



His Duchess' Wicked List (Duchess Deals #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: "If you want your list back, you must complete it all with me. Only me."

Lady Madeline must complete her scandalous list before she's forced to marry. But she can't find it anywhere... And if anyone reads it, she's ruined. Especially if that person is her best friend's rakish brother...

When notorious Duke Daniel finds the list, he knows he must have the little minx who wrote it all to himself. Only he never expected it would belong to a certain alluring wallflower.

Overcome with possessiveness, he promises to give it back. On one condition: She must complete it until the end of the Season...with him. Only him...

*If you like a realistic yet steamy depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then *His Duchess' Wicked List* is the novel for you.

Total Pages (Source): 28

CHAPTER 1

“O h, Maddie! You are so naughty! I did not think you had it in you!”

Lady Madeline Cole, second daughter of the Marquess of Ollerton, felt her face burning fiercely at her best friend’s words. Selina’s voice was high-pitched with surprise, but Maddie noticed the slight twitch of her friend’s mouth and the twinkle in her blue eyes, which suggested that while Selina might be a trifle shocked by Maddie’s list, she was also highly amused and entertained.

Maddie glanced quickly behind her. Her older sister, Lady Augusta Cole, was acting as their chaperone on their stroll through Hyde Park and was trailing behind them at a discreet distance. Maddie let out a silent sigh of relief. She was fairly sure that Augusta hadn’t heard Selina’s outburst at all.

In fact, her sister wasn’t paying them the slightest attention. Augusta was reading as she walked, as always, with her head buried in a small book, which Maddie knew contained the latest poems of the scandalous rake Lord Byron.

Her eyes slid to the side. Maddie’s lady’s maid, Jane, was also officially chaperoning the young ladies, but she was otherwise occupied as well, intent as she was on feeding the ducks in the river crumbs from a stale loaf of bread.

Maddie sighed again. Augusta and her lady’s maid’s distraction meant that she and Selina could talk freely, without fear of retribution. And that was just as well, considering that their discussion was highly private. Maddie still couldn’t believe that she had plucked up the courage to show her best friend the list at all... but the cat was

well and truly out of the bag now!

Selina was clutching the slim piece of paper in her hand. Her blue eyes were the size of saucers.

“I do not know why you are so very shocked, Selina,” Maddie said in a breathless voice. “After all, you are the one who suggested I write such a list, of all the things I would like to do in the next month before I must submit to the yoke of marriage with someone.”

“Well, yes, I did.” Selina tilted her head back, trilling with laughter. “But I thought you would perhaps write that you aim to read all of Shakespeare’s plays or some other such things.” She gripped the list tightly, waving it under Maddie’s nose. “I did not think you would write things like... this!”

Maddie sighed dramatically. “Really, Selina, do you think my future husband—whoever he may be—would never let me read again?” She shook her head. “The list is for things I will in all likelihood never be able to do after marriage. Not in a hundred years!”

“I know that you wish to marry for love, dearest,” Selina said in a gentle voice. “Or that you at least want to be attracted to your husband.” She paused. “It might still be possible...”

“It is not likely,” Maddie grumbled in a glum voice. “This is my third London Season, not my first. Younger ladies are on the rise now. If I am not careful, I will end up a spinster like Augusta. And Mama will not tolerate two spinster daughters on her hands...”

“Oh, no,” Selina said abruptly, slipping the list back between the pages of the book Maddie had brought to disguise it. “Put on your best face, dearest. We are about to

have company.”

Maddie turned around quickly. Two gentlemen were approaching them from the left, smartly attired in traditional morning garb, complete with top hats. Maddie vaguely recognized them, but she had always been terrible with names and titles, often confusing them utterly, to her mother’s eternal chagrin.

“Who are they?” she asked in a fierce whisper.

“Lord Babcock and Lord Gingham,” Selina whispered, rolling her eyes, as she adjusted the bodice of her gown, pulling it higher. “They are two bores we met at the Vaughn soiree two weeks ago.”

“Oh, yes.” Maddie rolled her eyes discreetly as well. “But do not worry. I have a secret signal with Augusta if I am being accosted by a bore. She will intervene on our behalf.”

“Ladies,” one of the gentlemen greeted, smiling widely as he tipped his hat. “How utterly delightful to meet you here!”

Maddie and Selina both curtsied politely, as custom demanded. Maddie seized the opportunity to glance covertly at her sister. To her relief, Augusta was watching them now, and with eyes as sharp as a hawk’s. As Maddie rose, she scratched her chin, ever so slightly. It was a gesture that no one would have noticed or thought anything about... except her older sister.

“You are enjoying taking the air, ladies?” the other gentleman asked, with a silky smile. His eyes raked over Maddie in a very obvious way.

Maddie’s mouth tightened.

He looks at me as if he is contemplating buying a horse at an auction . It is insufferable!

As Selina mumbled an appropriate response, Maddie tried to pay attention and be polite. But it was almost impossible. She despised small talk with mincing gentlemen, and she had done enough of it over the past three Seasons in London since her debut. So much of it that she grew weary of even thinking of something inane to say nowadays.

She recalled her very first London Season, when she had such high hopes. She had been considered the Diamond that year, and in her second Season as well. As such, gentlemen were always flocking around her, vying for her attention. Her mother had said with a smile, on more than one occasion, that it was like watching bees buzzing around a honeypot.

Augusta was upon them. The two gentlemen gazed at her a little fearfully. Maddie's sister's reputation clearly preceded her.

"Gentlemen," Augusta said in a firm, crisp voice, sounding quite like an authoritative hospital matron. "How can we help you?"

The gentlemen smiled at her weakly, looking unsure.

"We are just conversing with the young ladies," one of them replied in an almost patronizing voice. "About the weather."

"The weather?" Augusta sounded affronted. "You truly have no better topic to talk about than the weather ? You have no opinions on politics, such as the latest war with France, or the problems that have arisen with the rapid state of industrialization in the north of the country?"

The gentlemen looked stunned, blinking rapidly.

“It... It was just a casual remark,” the gentleman stammered. “I think I asked something about taking the air... not the weather itself...”

Augusta smiled. “You appear confused. Which is it?”

The gentleman shrugged helplessly.

Maddie suppressed a giggle. If it wasn't so amusing watching Augusta in battle, she might even feel sorry for him.

“We should go,” the other gentleman said quickly, bowing his head. “Ladies!”

Maddie and Selina burst out laughing, gripping each other, as soon as the gentlemen were out of earshot. She had never seen such a hasty exit.

“There,” Augusta quipped in a pleased voice, rubbing her gloved hands together as if she had just completed a satisfying task. “They have retreated. Carry on, girls.”

Selina linked arms with Maddie, and they kept walking. Augusta dropped back behind them again.

“Thank you, Sister!” Maddie called gaily.

Augusta gave a dismissive wave, before opening her scandalous book of poetry once more. Within a minute, she was entirely absorbed.

It is a fine thing to have a progressive bluestocking for a sister . Even if it gives Mama an attack of the vapors and bewilders Papa.

“Now,” Selina said, her blue eyes twinkling, “back to the list!” She opened the book, retrieving the list, her mouth a small red moue as she studied it. “Oh, Maddie. It is pure scandal!”

Maddie blushed again but looked at her friend defiantly. “I have no choice, Selina. This is the only chance I will get to have any adventure before marriage. Mama is not backing down this time.”

Selina frowned. “She intends to marry you off if you do not find a suitor of your own?”

“Exactly so.” Maddie sighed heavily. “I must marry someone—anyone—by the end of the Season. I am afraid she has run out of patience with me.”

“It is not so very surprising.” Selina glanced back at Augusta. “She does not want you turning out like your sister, after all, who would not consider any gentleman if her life depended on it.”

Maddie’s heart flipped. “There are reasons Augusta is the way she is,” she said in a hesitant voice. “Do not judge her too harshly, Selina. Besides, I admire her beliefs enormously. She is not afraid to challenge gentlemen and the status quo and believes that women should be equal to men. She fervently believes there is the possibility of a more equitable society, if only we challenge the norm.”

She glanced back at her sister as well.

Augusta was very lovely, with silky golden hair and bright green eyes. She had definitely had her share of admirers over the years, all of which she had spurned. She was five-and-twenty now, and everyone knew a lady was over the hill at that age. The prospects had dried up. And Augusta professed to be happy about it. She was the only lady that Maddie had ever known who was unmarried by choice.

Augusta was proud to be a spinster and wasn't afraid to express it. Her singular opinions about the matrimonial state, and the rights of women in general, were hard for their parents to digest. The Marquess and Marchioness of Ollerton were very traditional, conventional people. Maddie thought they were probably taken aback that a hellion such as Augusta had landed in their midst. Rather like a family of sparrows being forced to raise an eagle.

"Do not mistake me, Maddie," Selina continued, raising her eyebrows. "I admire Augusta, too, even though my dear mama thinks her shocking, and is always warning me that I must never become a bluestocking like her." She smiled impishly, lowering her voice. "But I am not afraid to confide in you that I think women should be men's equals as well. Why should they have all the fun?"

Maddie laughed in delight, tightening her grip on her best friend's arm. Dear Selina. They hadn't been friends for such a long time—only since last Season—but they had established a rapport quickly and were now so close that not a day went by when they weren't either calling on or writing to each other.

Maddie still recalled the day, very fondly, when she had first met Selina. They had both been attending a garden party on the grounds of some London mansion. Maddie had been so bored that she was almost in physical pain.

And then, out of the blue, she had noticed a tall, lean young lady with golden brown hair a slight distance away from the party, almost squatting as she peered into a box near a garden shed. To Maddie's delight, the young lady had lifted a squirming black puppy, cradling it in her arms.

Maddie had snuck away to join her, of course. She loved animals, especially puppies. Soon, the two girls were chatting and laughing freely as they petted the litter of pups. And they had been inseparable ever since, at least when they were together in London.

“They definitely should not have all the fun,” Maddie agreed in a fervent voice. “Why can I not go off on an adventure, rollicking around, just as a gentleman does? Why must our lives always be boring garden parties, tea, and cakes?”

“Indeed.” Selina nodded, rolling her eyes. “It is insufferable! And my dear mama has been even stricter with me than yours has been with you... on account of all that we have suffered.”

Maddie squeezed her friend’s arm. She understood the oblique reference. Selina’s family had been beset by scandal years ago and had apparently struggled to overcome it. Selina had told Maddie that her mother had delayed her coming out because of it... but that was about all she knew.

Maddie wasn’t sure of the exact details, as she had been very young when it happened, and no one would have talked about such things to a young lady, anyway. Selina never mentioned it, even in passing, except with vague references about the family’s past suffering.

Maddie’s parents never mentioned it and would take her to task if she asked about it. She supposed that Augusta was probably aware of the details, but something stopped Maddie from asking her sister. Perhaps it was loyalty to Selina. She didn’t want to gossip behind her best friend’s back, even with her own sister.

That was just the way of things with Selina. She didn’t like talking about the past—or her family at all, really. She wished to live in the present moment. Maddie respected that and would never pry.

“Anyway, let us not talk about such things.” Selina took a deep breath as she peered at the list in her hand again. “This is much more diverting entertainment! Dearest Maddie, perhaps you should contemplate creating a scandal with a gentleman you admire. If that happened, then you would not be forced to endure someone your

mother chooses for you.”

Maddie gave a bark of laughter. “If only it were that easy, dearest. But unfortunately, there are no gentlemen I admire. They are all so very dull, just like the two gentlemen Augusta just sent away.”

“Sadly, I must agree with you.” Selina snorted, shaking her head. “But perhaps we just haven’t been looking hard enough.” Her eyes were twinkling with mirth again. “After all, we must find at least one agreeable gentleman, so you may complete some of the things on this list, even if he is not marriage material. Should you start at the top, or simply tick them off as the opportunities present themselves? There is simply no time to waste!”

CHAPTER 2

“ I must put my foot down.” The Dowager Duchess of Everly’s voice was firm and implacable. “You have been gallivanting around the Continent for years, Daniel. The time has finally come to settle down and take a wife.”

Daniel Huxley, the Duke of Everly, glared at his mother. He had barely been back a week in England, and she had already started on her quest to marry him off. He had thought that he might be given a brief period of grace, at the very least. It was enough to give a man a raging headache.

Daniel glanced at his cousin, Christopher, who had very kindly taken on the responsibilities of the duchy in his long absence. His cousin was leaning against the drawing room mantelpiece of their London residence, watching carefully, not saying much at all. Clearly, Christopher was playing the diplomat. He didn’t want to get overly involved in this particular game of verbal sparring between his relatives.

Good old Chris , he never did enjoy battles.

Daniel stood up, feeling agitated, pacing the room. His mother and cousin kept watching him. The tea service lay cooling down on the side table. It seemed no one was in the mood to touch it.

He looked around the drawing room. It was exactly as he remembered—not one little thing was different or out of place. The same stuffy furniture. The same old ornaments, dusted to death. His father’s portrait still hung over the mantelpiece, staring down at them all, somewhat disdainfully. Daniel gazed at it. It was a wonder

that hadn't been removed, at the very least.

"I mean it, Daniel," the Dowager Duchess continued, her jaw set. "If you do not find a suitable bride by the end of the Season, I shall find one for you."

Daniel whipped his head around, glaring at her again. Christopher coughed into his hand. Daniel rounded on him, eying him carefully.

Chris had aged a bit in his absence. His dark hair was thinning ever so slightly, but it seemed he was still the same cautious, reserved person he had always been. He always thought twice before he spoke. More often than not, he had his head buried in a book.

He wasn't a man of impulsive action. But that was often a good thing, and a character trait that Daniel had greatly appreciated during his years abroad, as it meant he didn't have to worry about what was happening here in his absence.

Chris had taken the reins reluctantly but firmly.

They had always been good friends, as well as cousins, even though they had dissimilar characters. Christopher wasn't a ladies' man like Daniel was, for instance, preferring his books to wild nights in the arms of a good woman. He had never been much interested in the fairer sex. Whereas Daniel couldn't seem to keep away from them.

Still, that might have changed in Daniel's absence. He had been away a long time, after all.

"What say you about this business, Chris?" Daniel demanded. "I think you must pick a side, Cousin."

“I believe Her Grace is right, Daniel,” Christopher said in a clear, calm voice. “You have been gone for years, and now it is finally time to accept the duties of being the Duke of Everly and all that comes with it. You owe that much to the title you have inherited.”

“Quite so,” the Dowager Duchess piped up, nodding vigorously. “It is a long, illustrious line, my son. You have a duty to provide an heir to it. You are not getting any younger! Why, in a few short years, you will turn thirty years of age, Daniel.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “I am hardly heading towards my dotage, Mother.” His jaw tightened stubbornly. “I have a mind to turn around and find the first ship sailing back to the Continent.”

Abruptly, the Dowager Duchess stood up. Her blue eyes were blazing with anger, and she was stiff-backed.

“For shame!” she growled. “You were raised to become the Duke of Everly. You always knew it. I gave you time to adjust... after everything that happened.” Her voice shook slightly. “You have been gone for years, Daniel. Years . Your cousin kindly took on the duties of the duchy in your absence. You have been indulged! I wish that had never sent you away on your Grand Tour if this is the result!”

“Now, let us not speak in anger, Auntie,” Christopher interjected, looking concerned. “Daniel has only been back in England for a week. Perhaps we need to give him some time to adjust.”

“Fiddlesticks,” the Dowager Duchess snapped, her chest heaving. “He has had years to come to terms with his responsibilities. If we give him more time, he will only find another way to wiggle out of them!”

Daniel’s hands clenched into fists at his sides. He could feel his anger starting to

overwhelm him, and that wasn't good. The last thing he wanted was to say something he would regret. And he knew that was exactly what would happen if he stayed in this room with his mother.

"If you will excuse me," he said in an icy voice, bowing slightly. "I must take some air."

He turned on his heel, marching out of the room, ignoring the hiss of indignation from the Dowager Duchess. He knew that Christopher would pacify her in his absence. Nothing could be accomplished when they were both in this high state of emotion. He was doing the right thing.

He grabbed his hat and gloves off the side table in the foyer, pulling open the front door. And then hastily stepped back. He had almost collided with his sister, who was evidently just returning from wherever she had been.

