then so be it. A slow, mischievous smile curved her lips. Yes, she would play their game. But she would play it her way.

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Two

Aiden Weston, the Marquess of Redding, did not like to be summoned. Even if the person doing the summoning was his father, the Duke of Templeton. He had no desire to leave London to attend his father at the ducal estate, least of all before the start of the season. He had reasons for wanting to remain in town, and none of them would be seen to if he were forced to spend time at his father's estate.

He avoided his childhood home as much as possible since the death of his mother a decade earlier. It held too many memories—both good and bad. But for him, the bad far outweighed the good. The worst were his mother's final days, memories he loathed to relive. That was the real reason he had resisted returning, and why he had been irked by the missive his father had sent, demanding his immediate presence.

His carriage came to a stop in front of the great house. Many would consider it an architectural masterpiece, constructed of limestone and gray stone, its tall mullioned windows adorned with dark, elegant shutters. The grand entrance boasted double oak doors framed by a columned portico, and above it, a balcony overlooked the long gravel drive leading to the estate. Soaring chimneys and turreted corners lent it an almost medieval grandeur.

As a child, he had loved this house. It had been a place of happiness and warmth. But after his mother's death, it had become dark and foreboding. He longed to see his father and leave immediately. There was no reason for him to stay longer than necessary—at least, none that he was aware of. He exhaled sharply. He could only hope his visit would be brief. He wanted to return to London as soon as possible.

Aiden took one long, deep breath and stepped out of the carriage. He had dawdled long enough. One of the servants had likely already alerted his father to his arrival. Best to have this meeting over with. The sooner it was done, the sooner he could depart.

As he strode up the steps, one of the massive oak doors swung open. Aiden knew better than to be surprised. On the other side, Wells, their longtime butler, stood as poised and unflappable as ever.

“Hello, Wells,” he said. “Is my father in his study?”

“His Grace is in the library,” Wells informed him. “He is expecting you.”

The library? That was unexpected. His father did not typically spend his hours there. It had been his mother’s domain. Aiden swallowed hard. This visit was going to be even more difficult than he had anticipated. If his father intended for them to speak in the library, it meant revisiting a room filled with ghosts. He exhaled, then forced himself forward. He had no choice but to endure this meeting—and pray he could keep his emotions in check. He paused outside the library door, gathering his composure. Then, pushing it open, he stepped inside.

The room smelled of polished wood, aged parchment, and the faintest trace of lavender—his mother’s favorite scent. He could not recall the last time he had entered this space. His father stood at the far end of the room, gazing through the floor-to-ceiling windows into the gardens beyond. Aiden was careful not to look around, for he knew he would see traces of his mother everywhere—the chaise by the hearth where she had often sat, the writing desk where she had composed letters, the well-worn volumes she had once held in her hands.

Instead, he focused on his father. Taking several long strides across the room, he stopped a few feet away. “Father,” he said evenly. The duke did not immediately

acknowledge him. Instead, he continued staring out the window in contemplative silence. Aiden clenched his jaw, waiting. His father had never been a man to be rushed.

After a few moments, the duke spoke. “Your mother would spend hours in this room.”

“I know,” Aiden said, his voice tight. He had spent many of those hours with her.

“She would be disappointed,” his father murmured. “In both of us.”

Aiden said nothing. He knew his mother would despair over what had become of their family. She had been the glue that held them together. Without her, they had become strangers in the same house. “She would have already spoken her mind on a great many things,” Aiden said at last, his voice carefully neutral.

“Indeed,” his father agreed. “But none more than your lack of a wife.”

Ah. So that was why he had been summoned. Aiden exhaled sharply. “I do not want a wife.”

His father’s lips twitched. “No man truly wants a wife, my boy. But that does not change the fact that you need one.”

“I am not ready.” He doubted he ever would be.

“I know,” his father said, softer now. “No man is truly prepared. But I made your mother promises, and I intend to see them honored. Starting with seeing you settled.”

“I did not make those promises,” Aiden replied tersely. But the words felt hollow. Would he truly betray his mother’s wishes, even now?

His father met his gaze. “And yet, you will honor them nonetheless.” He exhaled slowly. “Starting with attending the ball at Winston Manor tonight.”

Aiden stilled. “The countess is holding a debut ball for her niece,” his father continued. “I want you to go.” Aiden’s chest tightened. He could already see where this was leading.

His father held up a hand, cutting off his protest. “No, I do not expect you to court her niece. But I want you to begin looking at the unmarried ladies of the ton and determine if any of them might suit. It is time for you to start your search, and the ball is an excellent opportunity. You may return to London tomorrow and prepare for the season—but I expect you to attend social events with the intention of finding a bride.”

This was far worse than he had anticipated.

“And if I do not find a wife who suits me?” he asked coolly.

“As long as you make the effort, that is all I ask.” His father offered him a rare smile. “It will not be as terrible as you believe.”

Aiden scoffed. “You and Mother were in love. If I am to marry, that is the very least I would want. I have no interest in wedding merely to secure an heir.”

His father’s expression softened. “I would expect nothing less. I want you to be happy, Aiden. This is only the beginning. All I ask is that you approach this with an open mind. Do not dismiss every young lady outright.”

Aiden pinched the bridge of his nose, exhaling in frustration. He wanted to argue. He wanted to refuse. But deep down, he knew his father would not let this matter rest. “No,” he muttered at last. “It is not too much to ask.”

“Good,” the duke said. “Then it is settled.” His father leaned back against the desk. “I have already accepted the invitation.”

Of course he had.

Aiden resisted the urge to curse. “I will be in my chambers until it is time to depart. I require rest after my journey.”

His father nodded. Aiden did not wait for further discussion. With a curt bow, he turned on his heel and strode from the library, his chest tight with suppressed frustration. He had already spent longer in that room than he would have liked. Now, he had mere hours before he would be forced into a ball he did not wish to attend, surrounded by hopeful debutantes eager to ensnare a titled husband.

It was going to be a long evening...

Felicity had chosen to wear a color that no proper debutante would dare don at her debut ball. A shade so scandalous she fully expected her Aunt Enid to suffer an apoplectic fit. She rather looked forward to it. It was also why she had not stepped a foot outside her bedchamber until the last possible moment. She had no intention of allowing her aunt the opportunity to demand she change.

She was not some fresh-faced debutante of eight and ten, presented for the first time. She was twenty—nearly past the age of prime marriageability—and in some cases, already considered perilously close to being firmly placed on the shelf. As she had no desire for a husband, she had forgone a debut two years prior, and she would much prefer to do so now. She wished to be free, and acquiring a husband would never allow for that.

She paused before the mirror, taking one final look at the scarlet gown she had commissioned for the occasion. Her aunt should never have left her alone with the

seamstress. The gown was expertly fashioned, featuring a square neckline that elegantly framed her décolletage. Delicate gold embroidery had been woven in intricate floral patterns, tracing the edge of the neckline and extending down the fitted bodice, emphasizing her shape. Long, sheer sleeves of gauzy crimson lace fitted her arms and ended in a slight point over her hands, evoking an air of mystery. The deep red hue of the gown was both daring and dramatic. It symbolized passion and confidence—a bold choice for a lady who wished to make an impression.

Felicity fully intended to make an impression—the worst sort of one. She snickered at her reflection.

It was time. She had to descend the stairs and allow for her introduction—her debut. The ton would not know what to make of her. She intended to court their scorn, to create a scandal so outrageous that she would remain unmarriageable. And if she could, she would boldly seduce a man and ensure the most desirable feature of any debutante—her innocence—was irrevocably ruined. No man wanted an unchaste wife. At least, not one who hoped to secure an heir.

Felicity floated down the stairs, the silk of her gown whispering against her skin with each step she took. When she reached the ballroom, she waited until she was announced, then entered. She should have been beside her aunt in the receiving line, but she had convinced her it would be far more memorable for Felicity to make an entrance instead.

She did not think for a moment that anyone would forget her—or her daring gown.

The ballroom was crammed with guests, a true crush. Aunt Enid's ball, by all accounts, was a success. Felicity did not recognize a single soul in the room, nor did she wish to. She glided through the gathered throng, finally reaching her aunt's side.

“The ball appears to be a success,” she said, her lips curving into a falsely sweet

smile.

Her aunt's eyes widened in horror as she took in Felicity's attire. She hissed in a low tone, "What are you wearing?"

"This," Felicity replied, feigning innocence, "is my gown."

"That dress," Aunt Enid whispered furiously, "is not something an innocent debutante would wear. I daresay it is not even a gown a widow would wear."

Felicity resisted the urge to laugh. Her aunt had been widowed for a few years. She had borne her husband the requisite heir but had failed to give him a second child. Still, her place was secure, and she had full control of the household until her son came of age. Not that Aunt Enid needed financial security—Felicity's father had ensured she was wealthy in her own right.

"There is nothing wrong with my gown," Felicity said, rolling her eyes. "You are acting as if I paraded into the ballroom naked. Which, I assure you, I did not."

Her aunt's lips pressed into a firm line. "It draws the eyes ..." she muttered. "I suppose it isn't indecent, but it simply is not done. You should be in pastels."

"Pastels wash out my complexion," Felicity countered. Her golden-blonde hair and fair skin were far better suited to bolder colors. "I thought you wanted to present me at my best advantage."

Her aunt sighed in frustration. "You are correct. I did." She shook her head. "I only wish you had discussed it with me beforehand."

"If I had," Felicity replied, "you would have forbidden it. And we both know it is far better to ask for forgiveness than permission. Don't you agree?"

She smiled, the picture of feigned sweetness.

Aunt Enid exhaled heavily, shaking her head. “You are incorrigible,” she chided. “But you must tread carefully, dear. There is only so much you can do before skirting a true scandal.” She inhaled sharply, composing herself. “You have your dance card. Let’s see it filled.”

Felicity allowed her aunt to parade her about, introducing her to several gentlemen whom she presumed her aunt considered suitable prospects. But Felicity did not care. She found them all insipid. Some were handsome , she supposed, but none of them were remotely interesting.

Still, she allowed her dance card to be nearly filled, knowing it was expected. She left a few spaces blank on the off chance she found a gentleman she truly wanted to dance with. Thus far that had not been the case, but she believed in being prepared for any inevitability.

Each dance was more tedious than the last. The gentlemen were dull, uninspiring, and utterly predictable. One particularly clumsy partner had stepped on her toes so many times she was half tempted to feign an injury to escape the remainder of the evening.

She had needed air.

Excusing herself after a particularly tiresome quartet, Felicity slipped away from the crowded ballroom. She had no desire to endure another tiresome dance with another dull suitor. She longed for solitude, a brief respite from the suffocating heat of the ballroom and the constant hum of the crowd. Stepping onto the balcony, she inhaled deeply, the cool night air a welcome relief. Without hesitation, she descended the stone staircase into the gardens, the fragrant scent of blooming roses filling her lungs.

“That bad, is it?” A man with a deep, velvety voice seemed to emerge from the

shadows.

Felicity halted. “Who is there?” she demanded.

A low chuckle echoed in the darkness. A moment later, a man stepped forward, the silver glow of moonlight casting his striking features into sharp relief. Something about him was familiar, though she could not immediately place it. But there was one thing she knew with absolute certainty. He was the most breathtakingly handsome man she had ever encountered. His dark hair fell in an effortless wave across his forehead, and his eyes—good heavens, his eyes—were a shade of blue so deep, they appeared almost black in the dim light. Something in his gaze smoldered, a flicker of devilish amusement lingering at the corners of his mouth.

A rogue—a scoundrel.... And if she had any doubts, the way he looked at her, as if he saw through every bit of her feigned innocence, confirmed it. She tilted her head, studying him.

Yes. This man would do. Her heart thundered with anticipation. She had found her rake—the perfect man to assist in her ruination. A slow, mischievous smile curved her lips as she stepped forward. It was time to enact her plan.

And he was the final piece she needed to see it done.

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Three

Aiden stared at the beautiful woman before him and suddenly lost all ability to think. That scarlet gown of hers made her body decadence wrapped in silk and lace. Her golden blonde locks were gathered high on the crown of the head and twisted into a loose bun with tendrils left to frame her face in soft, romantic curls. He wanted to loosen her hair and set those curls free to fall down her back in a cascade of waves, then he wanted to run his fingers through those soft tendrils as he kissed her. He ached to touch her.

Her lips parted as she drew in a breath and his cock tightened in his breeches. He was a right arse staring at her as if she were a courtesan he could readily take in the garden. "Do I know you?" she asked.

"I do not believe that we have been introduced," he said. He tilted his lips upward into a wicked smile. "Would you like to correct that?" He certainly did. Aiden wanted to know everything about the lovely creature before him.

"I'm not so certain that would be wise," she told him. "You do not appear to be the sort of gentleman my family would approve of and I would hate to disappoint them."

She tilted her head to the side and studied him. What did she see when she set that gaze of hers upon him? She stepped a little closer and he itched to reach for her and pull her flush against him. This was not how he expected his evening to go. He had not spent any actual time in the ballroom. His father would be so disappointed with him. He was supposed to meet the young ladies and determine if any of them would be suitable to be his marchioness. He stared at the lady before him. At least he would

be able to say with some honesty he met one unforgettable woman. “You know nothing of me?” He lifted a brow. “And already you believe the worst in me.”

“Am I wrong then?” She met his gaze boldly. “Are you a perfect gentleman?” She moved even closer to him and he could see the shade of her eyes in the moonlight. They were a stormy gray and he couldn’t help thinking he had seen that exact shade somewhere before. She seemed so familiar to him and yet he could not fathom why. “You would never attempt to use your charm and experience to take advantage of my innocence?”