"Daniel!" she exclaimed, her eyes wide. "Whatever is the matter? You look wild!"

He stared at her for a moment, marveling at how much she had grown in his absence, and how pretty she had become. A proper young lady now, and a real beauty. He had always loved her dearly, and they had been getting along very well since his return, but he knew he couldn't speak in a civil manner even to her at that moment. Not until he had walked a bit and cleared his mind.

He muttered something under his breath, dodging her, heading down the front path and out the high front gate. He didn't look back.

The sun was shining, and it was a nice enough morning for a walk, he thought, doffing his hat politely to passing couples along the wide, affluent, tree-lined street. At least it wasn't raining. He hadn't missed England's miserable weather during his long absence. Not at all.

He exhaled slowly. Had he missed anything about his home country? He really didn't think so. But then, his departure for the Continent had been so hasty, and undertaken under such a cloud, that perhaps it had soured all his memories of England.

By Jove's beard. How am I ever to settle back here? How am I going to handle my mother's harping?

Abruptly, he turned left. Hyde Park was in the distance. He hesitated. Every gentleman and his dog would be promenading there on a fine morning like this. He didn't know if he could stand it. But on the other hand, if he could dodge the ton, he might find a tree to sit beneath, a quiet pocket of peace, to quieten his mind.

I cannot marry . I will not marry. Not even for the sake of the duchy. And she cannot make me.

He reached the park. His instincts had been correct—it was packed with ladies and gentlemen taking the air, promenading around the Serpentine. He grimaced to himself. If he remembered correctly, there was a somewhat private spot further along. He just had to endure the crowd until he got there.

He gritted his teeth, nodding politely at people as he passed them, refusing to stop and embroil himself in conversation. He doubted that anyone would recognize him yet, anyway, or even know of his return to England's fair shores. Once they did, he wasn't at all sure what their reaction to him would be. Yes, he was the Duke of Everly, but the name was clouded by scandal now. And he had been away so long that he simply had no idea if that cloud had lifted or still remained.

I do not give a deuce either way. I do not covet the good opinion of the beau monde. Let them do their worst.

He thought of his mother again. And his cousin. Now that he had walked for a while,

and his anger was settling, he was starting to see their points of view. He didn't necessarily agree with them, especially on the subject of matrimony, but he knew that they were only doing what they thought was right. His mother wasn't entirely a virago. She was just trying to do her best to ensure that the illustrious Huxley bloodline continued.

He was the Duke, after all. That line must come from him. But he balked at the mere thought of it. He couldn't marry, not even to produce the longed-for heir. If he did, then the marriage would come to grief, in probably the exact same way his parents' marriage had. He was his father's son, after all.

A rake begets a rake . But at least I admit what I am and fully accept my nature. I will never, ever hide it like he did. I would never put a woman through that.

Daniel blinked, trying hard not to remember what had happened all those years ago. But it was always there, just beneath the surface. His mother's terrible pain at her husband's betrayal.

The double pain of losing him forever as well, without ever having the chance to confront him about it. And then, the salt being poured into the wound—the scandal which had resulted, sweeping over them like a thundercloud, changing their lives forever.

It was old news now—five years had passed since that dreadful day. And yet, sometimes, it seemed like it was only yesterday. The years of his Grand Tour flashed before his eyes, a kaleidoscope of memories, one after the other.

He had wandered the Continent, traipsing from Italy to France to Spain, for so long that the nomadic life had settled into his blood. He didn't know how to be anything else anymore. He didn't know how to be the Duke of Everly, even though he had been born to the title...

“Oh!”

It was a feminine voice, high-pitched, full of surprise. He had been so engrossed in his reverie that he had actually collided with a lady walking towards him. Instinctively, he reached out to steady her, as she was in danger of falling sideways from the impact. She seemed intent on not dropping a book which she held in her hand, gripping it tightly.

Hound's teeth !

He was stunned as he gazed upon her face for the first time.

A beauty has just landed in my arms!

He kept staring at her, lost for words, taking in her fine form. A beauty, indeed. She was petite—a full head shorter than he was—but with a womanly figure. She had glossy dark brown hair, the color of mahogany, beneath her white bonnet, and pale, alabaster skin, with a smattering of light freckles across her nose and cheeks.

But it was her eyes that bewitched him, drawing him in further, mesmerizing him utterly. He had never beheld eyes quite like them before. They were the color of honey, or molasses, a rich golden brown, fringed by long dark lashes. And she fit into his arms as snugly as a hand fit into a glove.

She was blushing, her pale skin turning pink, deepening to a rosy glow.

“I do apologize,” she murmured in a breathless voice.

He didn't respond. He was too busy watching her blush. He didn't even realize he still had his hands on her shoulders until another lady came into view, coughing into her hand.

“Excuse me, Sir,” the other lady said in a tart voice. “But we must hurry. Our mother will be wondering where we are.”

“Of course, Madam.” Daniel abruptly took his hands off the beauty’s shoulders. “I hope you are quite able to walk...”

“I am well, Sir,” the dark-haired beauty assured, with a small smile, her blush deepening again. “Thank you.”

Her companion took her arm firmly and dragged her away, trailed by an older woman who looked like a maid. He couldn’t help watching them depart. Her figure was so very fine. It wasn’t until they had rounded a bend that he noticed a piece of paper slip from the book the beauty had been carrying, drifting in the air like a small white bird, before coming to rest on the ground.

He rushed towards it, scooping it up, feeling a small stab of joy. This was the excuse he needed to speak to her again and find out her name. He had been so spellbound by her that he had let her walk off without even finding out who she was.

He rounded the corner, clutching the piece of paper in his hand, seeking her and her companion. But to his dismay, the park was so crowded that he couldn’t see them anywhere. It was as if the crowd had swallowed them entirely.

Daniel stopped abruptly. It was no use. The dark-haired beauty was gone. Disappointment washed over him. He wasn’t going to be able to find her again. Unless...

He glanced down at the piece of paper, hoping that she might have written her name on it. A small hope—but a hope, nonetheless.

His eyes widened as he read it. It was a list of some kind, scrawled in black ink.

And oh... what a list it was.

A slow smile spread over his face. This list was definitely not meant for prying eyes. He doubted that the mystery woman had meant for anyone to read it, other than herself. He had never read a list quite like it before.

The little minx . No wonder she held onto that book for dear life when we collided. If anyone read this list and knew that it came from her, she would be enshrouded by scandal.

He read through it again, stunned to his core. His blood was on fire. He was certain of only one thing: he must find her again. And quickly.

CHAPTER 3

“M adeline!” The Marchioness of Ollerton’s voice was as cutting as glass. “You are away with the fairies. Your food is congealing on your plate, Daughter.”

Maddie jumped a little in her chair, almost dropping her fork, as if she had been caught in a private act. In fact, she had been indulging in a private act: daydreaming about the impossibly dashing and handsome man she had collided with in Hyde Park that very day.

She hadn’t been able to stop thinking about him ever since she had returned home—he had been constantly on her mind. She had barely concentrated during her pianoforte lesson, which had earned her a sharp rebuke from Mr. Farquar, her tutor.

As soon as she could, she escaped to the privacy of her bedroom, languishing on her bed, indulging in the memory of the brief encounter. But, as always, she had been forced out of her solitude to attend dinner with the family. And now, it seemed she could barely eat... and her mother was noticing her distraction.

“I apologize, Mama,” she uttered, trying to sound chastened. “But you do know that I have never been overly fond of venison pie.”

Her mother gave her a sharp look. “However, you are fond of artichoke soup, and you barely touched the first course either.” She sighed dramatically. “Now that I think about it, you have been in a singular mood ever since you returned from promenading in Hyde Park. Mr. Farquar remarked that you were particularly absent-minded during your lesson as well.”

Maddie played with her fork, twisting it in her hand. “You should dismiss Mr. Farquar,” she said, wondering if she could distract her mother successfully. “The lessons are a waste of time. I will never be proficient in the pianoforte. We all know that Augusta is the only musical talent in the family!”

“Maddie, you are too harsh on yourself.” Her father’s eyes softened as he gazed at her. She knew she had always been his secret favorite. “You play well, my dear child, and will only improve with practice.”

“A lady’s education is woeful,” Augusta declared crisply, weighing into the conversation. “Maddie should be proficient in languages, mathematics, and literature, the same as a gentleman. Instead, all we do is endlessly practice an instrument, learn to dance, and embroider. It is a travesty.”

There was an awkward silence. Lord Ollerton looked dumbfounded, staring at his oldest daughter as if he couldn’t quite fathom what kind of creature she was at all.

Lady Ollerton rolled her eyes, not even trying to disguise it. She never hid her irritation when Augusta went on her bluestocking tirades.

“Be that as it may, Daughter,” she gritted out, “we pay good coin for your sister’s pianoforte lessons, and at the very least, Madeline needs to be conscious of that fact and respect her tutor’s time and dedication.”

“Perhaps you should ask Maddie what she wishes to do with her time,” Augusta countered tartly. “If she studied something she was actually interested in and found useful, there might be a better outcome all around. Instead, you treat her as if she is a puppet and you are the puppeteer, pulling her strings as you see fit.” There was a loud clatter as she dropped her fork, quite deliberately, onto her plate.

Lady Ollerton glared at her. “He who pays the piper calls the tune,” she said, her

mouth curling. “That is something that you would do well to remember, Augusta. You are a dependent in this household. And it is high time you started to earn your keep.”

Augusta’s green eyes were shooting daggers now. Maddie shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

The battles between her older sister and their mother were becoming more pronounced and virulent. All that Lady Ollerton wanted was obedient daughters, and Augusta was quite determined to rock the boat, as vigorously and as often as she could.

“How can I earn my keep?” Augusta asked in a deceptively calm voice. “You refused to educate me properly, so I cannot earn a living in any way commensurate with my talents. I am forced to be a dependent in this household.”

“You should be married by now, Augusta,” their mother hissed. “You should be running your own household. You are five-and-twenty and far too old to be living as a dependent in your family’s home. If you would only accept this, and put your mind to finding a suitable husband, then you would not need to listen to a thing I say any longer, would you?”

Augusta’s nostrils flared. “It is unacceptable that marriage is the only option for a lady—or any woman, for that matter! I refuse to be cowed in this manner!”

Maddie felt the dull throb of a headache coming upon her. It seemed that every family meal ended this way, nowadays, with her sister and mother locking horns, while her father and herself looked on helplessly. The older two women were the dominant personalities in the household. And her mother was right on at least one thing: there could only be one mistress in this family. There was no way she would stand being challenged like this forever.

Lady Ollerton pursed her lips. “I have given you every opportunity to secure a suitable husband for yourself, Augusta. But my patience is over. I am making it my mission to find you a husband... and Madeline knows that she will not escape the executioner’s sword either if she does not procure herself one as well... sooner rather than later.” She swiveled her head around to Maddie, giving her a hard look.

Maddie stood up, feeling pained, throwing her napkin on the table. “May I be excused?”

“If you wish,” Lord Ollerton said, gazing at her sadly with large owl eyes. Dear Papa . He was losing his only ally. “You look pale, Maddie. You should rest.”

Maddie smiled at him, before leaving the room. Her attempt at distracting the Marchioness had been successful, but there had been a price to pay, as always. Augusta just couldn’t seem to help herself, always making such bold and provocative statements. It was as if she were trying to lure their mother into battle.

As she made her way upstairs to the sanctuary of her chambers, Maddie knew that Augusta had overplayed her hand, at long last. Their mother was determined to marry her off quickly and would brook no further argument on the matter. Augusta was going to be saddled with a husband she neither desired nor would be able to tolerate.

And that will be my fate as well if I do not find a suitable match of my own.

Maddie entered her chambers, at last. Jane had already tidied up and lit the candle. All she needed to do was call her lady’s maid to help her undress for the night and crawl into bed. She couldn’t face the thought of joining the others in the parlor after dinner for games or reading or whatever else. Not when her mother and Augusta were locked in such a fierce battle.

But she didn’t call Jane. Instead, she sat down at her desk by the window, dropping

her face in her hands, dreaming about the devilishly handsome gentleman she had encountered in Hyde Park once again.

He was tall and had an exceedingly fine physique, broad-shouldered and muscular, with thick dark hair, curling around the collar of his jacket. And his skin was darkened by the sun as if he had been residing somewhere with a more temperate climate than England. The Continent, perhaps? Magical Spain, or far-flung romantic Greece?

The darkness of his complexion had contrasted dramatically with those piercing grey eyes that she could still vividly see in her mind's eye...

Maddie felt another wave of heat engulf her. Who could he possibly be? She had never seen him at any London event, and she had been to so many over the past three Seasons. He had been very well dressed, in fine clothing, but he wasn't a typical foppish dandy. Very far from it.

In fact, the dark-haired gentleman was the most masculine man Maddie had ever beheld. He exuded a raw energy, which might be quite alarming if it wasn't so very arousing.

She eyed the book on the desk—the one that contained her saucy list. The list that had so shocked and titillated Selina. She had stuffed it hastily into the book after her friend had left her, and in the shock of the encounter with the handsome gentleman, she hadn't given it the slightest thought since. Perhaps she could add finding out his name on it?

She picked up the book, thumbing through the pages. She frowned, then thumbed through the pages again. Her heart clenched, and her breaths came out in short, sharp gasps.

The list wasn't there. It was gone.

A cold wind swept through her. It wasn't possible. Once more, she searched the book, trying not to drop it in her panic. But it was clear, the list wasn't nestled within its pages, as it should be. It had vanished entirely.

Oh, dear Lord , it must have slipped out. Perhaps when the gentleman collided with me. And I tried so hard not to drop the book!

She stood up hastily, her heart racing. If anyone found that list and somehow worked out who had written it... well, she would be doomed. She needed Selina's help, and she needed it right this minute!

"Jane," she called, grabbing a cloak quickly. "Jane!"

The lady's maid appeared, staring at her boggle-eyed. "Milady?"

"Come along," Maddie said in a breathless voice. "We are going to the Huxleys' residence. You go and rouse the coachman while I tell my family."

Jane nodded quickly, knowing better than to question her.

Maddie flew down the staircase, with the lady's maid hot on her heels. She burst into the dining room. Dessert was just being served. Her family all turned to stare at her, looking surprised.

"I am calling on Selina," she panted.

"But... why?" her father asked, frowning, looking bewildered. "The evening is growing late, Maddie."

“I... I forgot a book,” Maddie lied, flushing. “And I need it. I will bring Jane. I promise I will not be long.”

She flew out of the room before they could question her any further.

Jane was waiting for her at the front of the house, near the carriage, as arranged. A footman helped her into it, and then they were off, hurtling through the dark London streets towards Selina’s home in fashionable Grosvenor Square.

Maddie gazed out the carriage window in despair, watching the gas streetlights sputtering furiously. It was so dark that she could barely make out the buildings. She absolutely must find that list, but she had no idea how it was even possible.

She could have lost it anywhere in Hyde Park. She berated herself soundly for her foolishness in even bringing it outside the house. How could she have done such a stupid thing?

Selina will know what to do . She always knows what to do.

The trip seemed to take forever, but in reality, it was only a few streets away. She counted herself lucky that she and her friend were both living in Mayfair. As the carriage drew up in front of the tall, grand house in Grosvenor Square, her friend’s London residence, Maddie started to open the carriage door, even before the wheels had stopped turning.

Bronson, the Huxleys’ butler, looked surprised and a bit disgruntled when he finally opened the door. Clearly, he wasn’t expecting any callers this evening. But he knew her well and didn’t make a fuss when she insisted on entering the house, striding into the grand foyer as if the very hounds of hell were on her tail.

“Stay here and wait for me, Jane,” she barked at her lady’s maid. She then turned to

the butler. “I will find my own way, Bronson. I know where Selina will be!”

The butler looked a little startled but didn’t protest.

Maddie knew he was used to them coming in and out of the house on a whim. And she did know exactly where Selina would be. At this hour, her dear friend would have sought escape from the claustrophobic dining room and be curled up reading in the study—as well as sneaking a half glass of brandy, for good measure, if the occasion demanded it.

There was no one about in the long hall as Maddie made her way towards the study, flinging back the hood of her cloak so she could see better.

She flung open the study door, letting out a sigh of relief. It seemed her friend hadn’t disappointed and was indeed doing exactly as Maddie suspected she would be doing—sitting in the chair behind the desk, even though the chair was swiveled around, enshrouding Selina in darkness.

There was only one candle burning on the desk, so it was very difficult to see, but Maddie could clearly make out the brandy decanter on the drinks cabinet, top off, with a glass beside it.

Clearly, the occasion had demanded a little liquid entertainment.

“Why is it so dark in here?” she demanded, closing the door firmly. “Never mind! Oh, Selina, I am in a dither! You will never guess what has happened!”

Maddie barely drew in breath. She was so flustered that she couldn’t help spilling it all out to her friend, right this minute. She had no idea how long they would be able to talk privately—someone might come and interrupt them. And she had promised her family that she wouldn’t be long. Her mama would probably send out the Watch

to look for her if she overstayed.

“I lost the list!” she cried, her heart skipping a beat. “It must have slipped out of the book in Hyde Park! Oh, Selina, if anyone recognizes my handwriting, I am surely doomed! My mother shall kill me or marry me off to some old baron in the countryside before I can draw breath, or something else equally horrendous.” She managed to gulp some air. “I must find it! You must help me!”

Selina was oddly silent.

Maddie frowned. She simply didn’t have time for games.

“Do you have any ideas?” she entreated, her heart skipping a beat again. “Any at all?”

On tenterhooks, she waited for a response. Any response.

Irritated, she was just about to entreat Selina again. What was wrong with her?

“Oh, you would be surprised by the ideas I have, My Lady,” a deep, masculine voice responded, sounding amused.

Maddie’s heart hit the ground with a thud. She didn’t know who was sitting in that chair, but it decidedly wasn’t her best friend.

CHAPTER 4

Maddie felt like a cold hand had touched her on the shoulder, turning her to pure ice. The chair finally swiveled around. The figure within was abruptly illuminated by the solitary candle on the desk.

Dear Lord, it was the man from Hyde Park. And he was clutching something in his hand... which looked suspiciously like her list!

Maddie's mind started to spin at a dizzying rate. Was she imagining it? But she must be imagining it! How could the devilishly handsome man whom she had been mooning over for the entire day be sitting here, in her dear friend's study, drinking brandy and waving her list around as if it were a victory flag? Was she losing her senses entirely?

The man stood up, slowly unfolding himself from the chair. She watched him, as fascinated as a bird by a snake, as he walked slowly towards her. It was only when he was standing so close to her that she could smell his cologne that she snapped back to reality.

This appalling situation really was happening. And he really did have her list!

Maddie didn't think. She simply reached out, trying to snatch it out of his hand. He laughed, in a lazy way, holding his hand higher still, so she was forced to jump a bit in a vain attempt to retrieve it.

"Give me back my list!" she demanded, outraged.

She didn't care who he was, or why he was here. All she knew was that he had something that belonged to her, which she needed back, quite urgently.

"All in good time, My Lady," he drawled in a dry, amused voice, those piercing grey eyes lingering on her face. "All in good time."

Maddie blushed fiercely, feeling heat creeping up her face, like a fever. She stepped back, watching him warily. She was so overcome by the shocking situation that she staggered a little, reaching out and gripping the back of a chair to stop herself from toppling over entirely.

To her shock, the gentleman leaned down, in a quite deliberate way, taking her other hand. Slowly, he planted a soft kiss on it, with his eyes locked on her own the whole time.

Maddie jumped violently. A thousand tiny pinpricks of sensation leaped to life within her hand, coursing up her arm. She sprung back as if the hem of her gown had suddenly caught fire, blushing so deeply that her face felt as if it were about to implode.

"I believe it is high time we introduced ourselves," the man continued in the same amused tone. "My name is Daniel Huxley, the Duke of Everly. And you are?"

Maddie's jaw dropped. He couldn't be Selina's older brother, could he? Selina had talked about her brother, the Duke, from time to time. He was on a Grand Tour of the Continent, which had apparently stretched on for years, sorely trying their mother's patience, who wanted him to come back. It had something to do with their family scandal, which Selina never talked about.

And her best friend had failed to tell her at all that her absent brother had finally returned home!

Selina had revealed, however, that her brother had the reputation of a rake. According to her, the ladies flocked like starlings around him. He had his pick, and he picked quite a few. Now that she knew who he was, Maddie didn't find it surprising at all. She had never encountered a man with such raw masculinity and charisma. No wonder the ladies couldn't resist him.

She still couldn't speak from the shock of it all. Here she was, in her best friend's family study, with a duke, no less... who happened to be the enigmatic older brother of that friend. And by some bizarre twist of fate, he had her missing list. How on earth had she managed to get into this truly dreadful situation? And how on earth was she going to get out of it?

A cold shiver ran down Maddie's spine. He not only had the list, but he had in all likelihood read it. Why else would he have it in his hand? He knew what was on it! Conflicting emotions surged through her. Embarrassment, shame, guilt... as well as heightened arousal at being in such close proximity to the gentleman she had been daydreaming about the entire day.

He was just as handsome as she recalled—if not more so. In the flickering candlelight, he seemed to loom over her, exuding a sensuous energy that she had never felt before. And the scoundrel had taken the liberty of kissing her hand!

"The cat seems to have gotten your tongue, My Lady," he drawled, his grey eyes sending off sparks of amusement, as well as something else, which made her stomach flutter with a thousand tiny butterflies. "Who are you?"

"I am Lady Madeline Cole," she managed to stutter. "And that is my list. I dropped it today, in Hyde Park. I demand that you return it to me this instant!"

He kept gazing at her, in a speculative fashion, as if he was trying to work her out. As if she was a puzzle he was determined to solve. Maddie's eyes flicked to the list, still

secure in his hand.

Oh, Lord, what was she going to do if he refused to give it to her?

Daniel stared hard at the beautiful young lady who had stumbled into the study, babbling on about the list. It was as if he had conjured her out of thin air. He was just as shocked as she appeared to be at this bizarre twist of fate. But he was thinking quickly as to how he could maneuver it to his advantage.

She was even more beautiful than he remembered from their brief encounter in Hyde Park. She had changed, of course, from what she had been wearing today. Beneath her dark green velvet cloak, he could just see her slim but curvaceous body filling a long white silk gown suitable for evenings. His loins were stirring at the sight in a way that he hadn't felt in a very long time.

She had finally revealed her identity to him, and now, he vaguely recalled Selina mentioning her new best friend, Maddie, in her infrequent letters to him over the past year. Were Lady Madeline Cole and Maddie, her sister's new best friend, one and the same person? It would appear so, judging by how familiar the beauty was with his house, as well as the way she had been speaking to him when she had assumed he was his sister sitting in that chair.

"So, you are Maddie?" he asked, with a small smile. "You are the new best friend my younger sister has been telling me about in her letters?"

The lady took a deep breath, straightening her spine, looking him directly in the eye. His loins tightened again at the fierceness he beheld within the liquid amber depths of her eyes. The blushing, stammering girl of moments before had entirely vanished.

Oh, she is indeed magnificent . I must have her. And it is going to be delicious play seducing her. The thrill of the chase is almost better than the capture.

“I am Lady Madeline Cole,” she repeated, through gritted teeth. “The youngest daughter of the Marquess of Ollerton. It is indecent for you to address me by my pet name, as it is reserved for those who are close to me.” She inhaled again. “Just as it is indecent to read and withhold personal items, such as the list you are holding in your hand!”

Suddenly, she lunged again, trying to snatch the list out of his hand. She was quick. Daniel only just managed to evade the attempt.

He leaned down, so he was close to her ear, noting the smoothness of her skin, as well as the evocative scent of her perfume. Was it lavender? Or bergamot?

“There are things that are rather more indecent than that,” he whispered in her ear, delighting in the way she shuddered. “Especially when a lady wishes to do them.”

He straightened, looking at her closely, watching for her reaction to his words. She was blushing fiercely again, but she held his gaze, a determined expression on her face.

“The list,” she demanded, holding out her hand in an imperious manner. “If you please.”

He ignored her outstretched hand. She was biting her full, rosy lips in the most endearingly sensual way. He wanted to lean down and capture those lips with his own, resisting the impulse with difficulty. He didn’t want to frighten her away entirely. Lady Madeline Cole was a dish to be savored, and he fully intended to do just that... when the time was right.

“Since we are getting to know each other better, My Lady,” he said in a low, solemn voice, “I should inform you that I have the reputation of a rake.” He followed the announcement with a saucy wink, just to gauge her reaction.

He wasn't disappointed. She gasped, quite as if he had slapped her.

"And why would I wish to know such a disreputable thing?" she scoffed, looking outraged.

He sighed heavily, then looked down at the piece of paper in his hand. "Well, it is on your list, My Lady." He couldn't help smiling as he read through it again. "There. I thought I had read it correctly. It is number three, in your own delectable handwriting— Kiss A Rake ."

She paled, then reddened, in quick succession. Daniel's mouth twitched, simultaneously amused and aroused, almost beyond measure. He had successfully set the cat amongst the pigeons now. He wondered how she was going to react. Would she fight, or would she flee?

She writhed with mortification for a full moment, before squaring her shoulders, meeting his eyes in a challenging way. "Why would I need you for such a thing?" she retorted. "I can find a better option than you for that."

He laughed with sheer delight. It was such delicious fun, sparring with her. He had her in the palm of his hand. Did she know it yet? Did she still think she could wriggle her way out of it?

He reached out, taking her hand, just for the sheer pleasure of feeling her flesh. It didn't disappoint. The touch was like lightning, full of such promise that he almost couldn't stand it.

Instantly, she tried to pull her hand away. He tightened his grip for a moment, before letting it fall. She was flustered again—her cheeks were pink, and her honey-brown eyes were sparkling. Her chest was rising and falling rapidly as if she was having a hard time catching her breath.

He knew at that moment, without a shadow of a doubt, that she felt the same strong connection between them that he was feeling. He had a vast knowledge of how a woman looked when she was genuinely aroused.

He walked away from her and then sat down again behind the desk, placing the list on it. He knew the physical distance, after such alluring intimacy, was a provocation in itself. He wanted her to be burning for his touch, as strongly as he was burning for hers.

“Well then, My Lady, I have an offer to make you,” he said crisply, in his most businesslike voice. “I will return your list to you...” Her eyes instantly brightened, full of hope. “But it is conditional on two things,” he continued quickly. “In order to ensure my silence about it, these conditions must be met.”

Her face fell. “What conditions? What do you mean?”

He smiled lazily. “Firstly, you must agree to grant me a favor—whatever favor I ask for, whenever I ask for it.”

The lady was visibly shocked. “I see,” she said in a bewildered voice. “Well, I daresay that is not so hard. I can agree to such a thing, since you are doing me a favor as well.” She hesitated. “What is the second condition?”

He leaned on the desk, staring at her intently. “That you agree to check off all the items on this list with me... and only me.”

Maddie gaped at the man leaning on the desk, staring at her in such a provocative way. In her wildest dreams, she could never have imagined that he would say such a thing!

“All of it?” she managed to stammer.

He nodded briskly. “Indeed. Every single last item on it, My Lady.” He paused. “You have one day to contemplate my terms. Only one day.”

Maddie was mortified beyond words. It was bad enough that he had demanded that she cross off the third item on her list with him... but all of the items? Oh, how had she gotten herself into such a dreadful pickle?

But before she could respond, the door to the study suddenly burst open. Selina was standing there, looking perplexed, her gaze traveling from Maddie to her brother, who was calmly sitting behind the desk with the infamous list atop it.

“Maddie?” she said, her head tilted to the side, in confusion. “What are you doing here?”

Suddenly, it was all too much. How could Maddie explain to Selina exactly what was going on? She simply couldn’t. Not at the moment, at any rate. This shocking man was her older brother . And he was truly living up to his reputation. It seemed that he hadn’t lied—the man was the king of rakes.

“I am sorry, Selina,” she mumbled. “But I must leave.”

She rushed out of the room, not even saying goodbye to either of them, mortified beyond measure.

Jane was still waiting, as instructed, in the foyer, sitting on a chair and looking a little tired and peeved. “Milady,” she breathed, visibly relieved. “There you are.”

“Here I am,” Maddie said, barely able to speak. “Come along, Jane. We must go home.”

Once in the carriage, Maddie’s shoulders slumped, feeling as if she was on the verge

of bursting into tears. It had taken so much strength to stand up to that rake, and she was sorely depleted.

And on top of that, it had been so hard trying to ignore her treacherous body, which had reacted wildly to his close proximity and his saucy, seductive actions, which she instinctively knew had been deliberate, designed to arouse and exasperate her in equal measure.

You have one day to contemplate my terms. Only one day.

His voice seemed to fill the carriage as she recalled his shocking conditions. He knew he held the power. He had the list, and he wasn't going to surrender it easily. Apparently, he was going to make her work for it. And she had only one day to agree to his demands.

The pressure was intense. The thought of her list being leaked to a scandal sheet was enough to give her a conniption. Her parents would be so mortified that she doubted they would ever speak to her again!

Maddie put her head in her hands, squeezing her eyes shut. What was she going to do?

CHAPTER 5

“Good morning, Milady.” Jane’s voice was irritably chirpy as she drew the curtains in Maddie’s bedroom. “It is time to rise and shine!”

Maddie lifted her head from the pillow, scowling. She had a slight headache as if she was coming down with a fever. She toyed with the idea of just telling her mother she was sick and staying abed for the entire day while she wrestled with how to deal with this impossible situation.

But she knew it would never work. Her mother ran the household as if she were a general in Napoleon’s army. Maddie knew she would have to be suffering from the pox, or some equally hideous and potentially fatal illness, before her mama would let her idle a day away in bed.

“What time is it, Jane?” Maddie mumbled, groaning.

“Just past eight,” Jane replied, walking to the wardrobe. “Which gown would you like to wear today, Milady?”

Maddie collapsed back onto the pillow. She couldn’t even begin to think about such things as gowns and the like. Her whole world was threatening to collapse around her. And all because of a certain diabolically handsome gentleman who seemed determined to toy with her.

“I do not care,” she groaned, shielding her face with a hand to block out the light streaming in from the windows. “I give you carte blanche to choose at your

discretion, Jane.”

“Very well then, Milady.” Jane rustled through the wardrobe and then emerged with a pea-green morning gown with delicate embroidery on the bodice. “This color looks lovely on you, so it does!”

“If you say so.” Maddie sighed, struggling to rise. She swung her legs over the edge of the bed, squinting. “I cannot even think.”

Her mind was working furiously as Jane briskly dressed her, pulling and turning her around as if she were dressing a doll, trying to arrive at a solution to her problem. But Maddie just couldn’t seem to work out anything.

She tried to forcibly retrieve the list the night before, but that didn’t work. She could try rummaging around Selina’s house, to steal it back, but what were the chances the Duke of Everly would leave it anywhere obvious? He probably had a secret compartment in that desk where he had hidden it. She knew her father secured some valuables in that way, to protect them from theft.

As Jane brushed her hair, securing it into a chignon at the nape of her neck, Maddie stared at herself in the mirror of her dressing table, still pondering the problem. A pale, pinched face gazed back at her, tight with worry. It was impossible. It truly seemed as if she might have to agree to his shocking terms, in order to get the list back safely.

The maid had just finished clasping a necklace around her neck when the door opened. It was Augusta, dressed in a plain navy blue gown that might have suited a nun.

Maddie’s sister didn’t believe in ostentatious dressing, saying it weakened women, playing into society’s expectations that women could only be pretty and frivolous.

“You may leave us, Jane,” Maddie said, trying to smile at her lady’s maid.

Jane bobbed a curtsy, before withdrawing from the room, closing the door firmly behind her.

Maddie rose, gazing at her sister. Augusta was still so lovely, despite the fact that she was getting closer to thirty rather than twenty. And despite her admiration for her sister’s courage to express her unconventional views, Maddie sometimes wondered if Augusta was lonely, beneath it all.