Aiden did not know what she expected him to say. If he told her he was the perfect gentleman would she stay in the garden with him. Would she then find him trustworthy? Where she was concerned he found he wanted to be a rogue. He wanted to kiss her. Hell, he wanted far more than that. But that was not what she asked him was it? “I do not think you require a gentleman.”

Her lips curled. “You believe I need a rake then?”

“Yes,” he told her. Then he moved closer to her. “I think you want me as much as I want you.”

He hoped he was not about to make a mistake. If he took a wrong step he could lose a chance with her. One he very much wanted and would do anything to ensure happened. She did not move as he made his way over to her. He stopped when he was so close their bodies almost touched. Still she remained in place. She lifted her chin and met his gaze. “What if I do?” She asked him. “Will you give me what I desire?”

Aiden swallowed hard. God help him. He had undoubtedly found his match in this woman. She was brazen and wild. A temptation he should not give into. The overwhelming desire to pull her into his arms surged through him, and it was too difficult to resist. He really should though. It was not proper and with her he found he

wanted to be the gentleman. Not that he was not a gentleman, but he wasn't exactly that far removed from being a rogue either. He walked a fine line and he had never regretted his actions. He could seduce her. It would be so easy to lead her down a path of ruination. "Are you certain?" Aiden could not take advantage of her. He had to be good. It might very well kill him, but he had to do right by her. He did not even know her name and he already knew she would be an important part of his life. She was daring him, taunting him, drawing him deeper into a wicked game neither of them should play. Yet he wanted to. More than he had ever wanted anything.

Her lips parted slightly, as if inviting his kiss. He knew he should turn away. He was not some callow youth incapable of controlling his urges, nor was he the kind of man to dally with an innocent. And she was innocent—at least, in the ways that mattered. But there was a knowing look in her storm-gray eyes, as if she understood the power she wielded over him and was prepared to use it.

Damnation.

Aiden drew in a slow, steady breath, willing himself to retreat. He had come here to consider his duty, to find a respectable match, to honor his mother's memory. He had not come to be undone by a woman in a scarlet gown with lips that begged to be kissed.

Her voice was silk and sin when she spoke again. "Are you afraid?"

A sharp, amused breath left him. "Terrified," he admitted, his voice huskier than he intended.

Her eyes flashed with something dangerously close to delight. "I see," she murmured, lifting her hand to trail her fingers lightly over the lapel of his coat. "I must say, my lord, I expected something more daring from a man with such a reputation."

His brows lifted. “And what reputation would that be?” There was no way she could know he had even a small roguish past. Could she?

She tilted her head, feigning innocence. “I do not know, precisely. But a man who skulks about in the dark corners of gardens rather than dancing in a ballroom surely has something to hide.”

Aiden chuckled despite himself. She was far more extraordinary than he could have imagined. “I do not skulk,” he corrected. “I avoid tedious conversation, which is an entirely different matter.” In truth, he avoided proper societal functions as a rule. This ball fit that description aptly.

“Ah,” she said, a ghost of a smile touching her lips. “And do you find me tedious?”

“Not in the least.” His voice dropped, his restraint fraying further with every breath. “You, my lady, are the most intriguing woman I have ever met.” That was an understatement. He could not truly describe her and what she did to him.

Her breath hitched, and for the first time, uncertainty flickered across her face. She had been toying with him, but now she realized the danger she courted. The air between them grew taut, charged with something neither of them dared to name.

Slowly, carefully, Aiden lifted a hand and traced a single fingertip along the bare skin of her forearm against the sheer fabric of her crimson sleeve. Her skin was warm beneath his touch, and she trembled, just slightly. It was a battle, then—one he fully intended to win.

“I should leave,” she whispered.

“You should,” he agreed. He should encourage her to, but he wouldn’t. Neither of them moved.

Aiden was the first to break the silence. “Tell me your name.”

She hesitated.

“Do not say it does not matter,” he continued. “Because it does.”

She swallowed, then lifted her chin, eyes locked with his. “Felicity.”

His breath left him in a rush. That name seemed as familiar as she did. “Have we met before?” He couldn’t escape the feeling that they had.

“Not to my knowledge,” she told him. Her lips parted, but before she could respond, the distant strains of a waltz floated from the ballroom. The real world beckoned, shattering the fragile illusion that had woven itself around them. Aiden reached for her hand, his fingers curling gently around hers. “Dance with me.”

She hesitated. “That would not be wise.”

“No, it would not.” He brought her gloved hand to his lips, brushing a slow, deliberate kiss across her knuckles. “But do you really wish to do the wise thing?”

Her breath caught, and for a moment, he thought she might refuse him. But then, to his utter satisfaction, she nodded. He offered his arm, and she took it, allowing him to lead her farther into the garden, down a path that lead to the center that would make the perfect dance floor beneath the moonlight. He would have this once dance with her. If his luck held, they would have far more than that. Aiden had the distinct—and unsettling—suspicion that Felicity was about to turn his world upside down.

Felicity could not go through with it. She could not seduce this man. It would be a mistake that she could never undo, and she did not want to have any regrets. Still, she could not deny herself this dance. It was the one dance she actually looked forward

to. All the others paled in comparison. This man held her attention on every level. She allowed him to lead her on to the stone floor in the garden. He twirled her in a waltz with expertise, and not once did he step on her toes.

The warmth of his hand on her bare skin was tantalizing. She did her best to ignore it. That warmth was a distraction that she did not need. Instead, she tilted her head to meet his gaze. "I told you my name," she said huskily. "But you never shared yours."

His lips twitched. "How remise of me."

"Indeed," she agreed. "Are you going to rectify your lapse?"

He grinned. He had lost his fight to hide a smile and what a glorious smile he presented her. It was all wicked and sin. Felicity wanted to press her lips to his and become lost in him. It would definitely lead to her ruination, and that was what she had wanted. She had worn her scarlet gown to attract a rake—and she had succeeded. One so beautiful she wanted to stare at him forever. "What if I want to keep an air of mystery between us?"

"You can tell me your name and still keep some mystery," she told him. "You do not know much more than that about me."

"I don't know," he said with a wicked tone. "I can name a few things about you other than your name." He lowered his hand from her waist to the curve of her hip. "I know you are brazen. I believe there is not much you would not dare to do."

She almost snorted. "Pray, tell me, my lord, does that approach usually prove successful?"

"I fail to understand your meaning," he said as he raised a brow.

“You are praising me for being bold,” she said. “You are being, how dare I say it, forward with me as if you do in fact, know me. When we both know that is the farthest from the truth. We are, in essence, strangers.” She tilted her head to the side. “You are attempting to seduce me and yet, you still have not told me your name.”

He smiled. “You are right, of course.” He leaned a little closer. “I do wish to seduce you.”

Felicity had not thought he would admit that much. “You need not try so hard.” She grinned. “I might be willing to let you.” She lifted herself up so she could whisper in his ear. “For a price of course.”

He chuckled softly. “And what is that price?”

“Not so fast, my lord,” she said. “You still have not introduced yourself. I cannot very well allow any seduction without at least having your given name.”

“I suppose I can concede that,” he said softly. “My name is Aiden.”

“Aiden,” she said. “Now that we have exchanged names, we can take the next step.”

She had thought she wanted to ruin herself, but perhaps she did not need to go that far. Felicity feared if she allowed this man liberties, she would become far too attached to him. He might prove to be her undoing. She was far too attracted to him to take that risk. What if she did a foolish thing and fell in love with him. Then where would that leave her? He was a rogue. It wasn't as if he was in search for a wife, and she still had not changed her mind about marriage. She was not in search of a husband either. Perhaps she could take one thing for herself. She could have a kiss and then move forward with the plans she had for her life. It was the one thing she selfishly wanted for herself.

“And what is the next step?” she asked him.

“In seduction?” he asked.

“Of course,” she replied breathlessly.

He twirled her with ease as the strands of the waltz floated around them. It was almost magical. The moonlight, the stars, the midnight sky—all of it added to the atmosphere. It could almost be described as romantic. Suddenly he stopped and pulled her against him. Heat swarmed her and her heart began to beat rapidly in her chest. “I think this may be a good place to start.” Slowly, he lowered his head until his lips pressed against hers. That one touch was enough for her to lose the ability to think.

His kiss was neither hurried nor demanding, but devastatingly thorough. His lips moved against hers with a tantalizing slowness, as if he were savoring her, as if he had all the time in the world. A shiver ran down her spine, and without thinking, she pressed herself closer. His arms tightened around her, drawing her firmly against the solid warmth of his body. She should pull away. She should remember why she had sought him out in the first place. But all rational thought slipped away the moment his hand caressed the curve of her back, his fingers lightly grazing the exposed skin above the scandalous neckline of her gown.

She was lost.

Felicity had always imagined her first kiss to be pleasant, perhaps even enjoyable, but this—this was nothing like that. This was madness. This was fire igniting in her veins, a dangerous sort of longing unfurling in her chest. She had meant to use him—to make herself unmarriageable—but instead, she was the one being ruined. Aiden deepened the kiss, a low sound escaping from deep in his throat, a mixture of pleasure and something darker. The warmth of his lips, the gentle yet possessive way

he held her, sent a delicious thrill through her. And then, as suddenly as it began, he broke the kiss, his breath ragged as he rested his forehead against hers.

“Felicity,” he murmured, her name rolling off his tongue like a whispered prayer.

She swallowed, forcing herself to step back, though every fiber of her being screamed in protest. If she did not stop this now, she would never be able to. She had not counted on desire feeling like this—overwhelming, all-consuming. “I need to go,” she said, though she made no move to leave. Her voice was unsteady, her breathing shallow.

Aiden studied her, his stormy blue gaze filled with something she could not quite name. “You do not want to.”

“No,” she admitted. Felicity swallowed hard. She could not stay there. This had not gone as she had planned. “But I must.” She should say something clever, something cutting, but she could not find the words—it would not do for him to seek her company again. Instead, she merely inclined her head and turned away, her heart hammering in her chest. With each step back toward the ballroom, she felt the heat of his gaze upon her, branding her in a way no man ever had before.

She had come into the garden seeking ruination. She had found something far more dangerous. Felicity had found a man she might never forget, and she had to keep as much distance between them as possible. This had been a grave error in judgment on her part.

Four

Felicity did not go back to the ball. Her aunt would be disappointed in her, but then again, when had Aunt Enid ever approved of her? She had been trying to change her since she was a girl of ten, and now that she was a decade older nothing had changed. Felicity certainly hadn't. She was as brazen as ever and she would not alter anything about herself. She liked who she was and she would not apologize for it.

She had planned on having some gentleman ruin her. It had been a silly plan and now that she had abandoned it she recognized that. Instead it would be far better for her to leave England altogether. She could take a ship to the continent or even go so far as America. She considered her options and wondered what the West Indies would be like.

Perhaps even those options were being reckless. She should consider it all and decide on the best course for her. France would likely be too dangerous even if Napoleon had been defeated. She would be far better to go to another country. She nibbled on her bottom lip and thought it all through. With logic instead of desperation as she had previously. She had studied a lot and was fluent in French, Italian, and Greek. The latter had been just to see if she could learn it. French and Italian had a similar pattern to it so she picked both up easily. Italy might be her best option, but she might reconsider later.

She pulled out a valise and started to pack. If she planned to travel she would have to do so as a man. No captain worth his salt would allow her aboard without a chaperone. Luckily she had a gentleman's full attire created for her in duplicate. Felicity had packed it all on the off chance she might need it. She added two simple

day gowns that she could fasten on her own, and one set of man's attire. The other she intended to wear as she sneaked out of the house once everyone was asleep. Though perhaps she should go now when her aunt was otherwise occupied. It might be easier to sneak out in a crowd of people...

She finished packing and then undressed quickly. Her scarlet gown's design made it easy for her to undress on her own. She'd had it created that way on purpose. After her maid had helped her earlier Felicity had told her to retire for the evening. She had not wanted anyone around in case she had planned something other than seduction for her evening—and if she had gone with seduction she did not need a maid privy to those details either. She would have revealed her lack of innocence in her own way, and at a time of her choosing.

After she removed her gown she put it in her valise. She wanted to take it with her to remember the night—to remember Aiden. Felicity lifted her fingers to her lips and recalled that kiss. It had been—so much more than she could ever have imagined. Something that decadent should be savored. She almost wished she could go to him and demand he kiss her again so she could relive that feeling. It was something she would not forget for as long as she lived. It was her one taste of passion and she may never have that feeling with another man. She doubted she would ever allow herself to be that vulnerable with a man again. It was far riskier than she had originally believed. She had thought herself incapable of being lost in a man's touch. She'd been so wrong.

Felicity shook herself from her reverie. She could not allow herself to be distracted by thoughts of Aiden and the way he had made her feel. It was a dangerous indulgence, and she had indulged enough for one evening. No, she had to move quickly before she lost her resolve entirely.

She slipped into the gentleman's attire, securing the trousers about her waist and buttoning the crisp linen shirt with practiced ease. The waistcoat fit snugly, and she

tugged on the dark coat, adjusting the shoulders until the disguise felt natural. Her blonde locks were the most difficult obstacle. She swept them up beneath a tricorne hat, tucking away every telltale strand. When she glanced at herself in the mirror, a stranger stared back at her—a young man with sharp, storm-gray eyes and an air of quiet determination.

A small, almost defiant smile curled her lips. She could do this.

She fastened her boots and hoisted the valise over her shoulder. If she hesitated now, she might never leave. If she allowed herself a single moment of doubt, she might run straight back to Aiden, straight back to the very thing she had spent years trying to avoid—a life dictated by a man, by expectation, by marriage.

No. That would not be her fate.

Felicity stole across the room, every movement careful, precise. She eased the door open and peered into the dimly lit corridor. The house was still alive with music and conversation from the ballroom below, but this wing was quiet. The revelers were too caught up in their frivolity to notice a solitary figure slipping through the shadows. She crept down the servants' stairwell, careful to avoid the steps she knew creaked, and emerged in the back hall. The kitchen staff would be preoccupied with the evening's demands, which meant the rear entrance was the safest route.

The cool night air greeted her as she stepped outside. The gardens were still, bathed in moonlight, and the stable beyond was dark. Perfect. She would need a mount. A carriage was too conspicuous, and she had no coachman she could trust not to alert her aunt. A swift horse would take her to the nearest posting inn, where she could secure passage to the coast. From there, she would find a ship bound for the continent.

Heart pounding, she made her way toward the stables, every step measured, every

sound magnified in her ears. She was nearly there when a shadow detached from the darkness.

"Running away, are we?" The deep, familiar voice sent a jolt through her, halting her in her tracks. She turned sharply, her breath catching as she met Aiden's piercing gaze. He stood in the moonlight, arms crossed over his chest, his expression unreadable. His dark hair was slightly tousled, as though he had run a hand through it in frustration, and the intensity in his eyes was enough to make her shiver.

Aiden had decided to return to home. There was no real reason to stay. He would have liked to dance with Felicity again, but she had not returned to the ballroom. The only thing he could surmise was that she had decided to depart after their private dance in the garden. So he had departed the ball without even stopping to speak with the Countess of Winston to say goodbye. Felicity had been his only concern. He had not expected that he would discover her exiting the manor in breeches of all things. At first he had not realized it was her, and then he caught a glimpse of that golden hair she'd tried to hide and knew. He had stiffened at the sight of her dressed so scandalously. He got a lovely view of her derriere in those breeches and his arousal sprung to life.

Slowly Felicity straightened her spine, lifting her chin and boldly met his gaze. "That is none of your concern, my lord."

Aiden arched a brow. "On the contrary, I find it very much my concern when a lady—particularly one I just kissed—decides to disappear into the night dressed as a man." And he prayed no other man saw her like this. He enjoyed it far too much and he did not wish to share her with anyone.

She swallowed hard and smirked at him. There was a wicked gleam in her eyes he appreciated. "You presume much. Perhaps I simply enjoy masquerading as a gentleman."

He exhaled a short laugh, but there was no humor in it. "Do not play games with me, Felicity. You are running." Why was she running? What could be so terrible that she needed to make a quick escape? He did not understand what was going on with her. He wanted to pull her against him and kiss her senseless, then throw her over his shoulder and keep her forever. What the hell had she done to him in such a short time?

She clenched her jaw. "And if I am?"

His expression hardened. "Then I must ask—where do you plan to go? Do you even have a plan, or is this a reckless impulse?" Where would she bloody go?

"I do have a plan," she said hotly. "And I do not require your interference."

Aiden took a step closer, and he was painfully aware of her, her presence, the way she seemed to consume the very air around him. "Do you think I will simply allow you to vanish?" he asked, his voice low. "Do you think I will stand idly by while you put yourself in danger?" He could not let her disappear on him. He had just found her and to lose her already...

"I am not your responsibility," she shot back.

"No, but you are a lady," he countered, his voice tight with frustration. "And whether you like it or not, the world will not be kind to a woman traveling alone, no matter how clever her disguise." And no man would mistake her for a gentleman for long. She as far too curvy to be of the male persuasion.

Felicity's balled her hands into fists at her sides. "I do not need your protection."

"Perhaps not," he said, his gaze darkening. "But you have it, nonetheless."

She stared at him with distrust. The muscles in her jaw tensed as she clenched her teeth together. He did not know what to expect from her and he prepared for anything. Something fierce, something possessive twisted inside of him and he found it far too dangerous for his piece of mind.

"Aiden—" She nibbled on her bottom lip as she studied him. Felicity drew in a deep breath as if to argue against him going with her. She would realize soon enough that he would have his way in this.

"You will not go alone," he interrupted, his voice firm. "Not while I draw breath." He would follow her to the ends of the Earth if necessary. She was his to protect. He did not know when or how he had come to think of her as his, but he could not shake that feeling. Even if he wanted to, and he definitely did not want to.

She shook her head in disbelief. "You would come with me?" Felicity almost sounded surprised that he would go with her. Actually, he was a little surprised too. Though he did hope to convince her to remain where it was safe.

He sighed, raking a hand through his hair. "If you insist on this madness, then yes. Someone must ensure you do not get yourself killed."

She let out a breathless laugh. "You are impossible."

"And you are infuriating," he said, stepping closer still. His fingers brushed her chin, tilting her face up toward his. "But I cannot let you go. Not like this."

Her lips parted, but no words came. He had thought his father a fool for insisting that he come to this house party. He had not thought that he would ever find a woman that would enthrall him like Felicity, and he knew little about her. He did not even have her full name. For that matter she did not have his either. What was he going to do with her.

“I cannot allow it,” she said in a mulish tone. “I am going and you are not coming with me.”

He cursed under his breath. “And how do you propose to prevent me from trailing behind you.”

Her lips tilted upward into a mischievous smile. He should have taken that look and taken some caution in it, but he was riveted like a besotted fool. He never imagined she could render him immobile in any way. But before he knew it, he found himself on the ground in a heap, having been struck over the head by the bloody, impertinent chit. The world turned upside down and he saw spots before everything went dark.

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Five

Felicity should have felt guilty for striking Aiden as she had. She had no choice. If she allowed him any leeway he would have prevented her from leaving. Her desire for him rivaled her wish to remain unmarried. He tempted her far more than any man could have. How could she not have foreseen that possibility? That there might be a man that she craved more than her own freedom... Aiden had ensnared her without any true difficulty. He had charmed her and nearly seduced her with an ease that left her confounded. She was supposed to be the seducer, and instead she had become the one trapped by her own needs.

That was why she had to escape. She had to go somewhere that he would not be such a grave temptation. Especially as she did not truly believe he wanted something lasting with her. She was one of many to a rogue like him. As much as she had hoped for ruination she could not allow it at the hands of Aiden. It would hurt too much when he inevitably turned away from her. Her heart had become involved and that was the true tragedy.

So she would go to the nearest seaside port and book passage. She did not care where the ship was headed. As long as it took her far away from England's shores—and the temptation of Aiden. Felicity took a deep breath and quickened her pace. Once she was inside the stable she readied a horse for her journey. The nearest inn was easily a couple hours away and she could not waste time.

She secured her valise to the saddle and then mounted the horse—thankful for the male attire she now wore. She would never have been able to ride astride in a gown. At least not without scandalously showing her bare legs... That could have also led to

her ruination. It would have been far easier to do that than seduce a man, but alas, it would not have been enough to prevent marriage. Some men could look past such scandalous behavior as long as she was an innocent in the marriage bed.

Felicity drew in a breath and pressed her knee into the horse and lifted the reins. It was time to go. Her rampant thoughts were going to keep her mind busy for the entire trip, but she could not allow them to slow her progress.

As Felicity urged the horse into a swift canter, the cool night air whipped against her cheeks, tugging at the loose strands of her hair. The stars above shone like scattered diamonds against an inky sky, and the distant hoot of an owl was the only sound beyond the rhythmic pounding of hooves against the damp earth. She exhaled, her breath coming in soft, white puffs. This was freedom—at least for now.

She did not look back. She could not. If she allowed herself even a single glance over her shoulder, she might lose her nerve. Aiden would be furious when he awoke and realized what she had done. If he had even the slightest inclination of where she was going, he would follow. That much she knew. He was too determined, too infuriatingly persistent to let her slip away so easily. But he could not follow if she left no trace.

Her destination was uncertain, yet that did not trouble her. It was the journey itself that mattered.

The moon illuminated the road ahead, a narrow winding path bordered by fields that stretched into darkness. She had traveled these roads before, but never alone and never with such a pressing need to flee. Each clop of the horse's hooves against the ground only strengthened her resolve. The nearest port town was a day's ride if she could maintain a good pace. There, she would find a ship. To where, she did not know. Perhaps France. Perhaps beyond. Somewhere on the continent...it did not matter. As long as she put some distance between herself and Aiden—and the fate her

aunt decreed for her.

Her heart wrenched at the thought of leaving England behind. She would never again see the rolling green hills of the countryside, the grand ballrooms she so despised, or the people who had shaped her into the woman she had become. But she could not allow sentiment to weaken her. Sentiment had nearly betrayed her once—had almost cost her everything.

Her thoughts trailed to Aiden once more...

The very thought of his name sent a shiver down her spine, though whether from longing or dread, she could not say. She still felt the ghost of his lips against hers, the warmth of his hand on her waist, the way he had looked at her—as if she were the only woman in the world. And for one brief, reckless moment, she had wanted to believe that she was.

But Aiden was a rake—a scoundrel she could not trust. A man who undoubtedly collected kisses as a gambler collected debts. She had been a mere amusement, a momentary distraction from the expectations that loomed over him.

And yet... she did not truly believe that. Not entirely. Her heart would not allow that truth to fully seep into her soul. Something in his gaze had been too raw, too unguarded. If she had been any other woman, she might have fooled herself into thinking it had been real.

But she was not any other woman.

Felicity clenched her jaw, forcing her thoughts elsewhere. The wind howled as she crested a hill, her cloak billowing behind her. She had to remain focused. She could not allow herself to be swept away by thoughts of what could never be. She pressed her heels into the horse's sides, urging it faster. The night was still young, and she

had a long road ahead.

And yet, she could not shake the ominous feeling curling in her stomach—that no matter how far she ran, no matter how swiftly she rode, Aiden would find her. And when he did, she feared she would not have the strength to resist him.

Aiden came to consciousness slowly. An ache bloomed on the back of his head and spread throughout making him wince. He lifted his hand to rub his head in the hope to wipe away the pain. It was a futile effort. As he spread his hand over his head he recalled how he had come to find himself in such a position. The chit had hit him. He did not even know what she had used to strike his head, but it had done the job well. He had landed on the ground with a thud and no doubt further injured himself as he found himself sprawled on the hard earth.

If he had wanted to go after her before he doubly did now. What had she been thinking? Why was he running? He had far more questions than answers, but he would find her. Surely she did not think this foolhardy plan of hers would work? He came to his feet and strode toward the stables. He would check to see if she had actually succeeded in securing a mount first. If she had, then he would return to his own estate and get the necessities he would need to go after her. He had a vested interest in finding her. She had ensured that by knocking him to the ground and fleeing.

Not that he hadn't wanted to go with her to begin with... She intrigued him. So much so he had sought her company again after their interlude in the garden. He knew next to nothing about the lovely lady. Nothing really except her name and that her beauty had struck him stupid. There was no other explanation for it. Her actions told him much. She was desperate and he had lost his bloody mind.

He entered the stables to find one of the stable hands wringing his hands worriedly. His face had little color to it and his hair was a disheveled mess—though the latter

might be normal for the lad.

“What has happened?” Aiden asked.

The stable hand turned to him and frowned. “My lord...” His lips formed a thin line. Almost as if he were considering admitting to his dilemma. Aiden had an idea of what that trouble might be, and her name was Felicity. Something flashed in his gaze—resignation perhaps? “Well, you see...” He frowned. “It’s Lady Felicity.”

Of course it was...

“She has taken a horse hasn’t she?”

The stable hand blew out a breath. “I fear she has. It is her horse that is missing.” He stared at an empty stall. “She must have come in while I was seeing to another mount for one of our guests. We are all so busy tonight...”

Aiden nodded. Then it occurred to him. This stable hand was very familiar with Felicity. He had called her Lady Felicity as if he had dealt with her on more than one occasion. Did that mean—he was almost afraid to finish that thought. “Lady Felicity keeps a horse here?”

“Of course,” the stable hand said as if that made perfect sense, and perhaps it did. “She came to Winston Manor with her own horse. She had insisted upon it.” The stable hand gestured toward the stall. “She refused to travel with Lady Winston if she could not bring the beast.”

“Why did Lady Winston wish for her to visit?” He had to know the truth. He had to hear the stable hand confirm his suspicions.

“Well, because she wanted to launch her into society. Lady Felicity Hathaway is

Lady Winston's niece."

Aiden closed his eyes and took a deep breath. That was what he had feared. How would he tell Lady Winston that he had allowed her niece to knock him senseless? That very action gave her the opportunity to run away. His own father would be displeased as well. Though he might like the idea that Aiden was taken with the girl. He had wanted Aiden to go to the ball and start searching for a bride. Not that he was ready to offer Felicity a marriage proposal. That would be ludicrous... He was fascinated by her though.

Aiden ran a hand through his hair, exhaling sharply. He had always known he had an inclination for trouble, but this—this was another matter entirely. Lady Felicity Hathaway. The niece of Lady Winston. The woman who had nearly undone him with a kiss, only to render him unconscious and flee into the night.

He let out a low chuckle. The minx.

But his amusement faded quickly. Where in the devil did she think she was going? And why? She had gone to great lengths to ensure her escape, which meant she had no intention of returning willingly. That alone troubled him. Turning back to the stable hand, he asked, "Do you know which direction she was headed?"

The lad scratched his head. "Hard to say, my lord. She left in quite a hurry. But if I had to wager a guess... she'd head toward the coast."

Aiden stiffened. "The coast?"