It took a lot of pluck to be so blatantly anti-matrimony in their position. Even though Maddie knew the reasons why Augusta held so firmly onto her convictions, was part of it just bravado? Underneath it all, did Augusta secretly crave a loving husband and family, while simultaneously pushing the idea of it away?

She studied her sister’s familiar face carefully. Augusta always wore a slightly closed expression now, as if she were constantly on the defensive. Maddie hoped they were as close as they had been before, but there were certain things she just couldn’t talk about with Augusta anymore—like the past. That was off-limits.

“You certainly riled Mama last evening.” Maddie shook her head ruefully. “You know she will make good on her threat now, do you not?”

Augusta looked mutinous. “She will try. But that does not mean she will succeed, Sister.” Her face darkened further. “I will simply run away again if she tries to force me into matrimony, you know that.”

Maddie gaped at her. “And do what? Exist in penury as a governess in someone else’s home? Try to make your living as a seamstress with your basic talent for embroidery?” She shook her head again. “You would do far better to simply pick your own husband, Augusta. Choose your own life.”

Augusta's shoulders slumped as if all the fight had abruptly left her. "I cannot choose a man. I will not." She looked so weary and sad that Maddie's heart lurched. "It is impossible, and you know why. But I suppose you are right—if Mama forces me, I shall have no choice but to capitulate. I am woefully under-skilled to earn my own living, as all ladies are. They raise us to exist within gilded cages. I am doomed."

"It might not be so bad," Maddie assured in a soft voice, reaching out to touch her sister's arm reassuringly. She hated seeing Augusta upset. "It could be a good marriage. It is possible."

Augusta shook her head vigorously. "No. If Mama makes me, then I will be forced to do it, but I will not willingly walk into the institution of marriage of my own volition, Maddie."

Maddie sighed. Her sister's views were implacable, and she wasn't going to waste her time trying to change them. She didn't have the emotional strength this morning. Her head was still spinning violently with her own predicament.

"Why did you rush off last evening?" Augusta asked suddenly in a curious voice. "What book did you need so urgently?"

Maddie bit her lip. She wanted to confide fully in her sister, quite desperately. But something stopped her.

Even though Augusta held progressive views about the rights of women, Maddie still wasn't at all sure how her sister would judge her for making such a provocative list, nor for being so foolish as to lose it.

She chose to ignore the questions entirely. Instead, she sighed. "Augusta... what would you do if someone asked you to do something, so they could do something for you in return?"

Augusta raised her eyebrows. “Such as?”

“It does not matter what it is,” Maddie said, feeling her cheeks turn pink. “I just would like to know whether you think it would be a fair exchange.”

Augusta sighed. “Well, without knowing the particulars of the matter, it is hard to say.” She frowned slightly. “The common wisdom is one good turn deserves another, is it not?”

Maddie’s cheeks were flaming now. She wasn’t at all sure whether the Duke of Everly’s proposition could be classified as such. It felt more like she was making a bargain with the devil himself.

But, on the other hand, there was truth to what Augusta said. And the sad fact of the matter was that she didn’t really have a choice, anyway. Not if she wanted to get that damned list back!

He is probably bluffing . He may demand the kiss, but in all likelihood, he will give it back to me, once that is done.

Her face burnt deeper as she recalled all of the items on the list—and having to capitulate to him to tick them off. Hound’s teeth, what had possessed her to write such scandalous things? What had she been thinking?

“Maddie, what is this about?” Augusta pressed, watching her carefully. “You look flustered. It has something to do with why you rushed off last evening, isn’t it? Are you and Selina having a tiff?”

“Oh, no,” Maddie replied quickly. “All is well, I do assure you! I am just speculating!” She paused. “We should go down to break our fast before Mama sets the cavalry upon us.”

Augusta hesitated, then nodded. Maddie let out a silent sigh of relief. Her sister was going to drop the subject and not press her any further.

As they headed downstairs together to the dining room, Maddie formulated a plan, of sorts. He had given her a day to mull over his terms, but if she managed to avoid him, then perhaps his zeal might cool. He might start to feel sorry for her and let her off the hook entirely.

Her heart tightened. He was a self-confessed rake, but he couldn't be that much of a rake... could he?

Daniel stared at himself in the full-length mirror as his valet adjusted his jacket. His mind was far away, still dreaming about Lady Madeline Cole and the most unexpected chain of events that had transpired in the study last evening.

He had retreated there after the evening meal to escape his mother, who had been staring at him frostily for the entire duration of it. Selina had tried her best to bridge the gap, chattering away like a starling, but it hadn't worked. The atmosphere had been so arctic that it was a wonder that icicles hadn't formed.

It might have helped if Christopher had been there, but unfortunately, he had a previous engagement. And so, Daniel had made a hasty escape, before the Dowager Duchess could start on him again with her infernal plan to marry him off as soon as possible. He had needed a glass of brandy badly. Or two. And while he was decompressing, he just couldn't resist reading that scandalous list again and conjuring in his mind the dark-haired beauty who had so shockingly written it.

And then, as if by divine providence, the dark-haired beauty herself had walked into the room... and he had quickly formulated his plan. Tit for tat.

Lust thickened his blood again. He was itching to see her and start executing the deal.

But he had given her one day to think about his terms, so he must restrain himself. And distract himself. He grinned ruefully. It was going to be a very long day, indeed.

“All done, Your Grace,” his valet said, stepping back.

Daniel headed down to the dining room for breakfast. His mother and sister were already seated. The Dowager Duchess was spreading a thin layer of marmalade on toast. She raised her eyebrows as he took his seat at the head of the table.

“Good morning,” he said in a falsely cheery tone. “I do hope you both slept well.”

“Tolerably well.” Selina smiled widely. “Although I never sleep that well in London. I much prefer my chambers at Stansgate. It is so very peaceful there!”

Daniel smiled at his sister.

Stansgate was their ancestral home, in Kent, just outside of London. They would all be making the journey there very soon—the first time he would see it since his return from the Continent. His mother had plans for a grand house party and a ball, to celebrate his return. After all, the return of the prodigal son demands it.

“I do hope you have not made plans for today, Daniel,” the Dowager Duchess announced, taking a bite of her toast. “For I must insist that you accompany me on a house call.”

Daniel suppressed his irritation with difficulty. His mother had commandeered many of his days in such a way since his return, reintroducing him to the beau monde. He had already spent more tedious mornings and afternoons sipping tea in drawing rooms with vapid people than he would have liked.

He opened his mouth to refuse her, then shut it again quickly. He wanted to keep the

peace as much as possible, and it would pacify her. Besides, he didn't have any particular plans for the day, and it might distract him from thinking about Maddie.

"Of course, Mother," he replied, forcing a smile, as he took two eggs from the silver dish the footman offered him, placing them on his plate. "Where are we going?"

But the Dowager Duchess shook her head, with a tight smile. "You shall see." She turned to her daughter. "Selina, you will accompany us as well. I will ask for the carriage to be ready by ten, and I want you both at the front door by then, please."

Daniel and Selina gazed at each other. Selina shook her head slightly. It appeared that his younger sister had no more idea of where they were going than he did.

"It is all settled, then," the Dowager Duchess uttered in a firm voice, standing up, and throwing her napkin on the table. "Do not be late." She sailed out of the room, as imperious as a queen.

Daniel picked up his cup, sipping his tea thoughtfully. He was bursting with curiosity about Maddie, and he was alone with his sister. Now was the time to find out everything that he could about his sister's best friend. Selina might reveal something that he could use to his advantage.

"Does your friend call on you often in the evening?" he asked, trying to keep his voice casual. "She seemed so surprised not to find you in the study last night."

Selina shook her head. "No, that was unusual. But Maddie does know my habits—she knows that I sometimes retreat to the study after dinner. I have told her often enough." She frowned slightly. "She seemed upset or flustered, and yet she refused to say why she had even come. What did you say to her, Daniel?"

"Why, hardly anything at all," Daniel responded, a red flush creeping up his neck.

“We barely had time to exchange two words before you came bursting through the door.”

Selina raised her eyebrows. “I do hope you did not flirt with her in any way. She is my dearest friend in the world, Brother, and I do not want you breaking her heart, along with every other lady’s heart in London.”

Daniel coughed into his hand. “You exaggerate, Sister! I am not such a rake as that.”

He glanced down at his plate. He didn’t want his sister to see that he was lying through his teeth.

Selina laughed shortly. “You have reformed? Why, then, do you refuse to contemplate marriage still, when you know how important it is to Mama?”

Daniel’s heart twisted. “You know why, Selina. You know what happened with our parents’ marriage. I simply refuse to be put in that position.” His gaze softened. “It is because I do not wish to break any lady’s heart by swearing eternal fidelity that I know it is impossible.”

There was silence. Selina looked sad and wistful. “But... I am sure that our parents loved each other once upon a time. At least, that is what Mama claims.”

Daniel gave a bark of laughter. “Perhaps. But love and desire fade over time.” He hesitated. “Do you know all the details of what happened with our father?”

Selina looked pained. “Yes,” she whispered. “How could I not? It was the biggest scandal in London. You all tried to keep it from me, but people do talk. It was not hard to find out that my father died from apoplexy while in his mistress’s bed.”

Daniel’s heart flipped over in his chest. Somehow, hearing it stated so calmly and

bluntly by his younger sister was shocking. He had imagined that he was immune to it, after all this time, but it seemed that he was mistaken.

It all came back to him in a rush. The shock of hearing that his father was dead, and in such a sordid way. The terrible pain on his mother's face when she heard the repugnant details of how her husband had died. Trying desperately to keep those details contained so that the ton wouldn't be aware of how the former Duke of Everly had passed and prevent a scandal.

It had all been in vain. Word had gotten out, as it always did. They had tried to lie low at Stansgate, waiting for the furor to pass. But it hadn't. In desperation, his mother had arranged to send him abroad, on his Grand Tour.

She had only been trying to protect him. His cousin had gallantly stepped in to assist with the day-to-day running of the duchy in his absence... and it had been easy to leave it all behind when he was so far away. There were even times when he was abroad that he had managed to forget about it entirely.

"I am sorry you know all the details, Sister," he said haltingly. "But I suppose it was inevitable, as you say." He hesitated. "Mama delayed your debut, as well, did she not?"

Selina nodded, biting her lip. "For two years. I only came out last year." She studied his face carefully. "No one really remembers anymore, Daniel. At least, it does not affect me. If anything, I have too many invitations to Society events. You do not need to be afraid of it any longer. You are the Duke of Everly, and you can take your position without fear of censure, Brother."

Daniel's face twisted. "I suppose I should be pleased," he said in a slightly acidic tone. "For everyone knows it is a fate worse than death to be shunned by the beau monde."

“You are not him, Brother,” Selina insisted in a wavering voice. “You would never do such a thing to your wife! I believe in you, Daniel. Please, do not let it affect your life forever.”

“Ah, but who knows?” Daniel tried not to let bitterness overwhelm him. “I am my father’s son, Selina. I inherited his taste for the fairer sex. I do not deny it. However, I refuse to marry and break a lady’s heart in such a way. I will never forget how Mother looked when she found out. It was like her heart had been ripped from her chest entirely. I simply will not take the chance... no matter how strongly she pressures me.”

Selina looked sad but didn’t contradict him. His chest tightened. He didn’t know how the topic had turned so dark. He had just wanted to find out all he could about Lady Madeline Cole, and he was still none the wiser. But a somber mood seemed to have overtaken both of them.

“I should go and get ready,” Selina said in a small voice, dabbing her mouth with her napkin. “I shall see you in a little while, Brother.” She left the room.

Daniel pushed his plate aside. He had lost his appetite.

He knew that Selina meant well. But it was impossible. He would never marry and risk that he would someday become his father. And his mother, as well as everyone else, would just jolly well have to live with the consequences.

Resolutely, he turned his mind back to Maddie and the delicious deal he was trying to broker with her. He would try his hardest not to break her heart, for his sweet sister’s sake. But he simply couldn’t stop pursuing her.

Lady Madeline Cole was the most successful distraction from all of it, and he couldn’t give her up now, even if he wanted to.

After breakfast, Maddie sat in the parlor, trying to focus on her embroidery, while Augusta read her book of Byron's poetry. The day stretched ahead in the dulllest of ways.

Maddie sighed heavily, dropping her embroidery patch. It was no use—she simply couldn't get the devilish Duke of Everly out of her mind.

The way he gazed at me, with such burning eyes. The way he kissed my hand. The way he calmly stated the terms of his indecent proposition, as if he were brokering a deal to play croquet.

She shuddered with delicious delight at the mere thought of him, despite her fear. Something was happening inside her body, just the same as when he had touched her and looked at her the previous evening. A glowing warmth was spreading through her limbs.

She felt flushed and aroused and entirely not herself at all...

Her mother marched into the parlor. "Quickly, girls, we have visitors," she announced in a slightly breathless voice. "I want you both in the drawing room. Right now!"

CHAPTER 6

M addie stopped short as she walked into the drawing room. Her jaw dropped. To her surprise, the visitors were Selina, her mother, the Dowager Duchess of Everly... and the Duke of Everly himself.

“Oh,” she stammered, feeling a flush breaking out over her entire body. Her heart started hammering violently.

What is he doing here? How on earth am I supposed to act in a normal way? I cannot look at him. I must not look at him!

But, sickeningly, her eyes were drawn to him—and only him. Strangely, he looked just as shocked to see her, at first. But then, a devilish glint flashed across his grey eyes. To her shock, the rake actually had the audacity to wink at her!

“Come and sit down, Madeline,” her mother instructed imperiously. She frowned. “What has gotten into you, child? You look like you have seen a specter!”

Maddie hastily took a seat, as far from the Duke as she could. Her mind was whirring. He must have engineered this house call, to put more pressure on her to accept his proposition. There could be no other explanation for it.

Maddie glanced covertly at Selina. Her best friend was smiling, oblivious. Her heart skipped a beat. She couldn’t imagine that the Duke had informed his sister about the details of their illicit conversation the previous evening.

Selina, most probably, was still none the wiser about any of it. She didn't know that Maddie had lost the list, nor that her brother had found it... and she certainly wouldn't be aware that he was blackmailing Maddie for "favors" to return it.

I must talk to Selina alone as soon as I can . But how am I to tell her about what her brother is proposing for the list's safe return?

"Tea for all?" Lady Ollerton asked sweetly, smiling at their visitors, picking up the teapot.

Everyone nodded.

As her mother poured the tea, Maddie tried to catch Selina's eye, hoping that her best friend might intuit that she wanted to speak to her alone. But Selina didn't take the hint.

Maddie would have to think of an excuse—any excuse—to draw her friend away from the drawing room at some point. But for the moment, it seemed she must simply endure this excruciating torment.

"How are you finding London since your return from the Continent, Your Grace?" Lady Ollerton asked, handing the Duke a cup of tea. Maddie noted he took it black, with a twist of lemon, just like she did. "Has it changed much in your absence?"

"In some ways, Lady Ollerton," he replied, sipping his tea. "But not in others. The London Season, for example, seems to be exactly the same as it always was." He paused, his eyes narrowing. "The same preoccupation with dull garden parties and the like. I am sure you are well aware of the torment one must endure at such events."

Maddie suppressed a laugh, almost snorting her tea. So, it seemed the devilish Duke wasn't any fonder of boring Society parties than she was. But then, he must be used

to more cosmopolitan events and company by now. There was a whole world outside of London, after all, which he had experienced.

“Indeed,” Lady Ollerton said, her nostrils flaring slightly, which Maddie knew indicated she was a little taken aback. “You have a colorful turn of phrase, Your Grace!” She turned to Augusta, who was sitting beside her on the sofa, looking painfully bored. “My dear, would you be so kind to entertain our guests on the pianoforte? I am certain His Grace will be charmed by your playing!”

Augusta looked affronted, but she complied, walking to the pianoforte in the corner of the room.

Maddie sipped her tea. It wasn’t unusual for their mama to request that Augusta play for guests—her sister was a talented pianist—but there was something in her mother’s manner as she looked at the Duke that made Maddie suspect she was up to something.

“You will adore Lady Augusta’s playing,” the Dowager Duchess gushed, leaning towards the Duke. “She is quite skilled, Daniel. And we all know that musical proficiency is one of a lady’s greatest accomplishments.”