"Aye." The stable hand shrugged. "Lady Felicity had no desire for marriage and had argued quite loudly with her ladyship about her distaste for being trapped in such a union. If she means to flee, I'd wager she's making for the nearest port."

Damnation. Aiden had anticipated the possibility that she meant to leave the estate, but to flee England entirely? He had known she was bold, but this... this was madness. And yet, he could not say he was entirely surprised. There had been something in her gaze earlier, something beyond flirtation or the thrill of scandal. There had been desperation.

But why did she think running was the answer? Aiden had to find out. And to do that, he needed to find her. He turned on his heel, striding toward the nearest stall. He had no time to waste. He would need fresh clothes, provisions, and coin if he meant to chase after her. But first—he needed a horse.

“Ready my mount,” he ordered. “I will go after her.”

The stable hand hesitated. “Forgive me, my lord, but... what do you intend to do when you find her?”

Aiden paused, staring out into the darkness. What indeed? Would he drag her back, kicking and screaming? Would he offer her an alternative to running, though he had no notion of what that might be? Or would he do the unthinkable—let her go? The thought unsettled him more than he cared to admit.

“I mean to bring her back,” he said at last, though he was not entirely certain if he believed it. “One way or another.”

The stable hand nodded and rushed to prepare the horse. Aiden rolled his shoulders and exhaled slowly. He had never pursued a woman in this manner before. Hell, he had never pursued a woman at all. But Felicity Hathaway was no ordinary woman. And if she thought she could escape him so easily, she was about to learn just how wrong she was.

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Six

Felicity pulled on the reins to slow her horse down to a light trot. She was nearing the seaside town that had been the closest to Winston Manor. There was nothing to recommend the small town of Bamburgh. It was quaint and bustling like any small town near the sea. It had more than one inn, probably to accommodate those that hoped to board a ship and those hoping to take the waters. Bath was not the only seaside destination that people sought and not everyone could afford the cost of traveling there. It seemed like a nice town, but she did not care to remain there. She had a much farther destination in mind.

Felicity pressed her lips together, scanning the narrow streets of the seaside town as she guided her horse toward what she assumed must be the main thoroughfare. Though it was not yet dawn, the town was already stirring. Vendors were setting up their wares, fishermen were returning from their early morning catch, and a few weary travelers stumbled from the warmth of an inn, their boots crunching against the cobbled road.

Her stomach twisted with nerves. She had come so far, but the reality of what she intended settled heavily upon her. She had never bartered for passage on a ship before. She had never even seen the process firsthand. She was not sure where to start. Her main goal had been to make it to the town and now that she had arrived she suddenly seemed lost. How did one approach a ship for passage? This was beyond her limited knowledge of such things.

What was she to do? Walk up to the first sailor she saw and demand a cabin? She knew enough to understand that no respectable captain would take on an

unchaperoned lady, which was precisely why she had donned her disguise. With her hair pinned tightly beneath her hat and the loose cut of her coat concealing her figure, she prayed she could pass as a young gentleman eager for adventure.

That was, if she could summon the courage to actually speak to someone.

Felicity dismounted outside a modest-looking inn, tying her horse to the hitching post. The scent of salt and freshly baked bread filled the air, and her stomach growled in protest. She had not eaten since leaving Winston Manor, and though she longed to sit down for a proper meal, she dared not delay. The longer she tarried, the more likely it was that someone would come looking for her.

And she had a very strong suspicion that someone would be Aiden. Felicity could not explain how she knew this, but she did. Perhaps it was because she had knocked him unconscious in her mad escape. He would likely want to locate her and exact some sort of retribution for her actions. In that regard she could not find fault in him. She would want to do the same in his place.

Her heartbeat quickened as she thought of him. Had he woken by now? Had he already set out in search of her? She shook her head. It did not matter. She had no choice but to move forward. She could not allow thoughts of Aiden to cloud her mind and prevent her from reaching her goal. He could not be a priority for her.

Steeling herself, she pushed open the door to the inn and strode inside, her boots clicking against the worn wooden floor. A few rough-looking men lingered near the hearth, nursing tankards of ale even at this hour, while a barmaid bustled behind the counter, stacking plates. Felicity hesitated only a moment before approaching the innkeeper, a heavyset man with ruddy cheeks and a thinning patch of hair. He eyed her warily. "A bit early for a drink, lad," he said gruffly.

Felicity forced a smile, keeping her voice low. Why did that matter at all? She

sneaked a glance at those already holding tankards. Surely she could have one if she desired if they had one... Not that she wanted one, but she should still be able to order one damn it. “I am not here for drink, sir. I am in need of passage. Do you know of any ships departing today?”

The innkeeper’s brows lifted. “Passage, is it? And where might you be headed?”

Felicity hesitated. She had not decided upon a destination. Anywhere but here was hardly a suitable answer. “France,” she said after a moment, remembering the language she spoke fluently. It was as good a place as any to begin anew. Though it might not be safe, she could easily get lost in the turmoil of the country. It would make it more difficult for someone, Aiden for instance, to locate her.

The innkeeper’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Dangerous crossing, that. You’ve coin for the fare?” As if she needed him to explain that to her...

“I do.” She thought about the purse at her side. Best not to let him know how much coin she carried. Felicity trusted no one.

He studied her for a moment longer before jerking his head toward the door. “Go to the docks. The ship birthed there—goes by the name Aphrodite’s Folly. Captain Bellamy’s ship is set to sail by midday. He might take you aboard—if you can prove yourself useful.”

Useful. She had not considered that part of the bargain. She wanted to book passage not work her way to France. Still, she nodded her thanks and turned to leave, her pulse pounding in her ears. She would meet with this Captain Bellamy and get his measure. If she had to work her way to France, so be it. Felicity would not be deterred.

She had only taken two steps toward the door when it burst open, a gust of cool

morning air sweeping inside. A towering figure filled the entryway, his shoulders broad, his boots planted firmly against the threshold. Felicity's breath caught in her throat.

Aiden. He was here. Drat... She had not expected him to catch up to her so soon, and from the dark glint in his eyes, he had no intention of allowing her to escape this time...

It had been a long, tiresome journey but he had finally reached her. Aiden stared at Felicity warily. He was certain she would bolt at the first opportunity and he could not allow that to happen. He had not chased after her only to lose her now. He had to understand what was motivating her to take such drastic actions, and well, admittedly she had irked him by knocking him senseless. He was not so prideful not to admit that she had gotten the better of him and that in itself wounded his male ego.

"Aiden..." She boldly met his gaze. "How did you find me?"

He quirked a brow. "Is that all you have to say?"

She tilted her head to the side. "It is the most prudent question I have."

His lips twitched as he fought a smile. She was such a cheeky little hellion. "You only wish to know so you can prevent it from happening again." As if he would allow her to get the better of him more than once...

"Perhaps." She curved her lips into a devilish smile. The imp. "Does it matter?" She laughed. "My reasons should not factor into your decisions."

But they did... Far more than he would have liked. He did not know what it was about this woman that drew him in. He only knew that he had to have her in his life. What that looked like... He would discern it all later. Once he had her safely at home.

He could not allow her to traipse around the continent with no one there to protect her. What kind of havoc would she cause? More importantly—what if she were harmed? He could not live with that possible outcome.

Aiden took a step closer, careful not to startle her into fleeing. She was like a skittish colt, poised to dart at the first sign of trouble. And he was trouble—at least where she was concerned.

Felicity's hands tightened around the strap of her valise, knuckles whitening. "I see little reason why you should concern yourself with my whereabouts."

"Little reason?" His voice was deceptively calm, though his patience was rapidly fraying. "You knocked me unconscious, stole away in the dead of night, and attempted to vanish from England entirely—little reason indeed."

She sniffed. "You make it sound so scandalous."

Aiden let out a sharp laugh. "My dear, it is scandalous. And reckless. And foolish. But by all means, do continue explaining how I am the one being unreasonable."

She narrowed her eyes at him, but the effect was somewhat diminished by the way her lips twitched, as though she were fighting a smile. Blast her, but she was enjoying this. "You are being unreasonable," she insisted, her chin lifting. "It is my life, Aiden. You have no claim upon me."

That, at least, was true. He had no claim over her. Not yet. But she was his responsibility now, whether she wished to admit it or not. "You are right," he said smoothly. "I do not have any sort of claim on you. But I do care about what happens to you, and I will not allow you to throw yourself into an uncertain fate because you are too stubborn to see reason."

Her gray eyes flashed, a storm brewing within their depths. She clenched that valise of hers even tighter and her knuckles had gone white. “I am not some helpless maiden who needs rescuing.”

Aiden took another step forward, forcing her to tilt her head back to maintain eye contact. He saw the moment she realized she was trapped and had no where to run—he had effectively cornered her. She needed to understand that he would not let her slip through his fingers so easily. “No,” he murmured, his voice soft but firm. “You are not helpless, Felicity. But that does not mean I will allow you to do this alone.”

A muscle in her jaw twitched. “You cannot stop me.”

His lips curved into a slow, knowing smile. “You sound quite certain of that.” Aiden could not wait to demonstrate how wrong the little minx was in her assumptions. She had taken him by surprise before and he would not be so easily duped again.

She hesitated. Aiden could practically see the wheels turning in her mind, contemplating whether to make a run for it. If she tried, he would catch her. And this time, there would be no escape. Finally, she let out a frustrated breath. “Why are you doing this?”

Aiden reached for her valise, prying it gently from her fingers. She did not resist, though she watched him warily. “Because,” he said simply, “I cannot let you go.”

Her breath hitched, her eyes darting to his. Something changed in that moment. The air between them grew thick, charged with something far more dangerous than the battle of wills they had been waging. She swallowed hard. “And what will you do with me now?”

Aiden lifted a brow. “Take you home, of course.”

Felicity let out a dry laugh. “Oh, is that all? I suppose I am meant to sit meekly beside you in a carriage like an obedient child, then?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of slinging you over my shoulder and tying you to the saddle,” he mused. He had only been half joking with that statement, but he was very tempted to act on that statement.

She gasped. “You wouldn’t dare.”

His grin turned wicked. “Wouldn’t I?” He leaned down and whispered in her ear. “Darling, there is not much I would not dare where you are concerned.” He leaned back and met her gaze, then winked. Aiden could not help himself. She brought out his wicked side.

She studied him, as though weighing the truth of his words. After a long moment, she huffed in exasperation. “You are insufferable.”

“I have been told as much,” he agreed, utterly unrepentant.

Felicity sighed, rubbing her temples as if he were giving her the worst headache imaginable. “If I agree to return, will you at least grant me one concession?”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “That depends on what it is.”

“I do not want to be forced into marriage,” she said quietly. “I will not .”

Aiden stiffened. He had been prepared for an argument, for another round of stubborn defiance. He had not been prepared for the soft plea in her voice. He exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck. “Is that what you fear? That I will haul you back and then you will be bartered off like a prize?”

She did not answer, but the flicker of uncertainty in her gaze was enough.

Aiden stepped closer, lowering his voice. “Felicity, I have no desire to force you into anything you do not wish for.” He chuckled darkly “ If I wished to trap you into marriage, I could have taken full advantage of the scandal you have already created.” His lips twitched. “But where would the fun be in that?”

She eyed him warily. “So, you do find this entertaining.”

“Oh, immensely.” He sighed. “Tell you aunt how you feel. Surely she will understand that you do not desire marriage.”

She made a sound of frustration. “Do you not think I have already tried that? My aunt will not listen to me. She thinks I will change my mind when I meet the right gentleman.” Felicity snorted. “As if a man could make me reconsider such an archaic institution.”

Aiden did not know how to change this for her. He only knew he could not allow herself to run amok in the continent causing chaos. It wasn't fair to the poor unsuspecting people she would encounter along the way. She might think her disguise worked for her, but anyone with eyes could tell that sweet derriere belonged to a woman.

“I will talk to your aunt if you think it will help.” He reached out, catching her chin between his fingers. He tilted her face up, forcing her to meet his gaze. “But make no mistake about this. I will take you back,” he said softly. “But only because you will choose to come with me. Not because I am forcing you. You have to know how reckless your actions are and that you are only putting yourself in danger by doing this.”

Felicity swallowed, her pulse thrumming beneath his fingertips. “And if I choose to

stay?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Aiden leaned in, his lips a mere breath away from hers. “Then I shall simply have to change your mind.” A challenge. A promise. The spark in her eyes told him that she was more than ready to accept it too... Bloody hell—he should have known it would not be so simple. Felicity would not go with him now, but that was all right. He suddenly did not want to be anywhere else, and he could not wait to discover what she would do next.

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Seven

Felicity did not know what she planned on doing. She should go back to Winston Manor. It was the prudent thing to do. But she couldn't... It went against everything she wanted for herself. If she gave in and allowed Aiden to escort her back to her aunt then she would lose. She would find herself married to some gentleman of her aunt's choosing. It irked her that anyone thought they could control her in any way, and a husband would be even worse than an aunt. She stared at him and considered her options.

"I do not wish to return," she said quietly. Felicity prayed he kept his word and would not force her to go with him.

"Very well," he said. "But please keep in mind I cannot allow you to board a ship. That would not be a wise decision for you to make."

As if he could tell her what to do... She sighed. He was certainly trying to. Somehow, some way, she would have to give him the slip and do as she pleased. Felicity just was not certain how she would accomplish that goal. "How about we make a compromise."

He quirked a brow. "I am listening."

That was more than she had expected from him. Now how to approach him with her idea... "I assume you will not leave me alone."

"Not a chance, darling," he said. His lips quirked upward. "If that is your suggestion I

will have to decline.”

She smiled then. “I had to try...” Felicity met his gaze. “How about we travel together then. I will agree to stay off a ship, but I do not want to return to Winston Manor. At least not yet...” She had another plan or rather her original plan in mind. She would have to seduce him and lose her innocence. If she were to return to her aunt she had to be unmarriageable.

“And where will we be traveling?”

Felicity shrugged. “Wales? Scotland? I do not care. You can choose.”

That was the truth any way. As she did not need a specific location for what she wanted from him. She would attempt to seduce him in this seaside town, but she had to prepare herself for that. She wasn’t ready to fall into his arms and allow him such liberties. She needed a little more time.

Aiden studied her, his dark gaze assessing, as if he were attempting to discern her true purpose. Felicity kept her expression carefully neutral, though her pulse fluttered beneath his scrutiny. She had given him what he wished—her agreement to stay off a ship. In return, he would have to give her something. That was how a bargain worked, after all.

“Wales,” he murmured, considering. “I could be amenable to that.” His lips twitched. “I hear it is quite beautiful this time of year.”

“Wales?” She had not expected him to agree so easily. Felicity allowed a small smile. “Then we are in agreement?” She did not even know in what direction they had to go to reach Wales, but surely Scotland was closer. Did he hope to spend more time with her and that was why he had chosen Wales over Scotland.

He tilted his head slightly. “For now.”

She narrowed her eyes. “That does not sound particularly reassuring.”

“It is the best you shall get from me,” he said with a smirk. “Shall we?”

Felicity hesitated for the briefest of moments. There was something in his tone, something in the way he was looking at her—as if he knew she was planning something and was merely waiting for her to make her move. Drat the man. He was too clever by half. But she could not discern his true intentions any more than he could hers. There would have to be a level of trust between them.

She nodded. “Yes, let us depart before my aunt has half the country searching for me.”

Aiden chuckled. “Oh, I imagine she already does.”

She swallowed. That was a very real possibility. Aunt Enid was not the type to simply give up. He offered his arm, and after a brief hesitation, she took it. A gentleman should not be so warm. She had not expected that. She had also not expected to feel so... safe. Which was absurd, given that she intended to seduce him and then part ways as if nothing had happened. Felicity lifted her chin, determined to see her plan through.

“We shall need provisions,” Aiden said as they began walking. “And a carriage. I had thought to rent rooms for the night, but if we mean to leave immediately, we shall need to make haste.”

She glanced up at him. “Would it not be more... prudent to stay the night?” She offered a coy smile. “Surely even you cannot wish to travel without rest.” She might even be able to get that pesky seduction completed sooner if they remained at the inn.

Though was she really in a hurry to give herself to him?

He arched a brow. “Ah, so now you are concerned with prudence?” He let out a low chuckle. “What game are you playing darling?”

She feigned innocence. “Game? Why, I am merely suggesting the practical course of action.”

His gaze flicked over her face. “I somehow doubt that.”

She sighed and glared at him. If only he wasn’t so handsome... Her heart skipped a beat as she stared at him. She shook her head and said, “You are insufferable.”

“So I have been told.” His grin widened as he met her gaze.

Something told her that this plan of hers would not be as simple as she believed. Aiden was playing his own game, and she might not end up the victor. Felicity rolled her eyes, but did not argue further. If he wished to play at being difficult, then so be it. The night was young, and she had time to wear down his resolve.

After all, the first rule of seduction was patience.

Aiden sat back in the carriage and studied his new traveling companion. She had believed him when he had chosen their destination. As if he would actually travel all the way to Wales. That would take weeks from where they were located. As much as he would enjoy spending that time with her, it was not the prudent choice. When he had hired the carriage and driver, he had instructed the man to take them to Scotland. It would allow him some time with her—time to persuade her to return home.

He rather liked her in breeches. The view of her figure was one he could appreciate far too well, and on any other woman, he might even find a way to worship it—with

his hands, his lips, and his tongue. He wanted to ravish the delectable beauty across the carriage from him. If she were not a lady and likely an innocent one, he might have taken her earlier suggestion for them to remain at the inn. There, he would have gladly seduced her into compliance. He wanted her almost desperately, but some decorum had to remain between them. Their lack of a chaperone was bad enough. She was already ruined if anyone discovered their time alone together, but he had to manage to keep some distance between them. That meant not seducing her. As much as he wanted nothing more...

Aiden exhaled slowly, forcing his gaze away from Felicity as she adjusted herself on the seat across from him. It was maddening—having her so close yet knowing he could not touch her. Not in the way he wished. She was temptation wrapped in scandal, sitting in a carriage with him, completely unaware of the dangerous game she played simply by existing in his presence.

The sunlight outside cast a warm glow through the carriage window, illuminating the delicate curve of her jaw and the way a single golden curl had escaped from beneath her cap. She looked softer in the sunlight, more vulnerable. It was a deception, of course—one that she had likely mastered over the years. Felicity Hathaway was no meek debutante, no simpering miss waiting for a gentleman's favor. She was a woman who had taken control of her own destiny, determined to carve her own path, no matter how reckless.

But even she had to realize that her ridiculous compromise was not the solution. Traveling anywhere with him would not aid her in her quest. Eventually, she would have to return to Winston Manor, and her aunt would secure a match for her. All she was doing was delaying the inevitable.

"You are too quiet," she mused, tilting her head in his direction. "I cannot decide if I prefer it."

He smirked. "Would you rather I fill the silence with idle chatter?"

She tapped a finger against her chin, feigning consideration. "I should like to know what it is you are thinking. You have been watching me as though I am some puzzle you cannot solve."

Aiden chuckled lowly. "And what if you are?"

Her lips twitched. "Then I would say you ought to give up the effort. I have been told I am quite impossible."

"Oh, I have no doubt of that," he murmured. "But I do not believe in giving up."

She shifted slightly, crossing her legs at the ankle. "Then I am afraid you shall be sorely disappointed."

Aiden leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Tell me, Felicity—what exactly is it you hope to find in Wales?" Wouldn't she be surprised to discover they never were traveling toward Wales once they arrived in Scotland.

She blinked at him as if the question had caught her off guard. "Freedom."

"Freedom?" His voice was mild, but he arched a brow. "Do you truly believe you shall find it there?"

She exhaled, her fingers tightening around the folds of her coat. "I do not know. But I know I will not find it at Winston Manor."

Aiden studied her, noting the way she avoided his gaze now. "And why do you believe that?"

She hesitated. "Because no matter what I do, I shall always be someone's burden. My aunt. My father. Society. A wife must submit, a daughter must obey. I am neither willing to submit nor inclined to obey."

Aiden understood the weight of expectations all too well. It was the burden of those born into privilege, into duty. But he also knew that running from it solved nothing. His own father had demanded he find himself a bride. It was the sole reason he had been at Winston Manor to meet Felicity that first time at the ball.

"You believe marriage to be a prison," he said.

"Is it not?" she challenged, her eyes flashing. "Tell me, my lord, do you believe a woman has any say in her own life once she is wed?"

Aiden held her gaze. "Not if she weds a man who does not allow it."

"And how many men do?" she demanded. Her eyes sparkled with the fury she barely contained. "How many would grant a wife true freedom?"

He said nothing, because he knew the answer would not satisfy her. Many men controlled every aspect of their wives' lives. He suspected that if she allowed her aunt to choose her husband, Felicity would find the fate she feared. He did not want that for her.

Felicity let out a humorless laugh. "You see? That is why I run. It is not a game to me, Aiden. It is survival."

Her words settled heavily between them, shifting something within him. He had believed she was merely being willful, avoiding marriage out of rebellion rather than necessity. But now, he wondered—had anyone ever truly listened to her? Had anyone considered that she was not simply difficult, but desperate?

Damnation.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. He had no intention of dragging her back to Winston Manor, but he could not, in good conscience, allow her to fling herself into a future she had not fully thought through. And yet, what could he offer her? What was he willing to offer? The question lodged itself in his chest, refusing to let go.

Instead of answering her, instead of telling her that he agreed, he decided to change the topic. They would not come to any decisions that night. He narrowed his gaze on her and said, "Have you ever been to Winston Manor before this most recent visit?"

She stiffened in her seat. "Why do you ask?"

He shrugged. "I lived on an estate nearby—or rather, I did as a boy. My father is the Duke of Templeton."

This time, she sat up straighter and stared at him. "You lived near my aunt's estate?"

He nodded and narrowed his gaze. "You have been there before." He frowned. "Have we met, then? Before that night at the ball?"

Her mouth fell open, and then she laughed. It was a boisterous, almost hysterical laugh. She wiped at her eyes and said, "Aye, my lord, I believe we may have."

Aiden frowned. "Tell me," he demanded.

"If we were not trapped in a carriage, Lord Redding," she said, amusement lacing her tone, "I would bow. I know I should curtsy, being a lady, but my attire would make a bow more appropriate." Her lips tilted upward in a mischievous smile. "I am Lissy."

This time, his mouth fell open. It made sense then. How she had known his title. That

had surprised him a little at first, but he had assumed that once he gave her his father's title, she would have made the connection. Though he had introduced himself as the Marquess of Redding that day by the pond. "I had assumed you belonged to a servant," he admitted.

Felicity shrugged. "It was a good assumption. I am sure I appeared to be a messy urchin to you. I was quite an unruly child."

"I would say you are still unruly," he said, then grinned. "Though you have outgrown your scrawny build." His gaze raked over her. She had curves in abundance. "Lissy, darling," he drawled, "you are a vision. Even in men's attire."

"As interesting as this revelation has been," she began. Felicity sighed and leaned back against the seat. "I should rest while I can. I imagine you will try to convince me to turn back before long."

Aiden smirked. "I would not waste my breath." At least not yet...

He watched her for a long moment as her breathing slowed, her lashes dark against her fair skin. She was unlike any woman he had ever met. And for the first time in his life, he wondered if perhaps he was the one in danger—not of losing a battle of wills, but of losing himself entirely.

Eight

They had traveled for several hours, and at last, they arrived at an inn. Felicity stretched in her seat, relieved that they would finally be stopping. The first thing she would demand was a bath. She had dust from the road clinging to her, making her feel gritty and altogether unkempt. If she hoped to seduce Aiden, it would not do for her to remind him of the little urchin she had once been.

And hadn't that been a surprise?

When she had first encountered him at the ball, she had not made the connection to their long-ago meeting. At ten years old, she had been quite unimpressed by the haughty young marquess she had met by the pond at Winston Manor. Never would she have believed that he would grow into a man who tempted her beyond reason.

Aiden stepped down from the carriage first, turning to offer his hand to assist her. She hesitated for the briefest of moments before placing her hand in his, allowing him to help her alight. The warmth of his touch sent an unwelcome shiver through her, but she masked her reaction behind a polite smile.

The inn was a modest establishment, its stone facade weathered by the years and the salty air that blew inland from the coast. A lantern swung from an iron hook above the entrance, casting flickering shadows over the cobbled courtyard. Despite its simplicity, the place appeared well-kept—a welcome respite after hours spent on the road.

Aiden led her inside, where the scent of roasting meat and fresh-baked bread filled

the air. A handful of travelers lingered in the common room, their voices low as they supped on stew and ale. A fire burned in the large hearth, crackling merrily against the evening's chill.

Felicity inhaled deeply, relishing the warmth that enveloped her. She was exhausted, travel-worn, and in desperate need of that bath. But she was also acutely aware of the man beside her, of the way his presence seemed to take up more space than it ought.

The innkeeper, a stout man with a balding pate and a red beard, bustled forward and inclined his head. "Welcome tae the Black Bull. How may I be of service?" His thick Scottish brogue threw her off, and she snapped her gaze toward Aiden. She had a lot of questions for him and she would get answers.

Aiden ignored her scrutiny as he addressed the innkeeper. "We require two rooms for the night."

Felicity exhaled a breath she had not realized she was holding. Despite her reckless plan, despite the temptation simmering between them, it pleased her that Aiden still had the presence of mind to maintain some semblance of propriety. Though she intended to seduce him, she wanted that bath in peace first.

The innkeeper frowned. "Two rooms, ye say?" His gaze flickered between them, lingering on Felicity's attire. Though she wore men's breeches and a coat, the delicate features of her face and the curve of her lips could not be mistaken for anything other than feminine. His bushy brows furrowed in suspicion, but he said nothing.

Aiden met his gaze with a pointed look. "Yes, two rooms," he said with emphasis. "I should hope that will not be an issue."

The innkeeper cleared his throat. "Ah, no, of course not, my lord. It is simply that our

rooms are rather limited this evening. I have but one chamber remaining on the second floor.”

Felicity bit the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling. Fate, it seemed, was on her side. Perhaps she would not need to work quite so hard to see her plan through. It would not do for Aiden to see how pleased she was by this revelation. She had liked the idea of privacy, but this was even better.

Aiden, however, did not appear amused. His jaw clenched as he turned toward her. “We shall take the second-floor chamber,” he said stiffly.

The innkeeper shuffled forward, key in hand. “Is there anything else?”

“Hot water for a bath,” Aiden demanded.

Felicity brightened. How had he known she would wish for that? She could have kissed him for his thoughtfulness.

“I shall have it brought up straightaway,” the innkeeper assured him.

Aiden merely grunted in response, as if he could not be bothered to reply.

The innkeeper motioned to a young serving girl, who hurried away to see to their requests. “If ye will follow me, I shall show ye tae yer room.”

They ascended the narrow staircase, Aiden trailing behind as Felicity followed the innkeeper. When they reached the chamber, the innkeeper opened the door, allowing them to step inside first. The room was small but tidy, with a sturdy four-poster bed, a basin for washing, and a modest hearth. The fire had already been lit, warming the space.