The Duke nodded politely, but he looked bored. “I am certain I will be charmed by Lady Augusta’s talent on the instrument, Mother.”

“My oldest daughter is also very well-read, Your Grace,” Lady Ollerton added, nodding vigorously. “As well as being proficient in French and German.” She smiled brightly. “Augusta has a talent for languages, you see, which I feel certain you would admire, being so well traveled.”

Maddie stared hard at her mother. It was a bare-faced lie, and her mother knew it. Augusta knew a smattering of French and not much more German. Languages had

never been her sister's forte at all. But then, it wasn't as if learning foreign languages had been pushed upon either of the Ollerton daughters. They had received a traditional lady's education, which wasn't much at all.

It wasn't a lie that Augusta was well-read. She devoured books as if they were her lifeblood. But Maddie wasn't certain that the Duke would appreciate her sister's choice of topics. She couldn't imagine that he had ever read Mary Wollstonecraft's radical treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which was practically Augusta's bible.

On the other hand, being a rake himself, he might just be familiar with his fellow rake Byron's poetry tomes, which Augusta had read from front to back cover many times over.

Suddenly, the tinkling sounds of the pianoforte filled the air. It was Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, one of Augusta's favorite pieces. Maddie glanced over at the pianoforte. Augusta may have been forced to perform by their mother, but she was clearly engrossed in her playing now, looking as if she were a thousand miles away, in a deep trance.

As always, when Augusta played, an air of slight melancholy enveloped her, even when she was playing the jauntiest of tunes. It always made Maddie a bit sad to watch her.

"How perfectly lovely," the Dowager Duchess praised. "I am so very fond of Beethoven! What do you think, Daniel? Are you as mesmerized by this sublime talent as I am?"

"The lady is gifted, indeed," the Duke agreed smoothly. He turned to Maddie, gazing at her intently. "And what about you, Lady Madeline? Are you as proficient on the pianoforte?"

“I play a little, Your Grace,” Maddie replied, her heart skipping a beat. “But alas, I am not as dedicated in my practice as my sister.”

Lady Ollerton rolled her eyes. “No, indeed, you are not, Madeline!” She looked at the Duke. “Why, only yesterday, she was rebuked by her pianoforte tutor for inattention, Your Grace. Unfortunately, my youngest daughter’s mind is often away with the fairies.”

“Perhaps the lady’s mind is simply preoccupied with other matters,” the Duke said, a wicked smile on his lips. “We all have talents in different directions, after all, Lady Ollerton.”

Maddie blushed fiercely. He hadn’t said anything improper at all—it was just the way he had said it. She just knew he was referring to her scandalous list. Not that anyone else would be aware of that fact. But still, she couldn’t help wriggling with discomfort. And she was very conscious that he was still watching her and was aware of her embarrassment as well.

Maddie squirmed. Oh, how long must she endure this? When were they going to leave?

“Perhaps you might like to turn the pages as Lady Augusta plays, Daniel,” the Dowager Duchess suggested a bit imperiously. “I am certain it would be a help for her.”

The Duke looked uncomfortable. “I am equally certain the lady is quite capable of doing so herself. I do not wish to distract her from her performance.” He gave his mother a sharp look, almost a rebuke.

It was all starting to make sense to Maddie now. Somehow, the two older ladies were conspiring to force Augusta and the Duke to become better acquainted. Her mama

had warned Augusta that she was about to take matters into her own hands and find her a suitable husband. And what better husband than a duke? Even one with the shadow of scandal in his past.

A duke was one of the highest ranks in the land, after all, just below royalty. And the Dowager Duchess was clearly supporting the match, for her own reasons. Perhaps the lady was as eager to marry her son off as Lady Ollerton was to marry her oldest daughter off.

An odd feeling gripped Maddie's heart. She didn't like it, not one little bit. She didn't know why it bothered her so much. She should be grateful—it might mean that the Duke would turn his interest to Augusta and leave her alone.

As long as she retrieved her list safely, why should she care?

But she did care. Evidently, she cared very much, indeed.

Suddenly, she couldn't bear to be in the room for a second longer. She could barely breathe. She stood up abruptly. "I need some air," she declared. "I am going to take a walk in the gardens."

Selina stood up like a shot. "What a glorious idea! I will accompany you, dearest."

Maddie breathed a sigh of gratitude, linking arms with her best friend, and exiting the room. She could feel the Duke's eyes boring a hole into her back, but she didn't turn around. Not once.

Somehow, she felt like she truly was making a great escape.

CHAPTER 7

“Thank the Lord for your quick thinking, Maddie,” Selina declared, squinting up at the sky. “I do not know how much more I could have endured in there.” She sighed heavily. “Was it my imagination, or are our mothers trying to match my brother with your sister?”

Maddie’s heart dropped into her shoes. So, she hadn’t imagined it either. “I think you are correct,” she said slowly. “Although how they have conspired so quickly, I cannot imagine!” She hesitated. “I did not even know that your brother had returned from abroad, Selina. You never told me.”

Selina sighed heavily again. “He has only been back a week. I suppose I simply forgot to mention it.” She bit her lip. “Daniel is an enigma. I am still getting to know him again—it has been so long since I last saw him. I was merely a child, back then. Five years is a long time.”

“Why has he returned now?” Maddie asked, her heart clenching a little.

“Mama forced him.” Selina rolled her eyes. “He has been gallivanting around the Continent for years, you see, avoiding his duties. Our cousin Christopher stepped into his shoes during his absence, but it has dragged on long enough. Mama wants to marry him off, and quickly. She is desperate to see him settle down and produce a longed-for heir to the duchy.”

“And is your brother in agreement?” Maddie held her breath. “Is he eager to find his Duchess?”

Selina gave a bark of laughter. “Oh, no! Not at all! He does not ever want to marry. Mama is going to have a hard time convincing him on the matter. But she is determined. They are like two old rams butting horns.”

Maddie’s heart flipped over. She didn’t know why she cared one way or the other what the devilish Duke’s views on matrimony were. She bit her lip, trying to drop the subject. But it seemed she couldn’t resist going back to it—much like pressing a sore thumb.

“I recall you telling me that he was quite a rake,” she said, her heart hammering. “Is that the reason he disdains matrimony?”

“Daniel is still a rake.” Selina shook her head. “A leopard does not change its spots that quickly!” She hesitated. “He has his own reasons as to why he does not wish to marry. It is all tied up with our late father...” She stopped abruptly, tears welling up in her eyes.

“I am sorry.” Maddie quickly squeezed her friend’s arm. “You do not need to speak of it if it makes you uncomfortable, dearest.”

Selina nodded, looking grateful.

The subject was dropped, but Maddie was still burning with curiosity. She wanted to question her best friend further about her rakish brother and his reasons for disdaining matrimony. But she couldn’t. Selina had clammed up, and she simply couldn’t press her any further on the matter.

“So,” Selina asked, her voice dropping to a whisper, even though there was nobody around to hear them, “have you given any more thought as to how we are going to make sure you tick all the items off your scandalous list?”

Maddie stiffened. She had wanted to talk to Selina so badly about the list. It was what had spurred her to visit Everly House last night, after all. And she had thought that she wanted to confide in her best friend about what had happened in that study last evening... but something was holding her back.

I cannot do it . It has become so very complicated. The gentleman blackmailing me is her brother, after all. I simply do not know how Selina will react.

“I... I think that we should forget about the list,” she said, a little breathlessly. “It was a foolish thing to do. A dangerous thing. I do not know what I was thinking at all!”

Selina’s face dropped with disappointment. “Truly? But it was going to be such delicious fun!” She pouted. “How are we going to spend the boring Season now? Oh, say you will reconsider, dearest!”

“I will think about it.” Maddie bit her lip. “That is all I can promise you, Selina.”

They had reached the gazebo. They both sat down in it, side by side. Maddie could tell that her best friend was a bit frustrated with her, and she didn’t blame her. They had both been so wildly excited about the list only the day before. But so much had changed since then that it might have been a year that had passed, instead of a mere day.

“Why did you call last evening,” Selina asked suddenly, “and then rushed off like that, without even talking to me? It was odd.”

“Oh, it was just a whim,” Maddie replied, trying to keep her voice neutral. “I do not know what I was thinking!” She glanced at Selina, who was looking unconvinced. “I thought I would find you in the study, and then I discovered your brother, and time slipped away... I had to rush home, as Mama would have gotten worried about me.”

Selina raised her eyebrows. “Daniel told me that you barely exchanged two words.”

“He is correct,” Maddie confirmed, feeling a bit desperate. “By the time we had introduced ourselves, you had arrived.”

There was an awkward silence. Maddie knew that she was talking lamely and that she wasn’t convincing her friend at all. But she just couldn’t tell her the truth of the matter. Not yet, at any rate. And perhaps it wouldn’t ever be necessary. Hopefully, Selina’s brother would reconsider his dastardly plan and just give her back the list and be done with it. Selina would never be the wiser.

“There you are!” a deep voice said, filled with amusement. “You have led me up the garden path, trying to find you both, well and truly.”

They both jumped, swiveling their heads around.

The Duke was standing there, watching them, his grey eyes narrowed. Maddie felt a jolt of lightning course through her, and her heart started to beat erratically again. He had sought them and found them. She felt rather like a mouse being cornered by a large cat.

“Brother,” Selina uttered, looking surprised.

“Sister.” He grinned at them. “Lady Madeline.” His eyes bored into Maddie’s. “I was hoping to see the gardens while I am here. Would you both mind squiring me around?”

“Are you not needed in the drawing room, Your Grace?” Maddie asked, an edge to her voice.

She knew she probably sounded rude, but she didn’t care. It was imperative that she

avoid him as much as possible, and besides that, it would be terribly awkward strolling with him around the gardens, after what had happened between them last night, with Selina by their side.

A flash of memory assailed her. His eyes, locked with her own as he bent down to kiss her hand. The sensations that had coursed through her body at the contact. Sensations that she had never felt before. Sensations that were clearly sinful and dangerous, especially as they had been evoked by him...

She realized that her entire body felt heavy in some way. And that her nipples had hardened, feeling like two small pebbles pressing against the bodice of her gown. To her horror, his gaze dropped to that area of her body, lingering. Her stomach tightened with arousal, as well as fear.

“Oh, I think they can do without me for a few moments,” he replied, his eyes still lingering on her bodice, in an almost insolent way. “Your sister seems preoccupied with the pianoforte. And it will give the two older ladies a chance to gossip.” He gave an impish smile.

Selina sighed, then jumped up. “Come along, then!”

Maddie got to her feet reluctantly.

They started walking, three abreast, past the gazebo, still following the path. Maddie could hear the sounds of horses nickering and men talking on the other side of the high brick wall. It was coming from the mews, where the horses were stabled and the servants resided. The path was so close to the wall that they could hear practically everything.

“Oh!” Selina came to a sudden halt. “Can you hear that?”

“What?” Maddie asked, confused. “It is just the sounds of the mews on the other side of the wall.”

Selina shook her head. “No, not that! Listen!”

They all stopped, now, not saying a word. Maddie could hear a very faint sound that seemed to be coming from just beyond the wall. It sounded like the plaintive mewling of a kitten.

“I am going to find that cat,” Selina stated determinedly. “It might be separated from its mother. Is there a path to the mews from the garden, Maddie?”

Maddie nodded. “Yes. You just need to go down that path to a small gate. I will come with you?—”

“No.” Selina grinned widely. “I shall not be long! Carry on walking without me!”

Before Maddie could protest, she was gone, slipping away like quicksilver down the path, before disappearing entirely.

Maddie’s heart somersaulted in her chest, and her mouth felt dry. Somehow, despite all of her efforts, she now found herself alone with the devilish Duke!

She turned to face him. His expression was highly amused, and she blushed fiercely.

“Cat got your tongue again, My Lady?” he drawled, taking a step closer to her so that she could smell his cologne.

Maddie’s heart somersaulted again.

He had managed to catch her. What was he going to do now?

CHAPTER 8

Daniel gazed down into the lady's face, feeling the same irresistible pull towards her, as strongly as ever.

He had no idea they were heading to her house when he and his mother and sister had set off in the carriage that morning. His mother had been tight-lipped about their destination, and Selina had her head buried in a book, not even noticing where they were going.

And his sister had lagged behind as well when they had reached their destination, snagging her gown in the carriage door. He and his mother had already entered the house and were being escorted to the drawing room by the time Selina caught up to them.

When he had seen Maddie enter the drawing room, his heart had almost stopped beating. It seemed that fate truly was bringing them together. She looked particularly beautiful today in a light green gown with a low bodice, the tops of her creamy breasts straining delectably against it. He wanted to pull down that bodice and cup those sweet breasts in both hands, drawing one of her nipples into his mouth...

His loins stirred. They were alone in the garden now. His sister had run off into the mews beyond the high wall, seeking an abandoned kitten, as she was wont to do. Selina had always had a soft spot for animals, and it seemed that nothing had changed. He thanked her silently.

"So," he asked in a business-like tone, staring straight ahead, not meeting Maddie's

eyes, “have you reached a decision yet, My Lady?”

Maddie gasped, taking a step back. Her chest was rising and falling dramatically. He tried not to look at it, but it was hard not to.

“It seems that we might be seeing a good deal of each other,” he continued thoughtfully. “Seeing as our families are friendly with each other. So, it would probably be a good thing if you made up your mind quickly.”

“You are outrageous, Your Grace,” Maddie hissed, her honey-colored eyes shooting sparks. “Did you engineer this call? You told me that you would give me a day to think about it!”

“So I did,” he said, grinning. “But it would seem that fate had other ideas, My Lady. I had no idea we were coming here—my dear mother arranged everything, you see, and did not bother to tell either my sister or myself of her plans.” He took a step closer to her. “But I cannot deny that I am pleased with how it has turned out.”

“I do not believe you,” she whispered furiously. “It is insufferable!”

“Why do you protest so much?” he asked in an amused tone, taking another small step closer to her. “You wrote that list. You clearly wish to experience all that is written on it. All I am asking at the moment is that you experience one of those things with me. Is that too much?”

Her eyes widened. “Just the one? And then you will give me the list? It is not what you suggested last night.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Just the one... for now.”

His eyes swept over her face, taking in her full, sensuous lips, her high cheekbones,

and her long, dark eyelashes. Hound's teeth, she was a beauty! He was still fully convinced that he had never seen a woman more beautiful, and he had been acquainted with many, some of them feted for their great beauty. None of them held a candle to Lady Madeline Cole.

He took another small step, inching closer. Now, they were only a hair's breadth away from each other. Maddie seemed to freeze, standing as still as a statue. He exhaled slowly, watching her face intently, spellbound to see a small dark curl flutter slightly at the force of his breath. Slowly, he reached out a hand, taking the curl within his grasp, and stroking it lightly.

She gasped, shuddering. He saw that she was trembling from head to toe.

He could see her hesitation. He knew she was torn. His experience told him that she was just as attracted to him as he was to her. But it seemed that the lady, despite her saucy list, wasn't as experienced in these matters as he was. He must take the lead, and he must do it now, while he had the chance. Selina could be back at any moment.

He reached out, pulling Maddie towards him, drawing her behind a large tree where they couldn't be seen. He gazed down at her, taking her waist in his hands.

"You wanted to kiss a rake," he whispered, his blood thickening. "So be it, My Lady."

He bent his head slowly to give her time to retreat if she wished to. She didn't.

He captured those sensuous, full lips with his own, exploring her mouth. She stiffened at first, placing her hands against his chest as if she were about to push him away. He gripped her waist tighter, pulling her closer still, glorying in the kiss, tasting her fully. Her lips were every bit as sweet as he had anticipated.

Suddenly, she sagged against him, her mouth opening beneath his own. He felt a stab of pure, unadulterated desire snake throughout his entire body. He deepened the kiss, flicking his tongue into her mouth, feeling like he wanted to devour her whole. He simply couldn't get enough of her.

He was consumed by the sensual energy that had thickened around them like a fog.

Heaven help me . Her lips are even more sublime than I had imagined!