Felicity turned, her lips parting to say something to Aiden, but the intensity in his gaze made her falter. He stood in the doorway, one hand braced against the frame, as if battling some internal war.

“I will return later. After you have had time to bathe,” he said at last, his voice low, roughened by something she could not name.

She inclined her head. “Thank you, Aiden.”

He nodded once, then stepped back, pulling the door closed behind him. Felicity let out a slow breath, pressing a hand to her chest. This was madness. Absolute madness. And yet she had never felt so alive.

A knock at the door made her jump, but it was only the serving girl with the promised hot water. Felicity busied herself with preparing for her bath, but her thoughts were elsewhere—on the man who would return later, in this very room, undoubtedly wrestling with the same restless thoughts that now plagued her.

What would he do if she remained wrapped in nothing but a drying cloth? Would it be that easy to seduce him?

She nibbled on her bottom lip and considered her plan. Naked would be too bold, but perhaps she was not so far off the mark with that thought. A thin covering... just enough to entice him, to make him forget all propriety.

Yes, that was what she would do.

A slow smile curved her lips as she sank into the warm water. First, she would bathe. And then... then, she would see if Aiden could resist temptation.

Aiden blew out a breath and sighed. He knew he should not return to that room. It

was a terrible idea to share a chamber with Felicity. She was already teetering on the edge of ruination simply by traveling with him, and if it was discovered they had shared a room at an inn—her reputation would never recover. He wanted her almost desperately, but he knew he could not have what he desired. That did not stop him from the wanting.

The need to return to her was a force he could not seem to battle. He had spent the past hour nursing an ale in the common room, attempting to quiet the tempest in his mind, but it was a futile effort. His thoughts strayed endlessly to her, to what she might be doing at that very moment. Was she still in her bath, her skin damp and warm from the water? Was she already curled beneath the blankets, her golden hair fanned over the pillows in careless disarray?

Damnation.

Aiden raked a hand through his hair and stood abruptly, startling a nearby patron. He muttered a curse under his breath and strode toward the stairs, each step taking him closer to the very temptation he had sworn to resist.

He reached the chamber door, hesitating for only a fraction of a second before turning the handle. The room was dimly lit by the flickering glow of the hearth, the scent of lavender and soap still lingering in the air. And there, standing in the center of the room, was Felicity.

Aiden's breath lodged in his throat. She had wrapped herself in nothing but a thin drying cloth, the fabric clinging to her damp skin in a way that left little to the imagination. Her golden hair cascaded over one shoulder in loose waves, and her eyes—those stormy gray eyes—watched him with something akin to a challenge.

"You are late," she murmured, tilting her head ever so slightly.

Aiden forced himself to remain rooted to the spot, when every instinct urged him to close the distance between them. "You should be in bed," he ground out. And dressed... He cursed under his breath. He had not expected to find her nearly naked, and a temptation that he could already barely resist.

She arched a brow. "I am." Her lips curved in a slow, knowing smile. "Or at least, I will be soon. If that is your concern, my lord, I am quite capable of putting myself to bed."

He was not strong enough to resist her. What man would be? He clenched his fingers into a fist at his side as he attempted to resist touching her. It was a near thing. One move, one word, and he would break and give in to her. "You are playing a dangerous game, Felicity," he warned, his voice rough.

She took a step closer, the firelight casting golden hues over her bare shoulders. "I know." She took another step, and his entire body thrummed with desire. She was a siren leading him to his own ruin.

Aiden's fists clenched at his sides. "I told you before, I am not the man you should be tempting." He was about to cave, to reach for her, and then all would be lost.

"And yet," she said softly, "you are the only man I wish to tempt."

The words struck him like a physical blow, and for a moment, all reason fled. It would be so easy—too easy—to take what she was offering. To pull her into his arms, strip away that flimsy excuse for a covering, and kiss her until they were both lost to all propriety. He wanted that, and he was ready to give in to that need.

But she did not understand what she was asking. She thought she could control this, that she could seduce him and walk away unscathed. She did not yet realize that if he took her now, there would be no walking away. His voice was taut when he spoke.

"Tell me, Felicity—do you truly understand what you are asking of me?"

Her lips parted, but no sound emerged.

Aiden exhaled harshly. "This is not some harmless flirtation. If I touch you now, I will not stop." He would have her in every way a man took a woman. He would make her his, and then... Well, then she would not have any choice. This was not as simple as she believed.

Felicity swallowed hard, but she did not retreat. Instead, she lifted her chin, determination gleaming in her eyes. "Then do not stop."

A muscle ticked in Aiden's jaw. "You think you want this because it is forbidden," he said, voice raw. "But if I take you to bed, I will make you mine. And I do not share, Felicity. If you seek only ruination, you will not find it with me. What you will find..." He stepped forward, closing the remaining distance between them. His fingers skimmed the delicate curve of her jaw, tilting her face up to his. "What you will find is that I will never let you go."

A sharp breath escaped her lips, and for the first time, uncertainty flickered in her gaze. "Aiden..."

He shook his head. "Say the word, Felicity. Tell me to walk away, and I will."

She hesitated. One heartbeat. Two. Then, with a whisper of movement, she reached up, placed her hands on his chest, and whispered, "Stay. Make me yours..."

Aiden's restraint snapped. With a groan of surrender, he crushed his lips to hers, sweeping her into his arms and carrying her to the bed. If she wished to play with fire, he would gladly let them both burn. He tore that sheet away from her and then began to kiss her. He pressed his lips to hers, and then trailed his lips down to her

luscious breasts. He drew one taut nipple into his mouth and sucked until she moaned.

When he lifted her, she did not resist, wrapping her arms around his neck as he carried her to the bed. He laid her down gently, his breath coming in harsh, uneven intervals as he hovered over her. "This is madness," he rasped, his forehead pressing against hers.

"Then let us be mad together," she whispered.

He swallowed hard. There was no turning back.

He slid his hand down her belly and then at the juncture of her thighs. He stroked his finger over her sensitive flesh until she became slick from his ministrations. Then he slid his finger inside of her and stroked her there until she broke from her first climax. He would ensure she had several before the night was done.

He kissed her again, reverently this time, as if memorizing every curve, every sigh, every shiver. He trailed kisses down the elegant column of her throat, to the soft swell of her breasts, savoring the way she arched beneath him, the way her breath came in shallow gasps.

Her hands roamed over his shoulders, her touch hesitant and exploring. He guided her fingers lower, over the hard planes of his chest, reveling in the way she trembled against him.

"You are certain?" he asked one final time, his voice strained with restraint.

She nodded, her lips parting. "Yes."

He stood and stripped off his clothing. Once he was done he returned to the bed and

spread her thighs. Not to press his hardened arousal into her—not yet. First he had to taste her. He trailed kisses over her thighs and then settled his mouth against her entrance and licked her. She gasped and tried to move away from him, but he held her firm. He ravished her with his mouth and tongue until she climaxed again and was limp from them. It was only then that he settled over her and started to press himself inside of her.

“After this there is not going back, darling,” he told her, his voice hoarse with need.

“Don’t stop,” she said huskily.

As if he would now... Aiden groaned, trailing his mouth down her body, tasting her, worshipping her with lips and hands. When she writhed beneath him, crying out in pleasure, he knew there would be no forgetting this—no forgetting her.

She wanted this. He wanted this—wanted her. He claimed her, slowly, reverently, losing himself in the feel of her, in the way she gasped his name, in the way she welcomed him without hesitation. He closed his eyes and leaned his head against hers as he reveled in the feel of being joined with her. When she moved he lost all ability to think. His need took over and he began to stroke in and out of her, until he forgot where she began and he ended. Nothing had ever felt like this before. This was all new as if he had never lain with a woman before, and when he found his own release, he knew he would never be the same again.

When they both had shattered together, Aiden had known in that moment—this was no mere night of passion. She had stolen his heart, his soul, and as much as he thought she would belong to him, he knew he was also hers. Forever...

Nine

Felicity woke up snuggled in Aiden's arms. Her head rested on his warm chest and her arms and legs were curled around him as if he were the best pillow she had ever had. She sighed and leaned even farther against him. The night before—it had been far more wonderful than she could ever have imagined. The way he had made her feel... She sighed again. That was why so many women fell into a man's arms. If being with him could make her forget everything...

She had agreed to his demands and declarations. It had given her what she wanted. She was completely and thoroughly ruined. No other man would want her now. But he did. He said he would not let her go. That the night would not end the way she had thought. Would he still believe that now? Could she convince him that she was not worth keeping?

Aiden woke and tightened his embrace, holding her firmly against his warm chest. "Good morning, darling," he said in a sleep roughened tone.

She didn't say a word. Felicity stared up at him and swallowed hard. It was then it hit her. In their short time she had fallen for him. Perhaps a small part of her had remembered the boy he had been and that was why she had been drawn to him. She may never know. But since that first night in the garden, she had wanted him. That was why she had felt the need to run immediately. She had recognized the danger he presented to her heart. If she stayed, then she would succumb to her feelings for him. She could not allow that because it went against all of her fears.

"Are you having regrets now?" he asked.

Was she? Felicity thought about that and shook her head. She could not regret what had happened last night. It was a memory she would cherish her entire life. “How could I possibly regret being with you?” she asked him.

“Because it changes everything,” he said.

Did he truly believe that? “I don’t think it has changed anything.” Not really. Not in any fundamental way. She thought she had wanted to seduce him so she would be ruined, and she supposed she was now. But that wasn’t why she had wanted to give herself to him. She had wanted him to take her innocence because he was the only man she could give it to. Because he held her heart.

“How can you say that?” he asked. “I told you what would happen if I joined you in this bed.” He frowned. “You know what I expect.”

“Do I?” She raised a brow. She would have tried to pull free of his arms but that would be futile. He was not going to let her go. At least not yet. She knew why. He feared she would flee and wanted to keep her safely in his arms. She smiled to herself. Felicity liked being in his arms. Why would she leave them? “Perhaps you should explain it to me. Use small words as if I were a child. I wouldn’t want there to be misunderstandings.”

Felicity knew she was goading him but could not help herself. She knew what she wanted. She prayed he wanted the same thing. There was no way she could make any declarations of her own without knowing his true intentions. If he loved her... that would change everything. Not what had happened between them in the bed. That had been an outcome she could use to her advantage if things soured between them. But love? It was the one thing that would convince her they had a future.

He cursed under his breath but then he spoke. “We are going to marry.”

“Are we?” she said. “I do not recall you asking me if that is something I wanted or even just plain asking me to be your wife. Why would I want to be your marchioness? What benefits me in that situation.” Still, she goaded him.

“Are you truly going to be difficult?” he asked her. The muscles in his jaw ticked and she almost laughed. It was so entertaining to needle him. It would be wonderful to have that privilege for the rest of their lives. But only if she had his heart the way he held hers. Otherwise, it would be a nightmare.

“And do you think ordering me is the way to gain my acquiescence?” she said in a calm tone. This had to go the way she wanted. It just had to.

Aiden exhaled slowly, his grip tightening around her waist as if he feared she might disappear into thin air. “You have been nothing but difficult from the moment I met you,” he said, his voice edged with exasperation. “But I do not mind the challenge, Felicity.”

Felicity tilted her head back to meet his gaze, her expression impish. “Then I should hate to disappoint you by becoming agreeable now.” Oh, how she adored this man. How could she have ever believed she could live her life without him? How silly of her to think such a foolish thought.

His lips twitched, but his eyes held something deeper—something that sent a shiver down her spine. “I do not require your agreement, darling. I told you last night what this would mean. You are mine.”

Something gleamed in his eyes—warning her that she could only push him so far, but still she dared much. She had to. This was far too important for there to be any doubts. She raised a brow. “That is rather presumptuous of you.”

Aiden sighed and brushed his knuckles over her cheek, his gaze searching hers. He

stared at her for several heartbeats before he finally said, “You wish to torment me, don’t you?”

She smiled then, a slow, deliberate smile. “I do. I find pride in doing so, in fact.”

He groaned and rolled her beneath him in one smooth movement, caging her in with the weight of his body. Her breath caught as she stared up at him, the air between them growing charged once more. “Shall I remind you what happens when you challenge me?”

Felicity’s lips parted, her heart hammering in her chest. Her entire body thrummed with a need she had never felt before their night together. His wicked tongue and equally devastating touch had undone her. She wanted to feel his mouth on hers and him sliding into her with the intent to unravel her completely. She had a new reason to taunt him. To gain his attention in much more pleasurable ways. She trailed a finger down his spine and said in a sultry tone, “Perhaps you should.”

Aiden dipped his head, his lips grazing the sensitive skin at the base of her throat before trailing lower. She arched against him, her fingers digging into his shoulders, but he caught her wrists and pinned them above her head, his breath warm against her ear. “Marry me,” he murmured.

She went still, her chest rising and falling beneath his. “That is hardly a proper proposal.” She almost whimpered when he had stopped kissing her, touching her. She wanted to beg for him to kiss her again. To remind her what she was fighting for this very moment. But she had to remain strong. This thing between them meant everything to her. She needed him to tell her he loved her. It was the only way she could agree to be his wife.

Aiden sighed, releasing her hands but not moving away. “You know why I must marry you, Felicity. You have left me no choice.”

Something in her chest tightened. “No choice?” That was no declaration of love. It was one of necessity and that was not enough for her. She cared not if he had ruined her in the eyes of society. She only wanted one admission from him. Only one that mattered. “Then there is no choice at all. I will not marry you if that is the reason you intend to marry me.”