He gripped her tighter, arching her back, pulling her closer to him. He couldn't stop a small growl in his throat as he further explored her lips, devouring her. He was as hard as a rock, his manhood pressing against her belly urgently. His desire for her was threatening to spiral out of control. If he wasn't careful, he would lose it, hiking her skirts and taking her quickly against the tree. And he didn't want that. Lady Madeline Cole was to be savored, like a fine wine.

She was shaking as he abruptly pulled away. And to his surprise, so was he. He simply couldn't remember the last time he had felt such an all-encompassing desire.

"I know you want to kiss me again," he whispered, his hands still on her waist. "You should visit me this evening. You can cross kissing a rake off your list, My Lady."

She was flushed and breathing heavily. "You will give me back my list if I do so?"

"We shall see, won't we?" He wanted to kiss her again, quite desperately. But he had no intention of giving up the list. He had told her he wanted her to check off all the items on it with him, and he meant it. "You will never know if you do not come."

"How?" she breathed, her eyes wide.

"I will send a carriage for you," he replied. "It will be waiting in the mews, just

beyond this wall. Be there at ten.”

She hesitated.

He swallowed painfully, trying not to push her any further, trying not to show her how desperate he was to hold her in his arms again. He didn't want to scare her. But he simply had to kiss her again... and so much more if he could manage it. She was like a fever infecting his blood. One kiss wasn't nearly enough.

“Very well,” she said, biting her lip. “I will be there at ten.”

He felt a wave of triumph surge through him, as well as exalted joy. At that moment, Selina reappeared, walking quickly up the path towards them. Daniel dropped his hands from Maddie's waist, stepping away from her.

“Sister,” he called, trying to keep his voice steady. “Did you find it?”

Selina looked slightly annoyed. “No,” she said. “I searched and searched, but I could not find it anywhere.” She stopped walking, peering at them both. “Is everything well? You are both flushed.”

“We have just returned from a brisk walk,” Daniel explained, not looking at Maddie. “That is all.”

“I see.” Selina frowned slightly. “Well, I suppose we should return to the drawing room.”

They started walking down the path, past the gazebo, towards the house. Daniel looked down at Maddie's hand by her side, feeling a sudden urge to hold it. He prayed she wouldn't get cold feet and not get into the carriage tonight. His blood was already quickening again at the thought of being alone with her, once more. He could

barely wait.

All was exactly as it had been when they entered the drawing room, Maddie noted. Augusta was still sitting at the pianoforte, engrossed in her music. She didn't even seem to notice when they walked into the room. Maddie doubted very much that she had even noticed them leave.

Her mother and the Dowager Duchess were still drinking cups of tea and had eaten a fair amount of the seed cake and scones that had been placed on the table as well. Both ladies looked up at the trio, in an almost guilty fashion, their conversation abruptly halted.

Maddie sat down in the same chair she had sat in before, trying hard not to look at the Duke. Her heart was still racing, and she felt slightly ill as if she were coming down with a fever.

He just kissed me . He kissed me against the old elm tree in the gardens, while my best friend was searching for a kitten.

It was the very first time she had ever been kissed like that by a gentleman. And, oh, what a kiss it was! Never in her wildest imagination had she ever dreamt it could be so divine. She had felt like her bones were melting—as if she were dissolving into a puddle on the ground.

She knew that she shouldn't have agreed to meet him tonight. She knew very well that she was playing with fire. She had kissed a rake—exactly as she had written on her list—and that should have been the end of it. But it wasn't, and it couldn't be. Because she wanted to be kissed again by him, quite desperately.

She simply didn't know how she was going to endure the rest of the day until that moment arrived.

“Did you have a pleasant walk?” Lady Ollerton asked, turning her attention to Maddie.

“Very pleasant,” Maddie murmured, trying to ignore her flaming cheeks. “It is a beautiful day.”

The Dowager Duchess coughed into her hand. “Now that everyone is here again, I should inform you that we are hosting a house party next week at Stansgate,” she said, with a small smile. “And I am very pleased to invite you and your charming daughters for the duration, Lady Ollerton.”

Maddie jumped a little. She had never been to Stansgate, the Huxleys’ ancestral home in Kent. Selina often talked about how beautiful their country manor was and how much she missed it when she was in London.

Maddie tried not to look at the Duke. But once again, she couldn’t seem to help it. Her cheeks flamed further when she realized he was staring at her. His eyes were so grey that they were almost silver, she marveled, feeling her heart flutter in her chest.

“Oh, thank you, Mama!” Selina cried, clapping her hands together in delight. “I am so very glad that Maddie and her family will be coming!”

“You are going to be there, are you not, Your Grace?” Lady Ollerton asked, gazing at the Duke pointedly.

The Duke nodded. “I am, Lady Ollerton. It will be my first time back at Stansgate in a very long time, indeed.”

Augusta finally finished playing the pianoforte, getting up and rejoining the group. She looked a little dazed, as if she had returned from another world and wasn’t fully in this one.

“Did you hear, my dear,” the Dowager Duchess asked, smiling at her, “about the invitation to our house party in Kent?”

Augusta shook her head. “I am afraid not.”

“You are especially invited, my dear,” the Dowager Duchess added, her smile broadening. “I simply will not take no for an answer, Lady Augusta.”

Selina raised her eyebrows so high that they almost reached her hairline. She turned and looked at her brother, rolling her eyes discreetly. The Duke scowled a bit.

Maddie’s heart lurched. It was patently obvious that the older ladies were conspiring to match the Duke and her sister. It was probably all that the ladies had talked about while they had been in the gardens. And now, she recalled that her mama had received a note last night, very late, after she had returned from Grosvenor Square. It had probably been from the Dowager Duchess, telling her that they were planning to call today, and outlining exactly what the call was hoping to achieve.

Maddie felt faint.

Two birds with one stone . Both ladies hope to marry off their troublesome offspring, after all. And what better solution than to marry them off to each other?

It was still a mystery to her why the Dowager Duchess was suddenly so taken with Augusta, targeting her so obviously. The lady had always been disapproving of Maddie’s bluestocking sister, after all. Perhaps she had grown desperate, thinking she could tame Augusta.

It would be a lost cause. Augusta would never lead a conventional life.

It bothered Maddie, and she still didn’t know exactly why. She shouldn’t care in the

least if her mother and the Dowager Duchess succeeded in their matchmaking endeavors, except as to how it would affect Augusta, who was violently opposed to matrimony. She wanted her sister to be happy, in any way that suited her, and if that was as a spinster, then so be it. Of course, she still had a secret wish that Augusta would find her love match, but the chances of that were slim, and growing slimmer by the day.

Maddie took a deep breath. Perhaps that was the root cause of her disquiet at the thought of the match. She just didn't want her beloved sister forced into a loveless marriage with anyone. And especially not an acknowledged rake, who would probably never make her happy.

"I would be honored to attend your house party, Your Grace," Augusta replied in a monotone voice, without a flicker of emotion on her face. "Thank you for the invitation."

The Dowager Duchess nodded in satisfaction, rising to her feet. "And on that happy note, I believe we should depart!" She turned to Lady Ollerton. "I shall send details of the party so that you know what to bring, Lady Ollerton."

"Very good, Your Grace." The Marchioness nodded, looking very satisfied as well.

"Come along, then," the Dowager Duchess barked to her children.

Maddie and her mother and sister curtsied as their guests walked out of the room. Maddie tried to keep her eyes firmly on the ground. But as the Duke swept past, she couldn't resist peering up at him. He was watching her intently, and then, to her shock, he whispered something that only she could hear.

"I will be waiting for you tonight," he said, his grey eyes filled with desire.

And then, they were gone.

Maddie collapsed into a seat, her heart racing. She felt sick and frightened and enormously excited, all at the same time. She didn't know how she was going to get through the day. She was certain it was going to drag interminably.

She knew she had made a deal with the devil. She couldn't even pray for guidance. For everyone knew that if one made a deal with the devil, then the grace of God was lost, perhaps forever.

After dinner that evening, Maddie told her family that she had a headache and that she was retiring for the night. Her heart was beating frantically as Jane undressed her and she slipped into her night attire. It was only after she had dismissed her lady's maid, firmly locking the chamber door, that she sprang into action.

Frantically, she rifled through her wardrobe, selecting her plainest, darkest gown. She didn't want to be hampered by it, nor did she want to be seen. She was planning to slip out of the house via the back entrance to meet the carriage in the mews—if she went ahead with it, of course.

Maddie blew out her candle, getting into bed fully clothed so as not to arouse suspicion. If anyone passed her room, there would be no candle burning. They would assume she was fast asleep, and they would not disturb her. The remaining hours, until the appointed meeting time, seemed to crawl by, as if they were years instead of hours. Her mind was racing with frantic worry.

What if I am caught? What if the carriage is not waiting in the mews? But then, what if it is, and I must go through with it?

She stared up at the dark ceiling, feeling sicker by the minute. There was simply no way she could go through with it. She would simply get up and change again and this

time really go to bed. She supposed that if the carriage arrived, it would just wait and then leave if she didn't show up. The Duke would be disappointed, but he must be half expecting that she wouldn't do it. And she didn't owe him anything, anyway. He was a rake and must be used to women slipping out of his grasp, from time to time.

If only I had not written that infernal list!

She still couldn't believe that she had done it, and the unexpected consequences of it. It was written in a fit of high spirits and bravado, a fit of rebellious yearning, chaffing against the chains of her repressed upbringing. She didn't know now whether she had ever intended to go through with it. If the Duke hadn't found the list, she would probably have ripped it up eventually, throwing it in the fire, for fear that anyone discovered it.

Be careful what you wish for, lest it come true.

The cautionary words from Aesop's morality tale slipped into her mind. She had never quite understood it before. Why would anyone regret their wish coming true? But now, she knew. It was a double-edged sword, indeed.

Just before the appointed hour, she got out of bed, pulling the quilt high to look like she was still within it. Her heart was pounding so loudly that it sounded like a drum in her ears. She put on her cloak and slipped out the door, heading towards the back exit of the house on tiptoe.

All was quiet. It seemed everyone had retired for the evening, even the servants. She almost collided with a dresser, before quickly avoiding it. She only breathed out when she made it to the back door, entering the gardens.

It was a cool, clear night, with a bright full moon lighting the way. Maddie slipped the hood of her cloak over her head, making sure that her face wasn't visible. She had

to push and pull at the small gate connecting the house to the mews before the latch finally gave way.

The mews was quiet, too, and very dark. The only sound she heard was the faint nicker from a horse in the stables. She cast her eyes down the narrow alley.

There was the carriage, waiting at the corner, cast in shadow, looking like a giant black bug in the darkness.

Maddie stopped abruptly, staring at it. This was the point of no return. If she climbed into that carriage, her fate was sealed. She could still return to the house and forget that this had ever happened. That would be the most sensible thing.

Her heart seized with indecision. Oh, Lord, how on earth was she going to make up her mind?

CHAPTER 9

“Y ou came,” a deep voice threaded with amusement said just behind her. “I wasn’t at all sure that you would.”

Maddie started, her heart beating wildly. Slowly, she turned around. There he was, the Duke of Everly, tall and almost fierce in the darkness. She couldn’t even see his face.

She gazed around, blinking rapidly, trying to see. The carriage had deposited her at the side of the house in the mews. It was so dark. The light from the moon wasn’t visible there. It struck her forcibly that this was the most daring thing she had ever done in her life.

“Here I am,” she echoed, squaring her shoulders, trying to sound braver than she felt. “Where?—”

She didn’t get to finish her sentence. He put a finger on her lips, bidding her to be quiet. Quickly, he took her hand, pulling her down a dark path. She could barely see anything but was sure that they had entered the house through the back entrance.

She could just make out its high wall, the dark windows with the curtains firmly shut. It was as silent as a grave.

Oh, Lord . Selina is asleep in there, blissfully unaware that I am walking hand in hand with her brother. What would she think if she knew? And where on earth is he taking me?

The answer to the last question was becoming evident. She saw a glimmer of light flickering in the darkness. It was emanating from an outbuilding on the property. She balked, pulling up short.

“You are taking me to a-a garden shed ?” she stammered, appalled and alarmed.

He gave a bark of laughter. “No, My Lady. Never fear, it is not a common shed where gardeners store their tools.” He stifled another laugh. “Come along. All will be revealed.”

Maddie bit her lip. She could just extract herself now, insist that this was a mistake, and demand that he return her home immediately.

But curiosity and arousal at being in such close proximity to him were winning the day. She didn’t protest. They kept walking towards the glimmering light.

She didn’t know what she was expecting when they entered the building, but it wasn’t this. She gaped openly as she gazed around. This was no dirty garden shed, indeed. It was fitted out for a king... or perhaps a duke.

It was spacious and lined with bookshelves. There was a comfortable-looking upholstered chaise sofa in one corner, along with a tall dresser, upon which lay a crystal decanter filled with brown liquid and two gleaming glasses. A fire was flickering, warming the space, and a tall candelabra cast a pool of light.

“I do not understand,” she whispered, shaking her head incredulously. “What is this building? I never even knew it was here!”

The Duke laughed again. “One of my many secret lairs,” he drawled, his eyes twinkling with a devilish light. “A gentleman must have them when he is forced to reside with his family. I have another space quite like this one at Stansgate as well.”

A deliberate pause. “For when I need some quality time alone.”

Maddie shook her head again. She wasn't sure, as it had been so dark in the gardens, but she thought she had probably passed this building while walking with Selina many times and never given it a thought. She had probably assumed it was the servants' quarters.

The Duke was staring at her, quite openly, his eyes narrowed, waiting for her response. She felt a pull of desire, deep inside. They were so alone. No one knew where she was. The thought was thrilling and alarming, in equal measure.

She kept gazing around, taking it all in. Suddenly, she knew. The Duke might take advantage of this space to spend quality time alone, as he put it, but she rather imagined that it was for far more than that.

This is where he takes his conquests . And the rake believes that I am a conquest!

She drew herself up tall, squaring her shoulders, looking him straight in the eye. “I do not know what you think of me, Your Grace,” she said slowly, an edge to her voice. “But I must inform you that you are quite wrong. I am here to retrieve my list. Nothing else!”

He took a step closer to her. She inhaled the scent of his cologne, feeling quite dizzy with desire. It took all of her will to step back from him, but she did it, desperately trying to maintain her composure.

“And here I was thinking that I had convinced you with our kiss this morning,” he whispered, a teasing tone in his voice. “Are you telling me, My Lady, that you need more convincing? For I will tell you plainly that I am up for the task. And more than ready for it.”

He reached out, taking a stray curl between his fingers, and tucking it softly behind her ear. His eyes bored into hers. She couldn't seem to look away. It was as if he was holding her in a manacle.

"You have not convinced me," she insisted in a strangled voice. "In fact, the only thing you have convinced me of is that you are a rake, through and through!"

He just kept looking at her. Maddie felt the tension in the air. It was so thick and seemed to be swirling around them like a hot wind.

Was the rake going to try to kiss her again? What would she do if he did?

But he didn't try to kiss her. Instead, he reached into the pocket of his jacket, taking something out. A piece of paper. Her heart lurched. It was her list. He unfolded it, straightening the paper in a slow, leisurely manner. He sighed dramatically.

He is enjoying playing with me. As the cat enjoys playing with the mouse.

"Ah," he said, peering down at the list in his hands, squinting slightly. "There it is." He held it out at a tantalizing distance so she could read it but not snatch it away. "You see? I have crossed out number three. Kiss A Rake ."

"So you have," she said, infuriated but deeply aroused. "You are insufferable!"

"You are not the first person to tell me so," he drawled. He looked at the list again. "What shall we cross off next?"

"Nothing," she gritted out, her heart pounding hard.

Dear Lord, she had written quite a few scandalous things on that list! The thought that he might ask her to do those things with him was inconceivable. She barely knew the

man! He was treating her like a painted trollop.

He tucked the list back into his pocket. “Come and sit down while we consider it. I will pour you a drink.”

He walked towards the drawer with the crystal decanter and glasses atop, leisurely pouring them a drink. Then, he sat down on the chaise sofa, patting the cushion next to him, a devilish glint in his eyes.

Maddie sighed deeply, sitting down next to him. He handed her the glass. It was brandy. She took a small sip, almost choking on it. He took a long sip, before placing the glass on the small table in front of them and producing the list again.

“Ah,” he said, smiling, “I think I know what we should cross off next.”

Maddie couldn’t breathe. What was he going to do?

But, to her surprise, he turned to the dresser next to him, opening a drawer, and taking out a pack of playing cards.

“You wish to know how to cheat at cards,” he continued, expertly shuffling the deck. “And I am just the man to show you how to do it.”

Maddie exhaled slowly, filled with relief. This wasn’t so bad. She was fervently glad that she had added a few less scandalous items to the list—although her parents would probably still be appalled to know their darling daughter wished to learn how to cheat!

“We shall play piquet,” he said in an authoritative tone, placing the pack face down on the table in front of them. “It has a complicated scoring system but has the potential for rather large wins. You draw one card at a time, trying to get as close to

the number twenty-one as possible, but without going over. Do you understand?"

Maddie rolled her eyes, trying not to giggle. The sip of brandy, combined with the fact of her being here with him like this, seemed to have gone to her head.

"I am not a dunce, Your Grace," she stated crisply, picking up a card. "I think I can manage to count to twenty-one!"

"I am so glad to hear it," he drawled, a sardonic look in his eyes. "We will turn you into one of those high society matrons who supplement their income by holding private card parties."

Maddie raised her eyebrows. "There are no such matrons!"

"Indeed, there are, My Lady." He laughed, picking up a card. "I have been to many private card parties, in very well-to-do houses all over the Continent. Impoverished ladies, with grand titles but little else, who need to make a little extra income on the side. Who can blame them?"

"That is scandalous," Maddie breathed, but she was secretly thrilled to hear such enterprise. "If they were discovered..."

The Duke shrugged, picking up a card. "If they are discovered, they suffer a dent in their reputation, but it does not necessarily ruin it. People understand."

Maddie glanced at him. He was older than her and so well-traveled. He had a wealth of experience that she could only imagine. What she wouldn't give to be able to travel around the Continent, just like he had, and have a myriad of colorful, exciting experiences...

"What countries did you visit in your travels?" she asked, curious.

His eyes flickered. “A great many,” he replied, smiling slightly. “But I spent most of my time in France, Italy, and Spain.” His smile widened. “The weather is much better in the Mediterranean countries.”

“What was your favorite place?” she added, trying to imagine it, but falling short.

The furthest place she had ever journeyed to was Manchester, in the north of England, where the weather was even drearier than here.

“I greatly enjoyed Italy,” he said, his face softening as he remembered. “The people are very friendly. And there is a wealth of art everywhere. It seems that whatever small church you venture into, in even the remotest place, has a Michelangelo, Botticelli, or Da Vinci painting on its walls.”

“Incredible,” Maddie gasped, her face alight. “Oh, what I would do to see them all!”

He laughed, picking up another card, and glancing at her with amused eyes. “You wish to travel, My Lady? Or do you just enjoy perusing great art?”

“Both,” she said fervently. “One of my greatest dreams is to see the Sistine Chapel in Rome. But I have also dreamt of journeying to the Far East. To Cathay or Persia, perhaps.” She sighed heavily. “One of my favorite childhood books was A Thousand and One Arabian Nights .”

The Duke put down his cards, gazing at her, an amused glint in his eyes. “You wish to be an adventuress, perhaps? Riding elephants and camels and finding magic lanterns in bazaars?”

She laughed awkwardly. “You are teasing me, of course. I know that I will never be able to do any such thing.” She took a deep breath. “I am the daughter of a marquess, and daughters of the nobility can never become adventuresses. We have no freedom

at all.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Ah, and so now I think I understand why you wrote that list, My Lady. It was your act of rebellion against your lot in life.” His eyes darkened. “Alas, I may not be able to whisk you off to Persia on a magic carpet, but I can help you experience many other things... quite delicious things.”

Maddie’s breath caught in her throat. He was gazing at her with such intensity that she blushed, quickly looking away. She knew exactly what things he was willing to help her experience—they were all written on the list, tucked safely in his jacket pocket.

The air between them thickened once again. She put down her cards. It was hopeless, she couldn’t concentrate at all.

“Are you giving up?” he asked in a soft, teasing voice. “But I haven’t even shown you how to cheat yet. How will you ever become one of those high society madams to boost your income?”

She couldn’t help laughing. “I fear I shall never be one of those ladies! As much as I do admire them.”

He picked up his brandy, drained it, and put down the glass with a thud. “Then perhaps we should skip to the rest of the list,” he whispered slowly. “Or, alternately, we could just repeat number three...”

She was staring into his eyes, mesmerized, as if she were falling into a trance.

Before she knew it, he reached out, taking her head in his hands, and pulling her towards him. His lips descended on her own, claiming them, with an almost arrogant confidence. She could still taste the brandy he had just consumed.

She shuddered, her limbs feeling heavy and warm. He prised open her lips with his tongue, tasting her, as if he wanted to swallow her whole.

She shuddered again as she felt hot liquid pool between her legs. She was opening to him, in a way she didn't understand. All she knew was that she felt as if she might die if he didn't touch her body in the most intimate way.

I want his hands on me. I want them on me... now. And I want to touch him...

Alarm bells were ringing in her head. She was in mortal danger. She couldn't let him take her maidenhead. He was a confessed rake. This meant nothing to him—it was just a game to him!

Desperately, she wrenched her face away, panting heavily. She stood up, looking down at him. "This was a mistake," she whispered frantically. "I need to go home."

He stood up, sighing deeply.

She tensed. Was he going to try again?

But to her relief, he nodded. "I will accompany you to the carriage."

The wind was calming on her hot face as they walked back to the carriage waiting in the mews. He didn't try to touch her again, nor did he speak to her.

She couldn't work out whether it was out of respect for what she had just said, or whether he was bitter with disappointment that the night hadn't panned out the way he had planned.

As she climbed into the carriage, he peered into the window, looking at her intently. "Until the house party at Stansgate, My Lady. I am looking forward to it."

She didn't reply.

The driver cracked the whip, and the carriage lurched forward, taking her home.

Maddie rested her head against the carriage wall, her heart beating furiously in her chest. That had been a lucky escape. But she knew that wasn't the end of it, not by a long shot. He still had her list. She knew the game had only just begun.

CHAPTER 10

“Where on earth have you been, Sister?”

Augusta’s voice blared like a foghorn into the quiet, dark room. Maddie started, almost shouting in alarm.

Augusta was sitting at Maddie’s dressing table, dressed in her night attire. She looked cross and irritable.

The house had been as quiet as a churchyard as Maddie had tiptoed through it, before reaching her room. Clearly, it had lulled her into a false sense of security.

“Ah, I went to see Selina,” Maddie lied, her color deepening. “You will not tell our parents, will you?”

Augusta was silent, staring at her sharply. Maddie tried to look as innocent as a lamb. Her heart was thudding so heavily that she was certain her sister could hear it.

“Why?” Augusta demanded. “What did you need to do with Selina at this time of night? It is most odd.”

“We were playing cards,” Maddie replied, thinking quickly. “She taught me how to play piquet. That is all! We were just having a lark.”

She couldn’t breathe. It wasn’t all a tall tale, at least. She had been playing cards. Just not with Selina.

Augusta shook her head sorrowfully. “Maddie, you take too many risks. If our mother had discovered you missing, instead of me, she would have locked you in this room for a month! Promise me you will not do such a thing again.”

“I promise,” Maddie said in a faint voice, almost passing out with relief. “What are you doing in my room at this hour, anyway?”

“I could not sleep,” Augusta huffed in a grim voice. “My mind was whirring like the insides of a clock.”

Maddie sat down on the edge of her bed, gazing at her sister. “What is the matter?”

Augusta sighed heavily. “I have a bad feeling about Mama. I just know she is up to something. I think she is planning to marry me off to the Duke of Everly.”

Maddie’s heart stopped beating for a moment. “And what if she was? Would you think it a bad thing?”

Augusta rolled her eyes in disgust. “What do you think? I told you, I have no interest in marriage at all!” She shook her head incredulously. “Besides, the Duke of Everly is a handsome devil, and he knows it. I do not think I have ever met such an arrogant man. I am not fooled, and I am not susceptible to his charms.”

Maddie almost slumped with relief. Her sister wasn’t interested in the Duke at all. It would have been a terrible thing indeed if Augusta was truly interested in him... after what Maddie had done with him.

It didn’t bear thinking about at all. If their mother was still determined to match him with Augusta, of course. But she thought her sister’s instinct was correct—as did Selina. They couldn’t all be wrong.

“If I did wish to marry,” Augusta continued in a pensive voice, “which I do not, of course, the Duke of Everly would not be the type of man I would be interested in the least.” She drew in a sharp breath. “But if Mama is determined to match him with me, I fear I must relent. I cannot cause another scandal. Our parents would never forgive me for it.”

Maddie’s heart constricted. This was the last thing she had imagined Augusta saying. Only yesterday, her sister had told her that she would rather run away than submit to the yoke of marriage. This wasn’t like her firebrand sister at all.

“I see,” Maddie murmured in a faint voice. “Of course, you do not wish to cause another scandal. Who would ever want to do that?”

Augusta looked sad. “They barely forgave me the last time, and I have had to live with Mama harping at me constantly ever since.” She blinked back tears. “And perhaps there is a grain of truth in what Mama says—if I married, then I would not have to put up with that harping any longer. It would only be swapping cages, perhaps, but at least I would be its mistress.”

“You could still find a gentleman you like,” Maddie urged, feeling a bit desperate. “Yes, marriage would mean you will escape Mama, but it is for life, Augusta. Would you not wish to submit to someone you can share that life with easily?”

Augusta frowned. “There is no gentleman I like, Maddie. They are all fatally flawed, in my opinion. Either they are shockingly arrogant like this Duke or simpering fools like the two gentlemen I chased away in Hyde Park the other day. There does not seem to be any middle ground with them.” She sighed heavily.

Maddie was silent. She felt upset but was trying hard to fight it. She knew she had no right to feel this way. She barely knew the Duke, and he wasn’t a marriage prospect at all.

The man was a rake who was playing a game with her. He didn't take her seriously. To him, she was just another conquest, from which he would move on, as easily as if he were exchanging dice.

She had no real justification for objecting to her sister's contemplating marriage with him. Or none that she could easily share with her, at any rate.

"Is there something wrong, Sister?" Augusta asked, her frown deepening. "Do you have any reason why I should reject the prospect?"

Maddie shook her head vigorously. "Oh, no, indeed! I would only say that he has the reputation of a rake. Selina told me. I would hate for you to be hurt by him."

To her surprise, Augusta laughed outright. "That is all for the better! It would mean I would not need to suffer his advances, as he would be trawling for finer fish in the sea than me." She paused. "We could lead quite separate lives, which would suit me admirably."

Maddie nodded, not knowing what to say to that. The grandfather clock in the hallway chimed midnight. Suddenly, a wave of weariness washed over her. She just wanted to go to bed and put this troublesome day behind her.

"I wish you well, Sister," she said, yawning discreetly behind her hand. "But if you do not mind, I think I need to go to sleep now."

"Of course," Augusta said, standing up. She walked over to Maddie, placing a soft kiss on her forehead. "Sleep well, dearest."

After Augusta left the room, Maddie struggled out of her gown, hastily pulling on her nightgown. She hung the gown in the wardrobe, making sure it was straight. She didn't want Jane to question anything about it. Her lady's maid had an eagle eye.

She crawled into bed, pulling the covers high, trying not to think about the Duke and the kisses he had given her that day. Her body was still throbbing from them, but she knew she had made the right decision by pushing him away this evening. Who knows where it might have led? She had been alone with him in that building. Anything was possible.

Her breath caught in her throat. She knew she must put a stop to this dangerous game they were playing. She had let herself be swept away by it because she was so fatally attracted to him—but it must end. Not only because Augusta was seriously contemplating letting their mama lead her into marriage with the gentleman.

It was also because she had no idea how she could endure getting closer to him, letting him do the things on her list to her, when he clearly did not care to get to know her as a person at all.

It was all a big game to him. The Duke of Everly was peril. And that was the end of that.

Daniel walked into the drawing room in Stansgate Manor, gazing around, feeling intensely irritable. To his relief, Selina and his cousin Christopher were the only people in the room. His mother had gone out to call on some neighbors.

He walked to the drinks cabinet, pouring himself a generous amount of brandy. The family had been in residence at Stansgate for four long days. After the initial burst of pleasure at seeing his old home again after so long, Daniel had felt cooped up and extremely bored. There wasn't much to do at Stansgate besides walking, fishing, and shooting, in that order. And it wasn't even hunting season. Although, he reflected, it was good to get away from all the simpering fools and dandies in London.

He took a long sip of the brandy. But leaving London had also meant leaving the delectable Lady Madeline and the delicious game they started to play. That was hard.

Harder than he had imagined it would be.

He couldn't stop thinking about her, and his body was literally aching for her. He really couldn't remember when he had last been so consumed by lust for a woman.

"What the deuce is the matter with you, Daniel?" Christopher asked in a mild voice, watching him. "You have been walking around with a hangdog expression almost the entire time since we've been here."

Daniel shrugged, distracted. "Brandy, Cousin?"

"Always," Christopher said, grinning.

Daniel poured his cousin a drink, then topped up his own glass. He sat down, passing Chris his drink, before staring into the flickering flames of the fire, feeling disconsolate.

"Are you on edge about the house party, which starts tomorrow?" Christopher asked. "The horde that shall soon descend upon the house?"

Daniel glanced at his cousin. He couldn't tell Chris what was really bothering him. For starters, Selina was in the room, and he couldn't speak of his unconsummated lust for any lady, never mind her best friend.

But even if Selina wasn't here, he probably wouldn't mention it, anyway. Chris would probably be highly uncomfortable with the topic. His cousin wasn't a ladies' man. Daniel didn't know if he had ever experienced high lust in his life. Christopher never talked about such things, anyway. He was a cold fish in that way.

"Yes, that is it, exactly," Daniel replied dryly. "You have hit the nail on the head, Cousin." He paused. "It would appear I have been away from the delights of the

English ton for far too long.”

“Are you a trifle worried that the ladies will not flock around you like they used to?” Chris teased, grinning widely.

Daniel laughed shortly. “Hardly. Besides, I do not believe there are any ladies of particular interest attending.”

He tried to keep a straight face as he uttered the bald-faced lie. For, of course, there would be one lady of particular interest attending the house party. At least, he prayed that she was still going to attend.

She had rushed off the other night after the luscious kiss they had shared, fleeing into the night, claiming it was all a mistake. He was starting to get worried that she might make an excuse and stay behind in London.

“The ladies had better not flock around him,” Selina said, looking impish, as she threaded her embroidery needle. She turned to Christopher. “Did you not know, Cousin, that our mother is planning to marry him off to my best friend’s sister? I will not tolerate him embarrassing Maddie’s family like that at all.”

Christopher raised his eyebrows. “Really? You mean the formidable Lady Augusta, the bluestocking, who eats gentlemen for breakfast?”

Selina giggled. “You are awful, Chris! Lady Augusta may be a bluestocking, but she is also kind and clever. She just does not suffer fools—particularly when those fools are men—gladly.”

Daniel was silent, trying to digest what Selina had just said. He knew his sister’s instinct was probably correct. Their mother had fawned over Lady Augusta when they had called on the Coles, practically pushing him towards the lady in an

embarrassingly obvious manner. And what was worse, Lady Ollerton, the lady's mother, had been doing the same thing.

He had dismissed it from his mind, being so occupied with Maddie, but now, he contemplated it seriously. Lady Augusta was attending the house party, along with her sister.

It was going to be tedious, fending off his mother's efforts to push him towards the lady. For while Lady Augusta was beautiful, in her own way, he didn't think of her like that at all.

Madeline was the one he wanted. Madeline was the one who set his blood on fire. He couldn't even think about any other woman at the moment, and certainly not her rather frightening sister.

Selina put down her embroidery patch, standing up. "Well, it is probably time to start getting dressed for dinner. Mama will be furious with me if I am not ready when the gong sounds." She left the room.