He exhaled sharply. “You expect me to walk away after last night? To allow you to return to your aunt as though nothing has happened?” He shook his head. “I told you before, I do not share. And I certainly will not allow you to go back to London only to be paraded before some halfwit lord who does not deserve you.”

A strange emotion curled in her chest—something akin to hope. Surely that meant he felt more for her than obligation. “And if I had not been ruined? If last night had never happened?”

His jaw clenched. “You were mine before last night, Felicity. You were mine the moment you looked at me in that damned garden and dared me to want you.” His voice dropped lower. “Do you truly believe I would have let you go?”

Her heart pounded. That sounded like he felt much for her. Something deeper, affectionate, and yes, a little possessive. She could work with all of that if he truly loved her. She had to know the answer to that. She needed him to tell her what he truly felt for her. It was the only way she could agree to anything. Surely, he would understand that. “And what of love?” she whispered.

Aiden stiffened, his expression unreadable. He didn’t say a word. He stared at her as if he had suddenly lost the ability to form words and she had said something so foreign he could not fathom why she had asked it. Was love so untenable to him? Felicity swallowed past the lump in her throat. “You speak of possession, of obligation. But what of love, Aiden? Do you?—”

Before she could finish the thought, he kissed her. It was not the searing, desperate kiss of the night before. This kiss was deliberate, reverent, as though he were carving something permanent between them. She melted against him, wrapping her arms around his neck, pulling him closer—as if she had always belonged there. Of course, she had belonged there. He was the only man for her. The one she loved with a kind of desperation she could no longer ignore.

When he finally pulled away, his forehead rested against hers, his breath uneven. “You ask me what of love,” he said hoarsely. “And I find I cannot answer.”

Felicity’s stomach twisted. Did that mean he did not love her? Her heart sank at the thought. How could he have been so wrong?

He lifted her chin with his fingers, forcing her to meet his gaze. “Not because I do not feel it—but because I do not know when it began. I do not know if it was in that garden, or when you knocked me senseless at Winston Manor, or when I first saw you in my childhood.” His voice deepened. “All I know is that I cannot imagine a life without you in it.”

Her breath caught. Those sweet words stilled her very soul. She had thought she would never hear them, and she would have to leave him behind. Thank heavens he loved her. She could not imagine living without him, and now, she did not have to.

“So no, Felicity, I will not ask you to marry me.” His fingers curled possessively around her waist. “I will demand it.”

She blinked up at him. Her lips twitched at his words. “You do not believe in softer methods, do you? You could have coaxed me around, instead you are being rather brutish. Do you not think asking more prudent?”

His lips quirked. “Not where you are concerned. I will take no chances with you.”

Felicity shook her head, laughter bubbling in her chest. She had fought for so long—for her freedom, for her future. She had run, schemed, and tried to deny the truth staring her in the face. But now, she saw it clearly. Aiden had never been the cage she feared. He was the wings she had never dared dream of. She threaded her fingers through his hair, tilting her lips to his. “Very well, Lord Redding.” Her voice was a whisper of silk. “I accept your demand. I will marry you.” She cupped his cheek in her hand and stared up at the man she loved beyond all reason. She had found her home. This was where she belonged. Always. “You know my aunt will be quite distraught to have not arranged this and equally upset to have missed our wedding.”

“I do not care,” he said, then chuckled. “Somehow, I think she will survive the upset. As will my father. Though I expect he will just be content that I have found my other half.”

“Then all that is left is the wedding itself.” She frowned remembering her earlier thoughts when they had arrived at the inn. “How is it we are in Scotland? I thought we were going to Wales.”

His kiss was all the answer he gave her, and she found it was all she needed. It didn’t matter that he had tricked her, and surely, he had. She had not wanted to truly go to Wales anyway. And for the first time in her life, Felicity Hathaway was exactly where she belonged—in Aiden’s arms. There was no other place she wished to be, and all her fears were in the past. She had found love, and for her, it was the answer to everything.

Prologue

Elias Stevens, the Marquess of Savorton, leaned in his chair and then rocked it on the back two legs as he studied his cards. How many should he discard? After pondering it for a few moments, he set his chair back down on all four legs and leaned on the table. He plucked five cards out of his hand and placed them face down on the table, and then drew five more from the deck carefully arranging them with the ones he still held.

He refrained from grinning at the cards he'd added to his hand. He glanced up at his dearest friend, Elena, the Dowager Countess of Dryden. Her dark red hair shimmered in the candlelight, and there was a gleam in her light gray eyes. She was studying her own cards. The two of them were engrossed in a duel of sorts as they played a grueling game of piquet. This was their last hand in a set of six and would determine which one of them came out the winner. It was a close game and either of them might be declared the victor.

"It's your turn, love," Eli reminded her and tapped a finger impatiently on the table.

"I'm aware," she drawled. "I do not need your guidance." Elena winked. "I'm a far better player than you are."

"Debatable," he replied in an arrogant tone. "I am not so certain you're correct."

Her lips lifted into one of her sensual smiles. It was the type of smile that would set most men aflame with desire, but Eli felt nothing. For him that smile meant something far different. The minx was about to pounce and he would end up

metaphorically wounded after she made her strike. Hell. She was going to win, and he didn't like it.

"You always did hate losing," she replied in a glib tone. She removed three cards from her hand and then replaced them with three more from the deck. "There's no need for deliberations. We both know the truth."

"That piquet is a game of chance?" Eli lifted a brow. "In that you are correct." He refused to admit defeat until he absolutely had to.

She laughed and then grinned at him. "I suppose that is true with any game used for the purpose of gambling. Luck may or may not be on your side." She rearranged her cards in her hand. "But we both know piquet is much more than that. It requires skill, strategy, and an excellent memory. I happen to have all three."

Eli shook his head and sighed and made his declarations, and they continued on with the game. After they were done playing, he had to confess, "I concede, you won." He met her gaze. "I'm not saying you are a better player though."

"Of course you will not. I'd expect nothing less." Her gray eyes sparkled with mischief. "You never have. Why would you change that core part of you now?"

They were at Elena's London townhouse. Many members of the ton believed they were lovers, but nothing could be farther from the truth. Elena and Eli had been friends since they were children. He was only three years older than her, and they first met when he was four and she could barely stand to walk in the nursery. Their mothers had been close and that had brought them together often. Eli was as protective of Elena as he would be if he'd had a sister. When she had married an old man, he had tried to persuade her against the match, but she reminded him they all had their duties to perform and her marriage landed firmly in that column. Her father had arranged the marriage, and she had done as she was told.

Elena had regretted it as her marriage made her miserable. Her husband hadn't been abusive, exactly, but he'd been cold. When she failed to conceive, he'd treated her as if she were a useless person. He may never have physically hit her, but his words were like blows that failed to leave a visible bruise. Eli had never been happier when the earl ceased breathing. When the Earl of Dryden dropped dead suddenly Eli had rejoiced, and secretly so had Elena.

"Do you think you'll ever remarry?" he asked in a noncommittal tone.

She snorted. "Not bloody likely. One marriage of inconvenience is enough to turn me away from such an endeavor." Elena gathered the cards and stacked them neatly on the table. "Why do you ask?"

He didn't want to tell her he'd been thinking about how unhappy she had been. Elena enjoyed being a widow. She had freedom and if she wanted a lover, she could and probably had taken one. Not that, to his knowledge, she did... Eli didn't ask her about anything he didn't really want answers to. "What if you fell in love?"

"That is even more unlikely. Love is a myth they try to make a woman believe." She leaned back and studied him. "Are you in love, Eli?"

"Absolutely not," he said in an emphatic tone. "Unless you count that gorgeous opera singer, I spent an evening with a few nights ago. She was delicious and might convince me I could believe in love."

He was far too busy helping build Savorton Shipping. His family had struggled when he was younger and now that he could, he worked to make their fortune something that rivaled even the most affluent in English society. He was an heir to a dukedom and now the estate thrived. His father had become frail in his old age and left running all the estates to Eli, but still offered input when he felt it was required. Eli did not have time for love.

“A night of passion is not love,” Elena replied in a dry tone. “Neither of us is on the market for that elusive emotion.”

“So you do not believe you will ever willingly give your heart away?” This seemed like an opportunity. Should he take it? Elena had never really given any man a chance, and she had good reason for that. As a widow of wealthy means, she didn’t have to remarry, but she had a past she seemed determined to forget. One he wanted to remind her about in a subtle way. “You don’t have to marry a man if you love him, you know.”

“I’m aware,” she said, then tilted her head to the side. “I never have to marry again. But you do.”

“I’ve never been married, love,” he replied. “I cannot marry again when I never have.”

“You are purposely misunderstanding me,” she accused. “You know perfectly well what I meant. You’re going to be a duke one day and you need heirs.”

“I was hoping to convince you to marry me,” he said in a smooth tone. “You’re the only woman I actually like.”

“What a vile thing to suggest.” She glared at him. “The very idea of sharing a bed with you...” Elena shuddered.

“Now that wasn’t necessary. I’m not revolting.” He frowned. She made a valid argument, though. Eli didn’t wish to bed her any more than she wanted to join him in that activity.

“Darling,” she began as she studied him. “You are passably handsome. I’ve heard many debutantes expound on your breathtaking visage. Apparently, your black hair

and green eyes make them swoon with desire.”

“Of course, they do. What they actually desire to be a future duchess, and my gorgeous physique has nothing to do with their admiration.” Eli might be a bit jaded...

“I am not marrying until I absolutely have to, and love won’t be part of the bargain.”

“That’s too bad,” she said in a somber tone. “You’re destined to have a marriage like mine.”

“I won’t be a brute like your husband was. I’d never treat a woman so callously.” He wouldn’t. Eli had to believe he’d be better than the late Earl of Dryden. Elena was still young and only eight and twenty. She could find someone to be happy with. Somehow, he had to convince her to try.

“Perhaps not,” she agreed. “You might be the one that is emotionally abused. I pray you choose wisely.”

“I’ll have you approve of my future wife.” He smiled. “You may have better judgement than me.”

“I already do,” she said, then laughed. “Perhaps we should make a wager.”

It couldn’t be that easy... She was playing right into his plans. Elena was a lot like him. She hated to lose. “What sort of wager?”

She tapped on the cards. “All gambling is a matter of chance, but some games are a little more than that. Much like piquet, love can be played in a similar fashion.”

“So we use our strategy and skill to avoid falling?” he asked, trying to understand her meaning.

“In a sense,” she replied. “We will also have to keep track of all the players, for unlike our little game here, there will be more than two.”

“And what exactly is this wager?” Eli asked.

“How about we make it simple,” she began. “The first to fall in love by the end of Christmastide loses and owes the other a boon.”

He pondered her suggestion. “And what if neither of us falls?”

“Then we both win,” she said in a wistful tone. “Or perhaps we will both lose, depending on one’s perspective.”

Eli doubted he would fall in love. He had yet to meet a woman that inspired such an insipid emotion in him. “All right, I accept. In fact, I have the perfect playing field for us.”

She lifted a brow. “Oh?”

“Lady Winston is having a house party. It begins in a couple of weeks and will extend through the entirety of Christmastide. My mother has been hounding me to attend. I’ll tell her I will as long as you go and we can put our wager to the test.”

Elena steepled her fingers together. “Excellent,” she said in a gleeful tone. “Let the best player win, then.”

He was going to enjoy watching her fall, for he knew something she did not. The Earl of Northfield would be in attendance. Elena had never said as much, but the earl had been her first and only love. One she had never had a chance at having a relationship with. Elena had shoved those feelings deep inside her and prepared to marry the Earl of Dryden as her father had ordered. Perhaps this was her second chance at finding

happiness.

He wasn't worried about himself. Eli had time to find a suitable wife. His concern was for his dearest friend and helping her find a love she deserved. Besides he hadn't lied, Eli didn't believe in love, at least not when it came to his own life. Love was for other people. Individuals who had the luxury of accepting that gift into their lives. Eli would never be that fortunate.

One

Lady Gabriella St. Giles sat at her vanity and slid a brush through her long black locks until they were shiny and smooth. Now all she had to do was plait in and wrap it up into a knot above her neck. She could have her maid, Ruth, fix her hair, but she liked to be independent when she could manage it. This was one thing she could do for herself. Besides, she didn't need anything fancy for a dinner at home with her parents. Her brother and sister were not even going to be in attendance. All that was left at home was her. Both of her siblings had married, and that left her all by herself.

Her parents loved her. She didn't doubt that, but she couldn't talk to them. Not like she could with her sister. Her closest friend, Clara Adams, understood that loss too. When Clara's father died, she had gone with her mother to live at her grandfather's estate. Her grandfather was the Viscount of Redcliffe. Clara's sister, Juliet, had a different mother and hadn't been so fortunate. She'd had to take work as a lady's companion to survive. Clara hadn't spoken to her sister since their father died, but she'd heard the rumors. Juliet would marry the notorious Duke of Sin soon and she would become the Duchess of Sinbrough. Clara had admitted she'd been envious of her sister, but she missed her more. Even though Juliet would be a duchess, Mrs. Adams still refused to allow Clara to visit her sister. The Duke of Sinbrough's reputation made him unimpressive in Mrs. Adams' estimation even with his lofty title.

Gabriella understood that. She missed her own sister, Genevieve, too, but she was now the Duchess of Argyle and had her own household to run. It was kind of ironic that both Clara's sister and Gabriella's had married a duke. That was just another thing they had in common.

She finished plaiting her hair and wound it into a knot, then secured it with hairpins. Satisfied with her ministrations, she stood and smoothed down her skirts. Gabriella was on a mission. After her visit with Clara earlier that day, she knew how she wanted to spend the Christmastide season. Lady Winston was having a house party, and she wanted to attend. Clara was already set to travel with her mother, Mrs. Adams, and invited her to attend with them.

Gabriella's mother hated house parties, especially during the colder months. Mainly because she hated to travel. Not that she blamed her mother. As the Marchioness of Hollibrook, she shouldn't be required to do anything she didn't wish to do. But that didn't mean that she should suffer because of it. Surely, her mother would understand why she wished to travel to Lady Winston's home for the holiday season. Gabriella wanted to have a little fun and maybe try to find her own happiness.

She left her room and went in search of her mother. She found the marchioness in her favorite sitting room working on her needlepoint. Her mother slid her needle into the fabric and created a cross stitch that was both elegant and intricate in design. "Who is that for?" Gabriella asked.

"I'm not certain yet." The marchioness glanced up and smiled at Gabriella. "One of my children should make me a grandmother soon, I would think. This will be for whatever baby is born first."

Gabriella lifted a brow. "You have high expectations, don't you? What if Genevieve or Everett decide to wait to bring a child into the world? Then what will you do with that piece of art?"

Her mother shrugged elegantly, like she did all things. "It'll hold until it is needed. It's not as if it'll spoil while it waits for the intended recipient to be born."

"That is true," Gabriella said, then sat on the chair next to where her mother worked

on her needlepoint. “Mother,” she began. “I wish to discuss Christmastide with you.”

Her mother glanced at her and lifted her brow. “Is that so?” She set the loom on a nearby table. “Go on. What is it you wish to discuss?”

Gabriella now had her mother’s full attention. She wasn’t certain that was an entirely good outcome. It might have been better if her mother had remained distracted as Gabriella spoke. “I’ve been invited to attend Lady Winston’s house party with Miss Clara Adams and her mother.”

The marchioness frowned. “I would rather you stay here with your family.” She tapped her finger on the arm of her chair. “And I don’t care for Mrs. Adams. I attended finishing school with her and she’s always been...” She stopped as if searching for the right word. “I suppose that doesn’t bear repeating. Suffice to say she’s not a pleasant woman.”

“I cannot disagree with you on that score,” Gabriella told her mother. “In my opinion, you’re offering a kindness where one isn’t deserved. She’s perfectly horrid to Clara.” And what kind of woman throws her stepdaughter on the streets with nothing to aid her? When she had learned what Millicent Adams had done to Juliet, she’d cringed, and poor Clara was stuck in the middle of it all. “However, I would still like to attend with them. Clara needs a friend when all she has is her mother to lean on.”

Her mother was silent for several seconds. “As much as I hate to admit this... I agree with you.” She slumped a little in her chair. Her mother never slumped. This couldn’t be good... “Clara needs a friend like you. I’ll allow you to go, but I’m not happy about this situation. I would much rather go with you, but your father’s been ill, and I don’t wish to leave him.”

“I didn’t think his illness was serious.” Alarm spiked through her at her mother’s concern.

“It isn’t,” her mother said. “But that doesn’t mean he should travel and make it worse. I’ll stay with him, and I’m going to trust you to act like a lady of your station. If a scandal of some sort arises out of this house party, your name best not be attached to it.”

Gabriella’s lips twitched as she fought a smile. “I promise not to elope to Scotland with the first rake that crosses my path. However, shall I resist...” She lifted her arm on to her forehead in a woe is me pose.

“There’s no need to be cheeky with me,” she said, but she smiled. “You know how you’re to present yourself. Be the lady you were raised to be.”

“I will, mother,” she promised. “Now I’m going to summon Ruth so she can pack my trunks, and I need to send a missive to Clara to inform her that I will be joining them.”

“I’ll miss you when you are gone,” her mother said. “I hope it will be a pleasant excursion.”

“Me too,” Gabriella said, then left her mother alone to do her needlepoint. She had a lot to do before her upcoming trip to the English countryside.

The carriage rolled across the road as smooth as one could on a road with the occasional hole in it. When a wheel bounced over one of those holes, it would toss Gabriella into the side with a hard thump. She was starting to regret her choice to travel with Clara and her mother to Lady Winston’s house party. Not because of the rough roads and frigid weather. That she could endure if needed. No, her issue had nothing to do with anything so mundane.

“Clara don’t slouch. Ladies do not slouch.” Mrs. Adams glared at her daughter.

Gabriella barely refrained from rolling her eyes. They were in a carriage on a long journey. Slouching was a necessity at times. How could Mrs. Adams expect her daughter to remain stiff and unmoving? Especially when they were bouncing around the carriage whenever they hit an unfortunate bump?

“I’m trying, mother,” Clara said in a frustrated tone. “It’s not as easy as you seem to believe.”

“You’re not trying hard enough,” Mrs. Adams chastised her. “I’m not having the same difficulty you are.”

Gabriella mashed her teeth together. How could a woman as rotten as Mrs. Adams be the mother of a girl as sweet as Clara? If she could have intervened, she would have, but it wasn’t her place. She was their guest for this excursion, and she had to be as polite as possible. “We should arrive at Lady Winston’s soon,” she told Clara. “Then you will be free from this carriage.” Unfortunately, Clara would never be free from her mother’s disapproval.

“And when we get there, you best act like the lady I raised you to be,” Mrs. Adams said. “You’re the granddaughter of a viscount. Do not shame our family and act like a hellion.”

“I promise I will do nothing you don’t approve of,” Clara said in a meek tone. That poor girl...

The carriage turned, and they were finally going down the long drive to Winston Manor. Lady Winston was a widow and quite wealthy in her own right. Her son was a mere ten years old and the new Earl of Winston. Somehow, Lady Winston had convinced her husband that she should remain in control of her son’s inheritance. Which meant she remained at Winston Manor as long as her son was a child. When he was older and ready to start a family of his own, she would most likely remain in

London at the townhouse she owned separately from the Winston estate. The widow had always fascinated Gabriella, and she conversed with her when she could. She liked the idea of having control over her own fate and often thought that perhaps marriage was not something she wanted to agree to.

She had a fortune of her own that her father settled on her. Gabriella also had a dowry that was separate from her inheritance. She could live her life without ever marrying if that is what she chose to do, and she might. That decision was not something she wished to make yet. “This estate is gorgeous,” Gabriella said as she peered out the window. “In the summer, it must be breathtaking. Even with snow and ice as decoration it is quite imposing to behold.”

“Surely it is not as grand as your grandfather’s estate,” Mrs. Adam said in a shrill tone. “This is the estate of an earl. A duke would have something far more impressive.”

Gabriella frowned. “Cranbrook Castle is breathtaking.” She wrinkled her nose. “But traveling there is a bit tedious. His estate borders the lowlands of Scotland. He’s actually friendly with some of his Scottish neighbors and some of his servants are Scottish.”

“You have something against the Scots?” Clara asked.

“Not at all,” Gabriella clarified. “It’s merely an observation. Traveling that far north is not something we do often. Father’s estate is much closer to London if we need to stay in the country. Mother prefers to be in town and father humors her request.”

“I like the country better,” Mrs. Adams said. “But my father insists we stay in London. I believe he doesn’t enjoy having us near him.”

She almost sounded sad... “I’m sorry,” Gabriella said. Mostly because she didn’t

know what else to say. Thankfully, she was saved from having to continue the conversation when the carriage came to a stop. A footman opened the door immediately and helped them out of the carriage.

“Welcome to Winston Manor,” a man said from the entrance. “Please come inside. Your trunks will be unloaded and taken to your rooms.”

Gabriella smiled at him. “Thank you.”

“More guests have arrived.” Lady Winston clapped her hands together in glee. “I’m so happy you could join us for Christmastide. You all will want to rest and freshen up. The evening meal is in two hours. I will have a maid show you to your chambers. You can stay there and rest or you may join the other guests in the large salon. I’ve set up various games and activities in there for your entertainment. Just ask the maid directions if that is what you choose to do.” She beamed at them. “Now I have some other tasks to see to. Welcome again.” She waved at them and wandered off.

Gabriella would have liked to speak with her more, but she supposed she could later. They were there for the next couple of weeks and there was time for that. She followed the maid up to her assigned chamber and smiled because she had a room to herself. How wonderful! She hadn’t expected to be that lucky. She would enjoy the solitude when she needed it.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:05 pm

Her anxiety had hit an all-new level. Eden Barrett, the Countess of Moreland, did not take risks. It went against her very nature to do so. Yet, that was exactly what she was about to do. She'd willingly accepted an invitation to the Duke of Sinbrough's masquerade ball. It was literally entering into a den of iniquity. Sin itself would be on full display at this ball. The duke was famous for having the most debauched parties for anyone who wished to attend. It was rumored even the most strait-laced ladies would don a mask and join the festivities.

She should be all right. Shouldn't she?

If she kept telling herself that then perhaps, she would be. She'd convinced her good friend, Mrs. Claudine Grant to attend the masquerade with her. She'd even commissioned scandalous costumes for them both. Eden's gown was the pure white of innocence, but it was anything but that. It was made for sin, and she hoped she would live up to the invitation it presented.

Her mask was also white to match the gown, but it had ruby red feathers fashioned to it on one side. A little splash of color to show she wasn't as innocent as the dress may suggest. Just in case the low-cut bodice didn't do the job. She had left her golden blonde hair loose and flowing down her shoulders. Her mask kept them from going wild, but if it was removed then they might just become unruly.

"Are you ready?" Claudine asked.

"As I'll ever be." She smiled at her. Eden tried to embrace her inner wickedness, but so far it seemed to be hidden. "Someone is about to approach us." She nodded slightly at the direction of two gentlemen making their way through the crowd. "I do

believe the gowns are working.” She’d had Claudine’s gown designed in a decadent pink that nearly matched her friend’s skin tone.

Claudine grinned. “One of them is the man I hoped to see tonight. I’d recognize him anywhere.”

“How fortunate that he’s noticed you as well.”

When the two men reached their side Claudine’s love interest stared at her briefly before he held out his hand and said, “Dance with me.” Claudine went off with him willingly leaving Eden alone with the other gentleman.

“Would you like to take a spin around the floor.” The man said.

There was definitely something sinful about him. His hair was as black as his clothing, and his eyes were a very pretty green. She tilted her head to the side and studied him. “You’re the Duke of Sin aren’t you.”

“Was I being too obvious?” He grinned. “Would you like me to live up to that moniker?”

Eden wasn’t interested at all in him. He might be sexy as well, sin, but she didn’t find him all that interesting. She wanted to feel something. She didn’t know exactly what, just that he didn’t do anything for her. She shook her head. “No, thank you.”

Someone laughed from behind her. “Have you lost your touch old man.”

The Duke of Sinbrough frowned. “Don’t be ridiculous. That would never happen.” He wiggled his eyebrows at Eden as if that said everything. “We’re just becoming acquainted.”

Eden turned around to glance at the man who had just entered behind her. He didn’t

wear all black like most of the men in the room. However he had not bothered to wear a waistcoat and jacket. He had on dark blue pantaloons and a stark white shirt, but no cravat. He had left his shirt open giving her a nice view his neck, and part of his chest. The gentleman was completely disheveled. His hair wasn't nearly as dark as the Duke of Sinbrough's. It was more brown than black, but his eyes were a similar shade of green. Where she had found the duke's pretty, this man's were filled with heat.

That heat spread over her like a whirlwind. She'd been looking for someone to spark something in her. Eden had started to believe that she couldn't feel true passion. What was it about this man that made her want more? Was this desire? How had she never felt anything like it before. She took a step toward him and tilted her lips upward into what she hoped was a wanton smile. "Do you think you can do better?"

He returned her smile and it sent shivers right through her. "I know I can," he told her. "Would you like me to try?"

"You mean you haven't already?" She tilted her head to the side. "Wasn't that what you were doing when you slid your way behind us?"

He chuckled softly. "You may be right." He leaned forward and said in a demanding tone. "I want you?"

"Do you?" She licked her lips. "I might let you have me." She stepped closer and trailed her finger over his collarbone. "But the night is still young. I have many options. What makes you my best choice?"

She'd never flirted like this in her entire life. Eden felt alive for the first time. The thrill of this was beyond even her wildest imagination. He stepped closer until her breasts rubbed against his warm chest. Her nipples tightened at the mere hit of his heat and the pleasure was intoxicating. He leaned down until his mouth was near her ear. His breath caressed her skin making her even hotter with need. "Darling," he said

in a husky tone. “You already decided. Don’t make me beg.”

Her throaty chuckle sounded foreign to her ears. Who was this wicked, wanton, widow allowing this unknown gentleman to seduce her? She didn’t recognize herself but wasn’t that why she’d come to this masquerade. She slid her hand down and pulled out his shirt from his pantaloons, then slid it underneath until her fingers met his naked flesh. She trailed her fingers up his chest and then around his waist. He yanked her closer. “You’re playing with fire, love.”

“But what a burn it’ll be,” she replied in a husky tone. “You did say you wish to play with me tonight. Dazzle me with your skills.”

“It’ll be my pleasure,” he said as he lowered his mouth. When his lips touched hers, she forgot everything, even her own name. Yes. This is what she had come to the masquerade for. She hadn’t known what she’d been looking for until he’d come near. Damn this was good, and she suspected as the night rolled on she’d experience more passion than she’d ever known in her marriage.

She wanted him, and she’d have him. Then after this night she would go back to the proper Countess of Moreland. She had to keep up appearances after all. There were people that depended on her. But for this one night she could have him and all the pleasure this kiss promised. No one else had to know. A lady never tells her secrets, and this one she would always hold dear.