"Is Selina right?" Christopher asked, sipping his brandy. "Is the Dowager Duchess set on the fearsome bluestocking as a potential bride for you?"

"How should I know?" Daniel huffed irritably. "You know my mother. She is determined to find me a bride, no matter how much I protest. But I shan't let her push me. I am just as determined as she is."

Christopher sighed heavily. "Why do you fight your destiny so much, Cousin? Why can't you just marry someone, secure your heir, and be done with it? You can lead separate lives if you must. It happens all the time in the ton. Marriages of convenience are a dime a dozen. It would get your mother off your back, you know that."

Daniel turned away, staring into the fire again. He couldn't be bothered arguing with his cousin about it. When he turned back, he started. Chris was staring at him, an inscrutable look on his face that, if he didn't know any better, could be construed as disdain. But then it was quickly gone. Perhaps his imagination was getting the better of him.

He turned his mind back to the distasteful subject of marriage. His mother wasn't going to succeed, no matter how much she tried. He wasn't going to be pushed into a marriage with Lady Augusta—or any other lady, for that matter.

But it was dawning on him now that his mother's machinations might affect his chances with Maddie. He didn't want her to think he was seriously pursuing her sister. That would not do at all.

How was he going to handle it?

CHAPTER 11

“Welcome to Stansgate,” the Dowager Duchess of Everly intoned, smiling imperiously.

Maddie glanced around anxiously as her family stepped into the large, ornate foyer of Stansgate Manor, the seat of the great Huxley family. She couldn't even take in the splendor of the grand, sprawling manor. All she could think about was the Duke and whether he might suddenly spring from some corner.

But, to her relief, the only people in the foyer standing to greet them were the Dowager Duchess and Selina.

Maddie exhaled slowly. She was safe, for now. But she knew there was no possible way she could avoid him for the entirety of this house party.

I will just have to find a way . I cannot let him take advantage of this situation any longer. I simply must find a way to get the list back before this progresses any further.

“I trust you had a smooth journey from London, Lady Ollerton?” the Dowager Duchess asked.

“It was tolerable, Your Grace,” Lady Ollerton replied, sighing heavily. “A trifle bumpy, but here we are, in one piece.” She gazed around the foyer, blinking owlshly. “Your home is spectacular. We are so honored to be here.”

Maddie's heart did a cartwheel. Two gentlemen were striding into the foyer. One was Selina's older cousin, Lord Christopher Huxley, whom she had only met on one occasion, shortly after becoming friends with Selina. And the other gentleman was the Duke of Everly himself.

Maddie could barely breathe. It had been four days since she had last laid eyes on him, when he had sent her off in his carriage, after playing with her in his private garden pad. She had hoped that the irresistible attraction she felt towards him might have dimmed in that time.

It seemed she may as well have wished for the moon to crash down on Earth. For the attraction hadn't dimmed during the time they had spent apart. If anything, it felt stronger than ever. God help her.

Their eyes locked. Maddie felt a tingle all the way down her spine.

As the others talked, the Duke managed to sidle up to her, standing by her side in a seemingly perfectly correct manner. The Dowager Duchess and Lady Ollerton were walking away, talking animatedly, with Augusta trailing behind them, looking painfully bored already.

"It has been a while since we last saw each other, My Lady," the Duke whispered. "I confess that while I have been pining for you, it seems I had forgotten how beautiful you actually are."

Maddie's cheeks turned pink. "You are a shameless flirt, Your Grace. But you must stop, for I am immune to it."

"You lie," he whispered, his eyes flickering towards her. "You know that you do."

Her color deepened. But before she could respond, Lord Christopher and Selina

approached them.

“You remember my cousin, do you not, Maddie?” Selina asked, smiling widely. “Christopher, this is my very best friend in the world, Lady Madeline Cole.”

Christopher bowed slightly. “I remember Lady Madeline, Selina. We were introduced at your last birthday party.” His eyes lingered on Maddie. “Do you like croquet, My Lady?”

“I do, Lord Christopher,” Maddie replied, feeling enormously relieved by the interruption. She tried not to look at the Duke.

Christopher smiled at her. “Well, you are very lucky, then, as a game has just started in the gardens.” He held out his arm to her. “Would you do me the honor of accompanying me there?”

“Certainly, My Lord,” Maddie murmured, taking his arm.

She was highly conscious that Selina and her brother were just behind them, following them out to the gardens. Firmly, she tried to suppress her feelings. But her heart was still racing from her brief encounter with the Duke, and she knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that ignoring him entirely was going to be far harder than she had even anticipated.

And this was only the beginning of the party. She had days to endure.

How on earth was she going to manage it?

Daniel took a glass of champagne from a passing footman, trying not to make it obvious that he couldn't stop looking at Maddie. But it was hard. Very hard.

She was looking particularly lovely today in a salmon pink muslin dress with cream lace embellishment on the bodice and short sleeves. But it wasn't the gown. Lady Madeline Cole could be wearing a potato sack, and he would still think her the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes on.

He took a long sip of champagne. He had spoken the utter truth to her—he had forgotten how beautiful she was in the few short days since he had last seen her. It was as if the force of her beauty hit him anew, square in the face.

A game of croquet was underway, just as Christopher said. The Coles were the last of the guests to arrive. At least a dozen or more people were milling around the gardens, some of them playing croquet, some chatting, sipping champagne, or nibbling on the mille-feuilles that his mother had specially ordered for the garden party.

Daniel watched the game. Maddie was playing alongside her sister. She hit the ball with her croquet stick, managing to send it cleanly through the hoop. She laughed at her victory, her honey-brown eyes sparkling with joy, her cheeks flushed. Daniel felt an arrow of desire shoot straight through him, making him tingle all over.

“Well done, Lady Madeline!” Christopher called, clapping. “You are quite the skilled croquet player.” He raised a glass of champagne in the air towards her. “A short break to crow over your triumph, perhaps?”

Maddie laughed again, handing her mallet to her sister, then made her way to Christopher. Daniel edged closer to them. His cousin was paying a lot of attention to Maddie, and he had noticed him staring at her in a speculative manner.

Hound's teeth . Is Chris interested in her?

He watched as his cousin handed Maddie a glass of champagne, raising his own and clinking it against hers. She took a long sip, gazing around the grounds. Daniel edged

a little closer so he could hear their conversation.

“It is quite delightful here,” she said, smiling. “The gardens are magnificent.”

Christopher laughed. “Indeed they are, My Lady. That is thanks to an enormous army of gardeners. I would wager that Stansgate employs more servants than even St. James’s Palace.”

Maddie laughed, raising her eyebrows. “Surely you exaggerate, My Lord?”

He grimaced in a mocking way. “Only just. I have been running this estate for five years, as well as the residence in Grosvenor Square. Staying on top of the servants’ wages and the maintenance required on both properties is a full-time job in itself.”

“How noble of you to step in to run the duchy,” Maddie praised, gazing at him. “I am certain the Dowager Duchess could not have managed without you, My Lord.”

“I do my best,” Christopher said, puffing up his chest a bit. “Lord knows that someone had to do it. But truth be told, I have always had a head for business, so it was no hardship.” He paused. “I am afraid my cousin was too busy gallivanting around Europe to attend to it. But then, he has always had a tendency to shirk his responsibilities.”

Daniel tensed. It was still a sore point for him, hearing how well his cousin had run the duchy in his absence, even though he was very grateful for it. He was just a bit tired of his mother constantly alluding to it. And did Chris really have to run him down in such a way? Was that what he had been telling everyone in his absence?

“But enough about the duchy,” Christopher continued, gazing at Maddie warmly. “Tell me more about yourself, Lady Madeline. Perhaps how such a strikingly beautiful lady as yourself is still unmarried. I know you were the Diamond of the last

two London Seasons.”

Daniel smiled to himself. He wasn't surprised to hear that Maddie had been the Diamond of her Seasons at all. He leaned closer to hear her reply to his cousin's question.

“I suppose I have never met anyone who has swept me off my feet,” she said, looking wistful. “Many have tried, but they all seem to be cut from the same cloth. It is so very hard to find a gentleman who I find appealing in that way, My Lord.”

Daniel's heart constricted. She sounded so sincere that he didn't doubt her innocence. Clearly, she wasn't a wildly flirtatious type. His assumption that she was an ingenue who didn't have much experience with men was confirmed.

The things she had written, so shockingly, on that list had been conjured by her imagination. And her desire to explore that side of herself, which was unusual for such a well-brought-up young lady.

She has untapped passion . I felt it when we kissed.

Daniel couldn't wait to stir that whirlpool again. Already, he was dying of impatience. He must find a way to get her alone again, as quickly as possible, or surely die.

“Would you care to take a stroll?” Christopher asked casually. “There is a lake which is quite appealing at this time of year with the bird life.” He paused. “A pair of white swans have just arrived. They come to the lake at the same time every year. I believe they are life mates.”

Maddie's eyes gleamed. “Oh, I adore swans! Yes, please, thank you. I would enjoy that very much, My Lord.”

To Daniel's chagrin, they wandered away from the main party and towards the lake, side by side, their heads bent towards each other in conversation.

His heart tightened just watching them. He was certain, now, that his cousin was interested in Maddie. He had never seen Chris target a lady so quickly or exclusively.

It should be me taking her to see those swans , not him.

Immediately, he felt ashamed of himself. Chris was his cousin, and he had run the duchy when Daniel should have been doing it. He had taken care of his family as well.

While Daniel had been rambling around the Continent, indulging in countless love affairs, his quiet, steadfast cousin had stepped in to manage the estate. He shouldn't feel resentful towards him because he was showing a preference towards the woman that Daniel happened to be infatuated with at the moment. The infatuation would pass soon enough, as it always did.

Daniel ran a hand through his hair, watching them disappear further into the distance. He felt a little ill. Despite his best efforts, he was resentful, and jealous, which was such an alien emotion for him that he almost didn't recognize it.

It will pass after I have her . Then, I shall not care either way if Chris wants to squire her around.

Or so he kept telling himself as he drained his glass of champagne, waiting on tenterhooks for them to return.

Maddie was a little breathless by the time Lord Christopher brought her back to the party. And hot. It was such a glorious day and even hotter around the lake, which had sparkled as if a thousand diamonds were strewn across the surface.

“Madeline!” Her mother’s voice was imperious. “You forgot your parasol. Your cheeks are quite pink.”

“Sorry, Mama,” Maddie mumbled, not paying much attention, her eyes seeking out the Duke immediately.

Her mother gazed at Lord Christopher with a curious expression on her face. Suddenly, she smiled at him, in a quite dazzling way.

“Oh, never mind,” she said. “As long as you remember in the future. You must protect your complexion.” A pause. “Did you enjoy the stroll with my daughter, Lord Christopher?”

“Indeed, Lady Ollerton,” he replied, inclining his head. “Your daughter is charming. I could not ask for a better walking companion.”

Maddie smiled vaguely, inching away. She was thirsty.

When her mother started engaging Selina’s cousin in conversation, she took the opportunity, slipping away from them in search of some lemonade. She couldn’t drink any more champagne—it had made her head throb slightly in this heat.

As she searched for a footman, heading further away from the party, she noticed that Augusta and Selina were both still playing croquet, seemingly absorbed in the game. Her sister smashed the ball through a hoop with her mallet, looking triumphant. But she couldn’t see the Duke at all.

Her heart plummeted with disappointment, which she quickly tried to ignore. It was good that he had seemingly left the garden party. It meant that she didn’t have to keep ducking and dodging him, although he had managed to keep his distance while his cousin was entertaining her—which was something.

She found a footman coming from the house, and she snatched a tall glass of lemonade, which she drank thirstily. The walk around the lake had been wonderful, and she had even spotted the two white swans swimming placidly side by side, their long necks bent towards each other, as if in silent communion. That had been a thrill. How majestic they were.

But the whole time, she hadn't been able to stop herself from wishing it was the Duke squiring her around, instead of his cousin. Lord Christopher was a pleasant enough conversationalist, but her senses seemed attuned only to the Duke. He was the only man she wanted by her side. Her eyes could only see him.

She was still holding her empty glass, thinking about him, when she felt a warm breath on her ear. She stiffened, instinctively trying to turn around, but a firm hand on her shoulder rooted her to the spot.

Her heart leaped. It was him. It could only be him.

"Look over to the west," a deep voice whispered in her ear. "Do you see those quarters, on the other side of the lake?"

She turned in the direction he indicated. A frisson of sensation ran down her spine. "Yes."

"You will find me there in ten minutes," the voice said in a slightly imperious tone. "Meet me there. Make sure that no one sees you slip away. Do you understand?"

Maddie's eyes widened in alarm. "I... I cannot do it," she whispered. "It is far too risky..."

"Then make an excuse," the voice purred seductively. "Tell them that you have a headache and need to lie down. Or some such thing."

Maddie hesitated. The hand tightened on her shoulder. She felt as if her entire body was on fire now.

She swallowed painfully, before nodding. He withdrew quickly. She didn't turn around. She was trembling from head to toe. She felt sick and excited in equal measure.

It was happening again. She hadn't even been able to resist him for even a day. And at that moment, she didn't care in the slightest.

CHAPTER 12

M addie approached the door, a wave of nausea overtaking her at the thought of this daring daylight escapade.

I must be mad. Stark, raving mad.

Her heart was pounding hard by the time she reached the quarters by the lake. So hard that it sounded like a drum in her chest. She gazed around fearfully, convinced that someone would see her slip inside. But no one was about.

It had been surprisingly easy to escape. She had done what the Duke asked and told them she had a headache. Lord Christopher had been concerned, offering to escort her to the kitchens for a remedy, but she had managed to fend him off.

Her mama had smiled, telling the gentleman he was so gallant, seemingly more interested in talking to him than concerned about her youngest daughter's splitting headache.

Augusta and Selina had still been embroiled in their game of croquet and didn't even notice her vanish. It had almost been too easy. She was starting to realize that this game of theirs was entirely possible. She was not duplicitous by nature and wasn't familiar with the nuances of deception, the games that must be played to achieve what she wanted.

The quarters were seemingly rundown, looking like they belonged to a gamekeeper or some other servant. She wouldn't have even glanced at them in passing. Her hand

was slippery with sweat on the doorknob as she opened the door, blinking rapidly to accustom her eyes to the sudden darkness after the glare of the day.

The place was silent. She walked quickly, noting its layout. It was set out like a house, with a sitting room, a small kitchen, and one small bedroom, which, curiously, led to another room.

She gasped. The room was large and filled with furniture. A chaise lounge, bookcases packed with books, and several objets d'art . There were miniature marble sculptures, potted plants, and a large Persian rug in bright colors on the floor. Paintings hung on the walls.

“Do you like it?”

She swung around, her heart racing. The Duke was standing there, with that perpetual amused expression on his face, watching her.

“I renovated it myself,” he continued, his eyes never leaving her face. “Years ago. I collected all the items.” His eyes darkened. “And here it is, as if I never left it. I only had to get the maids to dust it.”

“Your lair,” she croaked, swallowing painfully. “Another one of your lairs.”

He laughed with delight. “Indeed. I have so many that I have lost count. I even keep a harem in one of my houses on the Continent.” He looked straight into her eyes. “Perhaps I could whisk you away to join it. I would rather like that.”

Maddie blushed fiercely, forcing herself to laugh. “You are teasing me. You do not have a harem, Your Grace. And if you do, I am certainly not inclined to join it.”

“Why ever not?” he breathed, taking a step closer to her. “It would be an adventure.

And you want to be an adventuress, My Lady, remember?”

He reached out a hand, trailing it down the side of her face in a slow, seductive way, his eyes never leaving hers. Maddie shuddered at the touch. She was already on fire for him. Her whole body felt like it was turning into molten liquid.

She was in as much danger as she had ever been. It was like her body was a traitor. Why was she having so much trouble resisting him, when her mind told her it was imperative that she did?

She forced herself to take a step back, breaking the contact. He didn't look offended at all. He just smiled in that maddening way of his, walking to a small cabinet in a corner of the room, which she saw contained bottles of liquor.

“A drink?” he asked in a mockingly polite voice.

Maddie shook her head firmly. She had already had a glass of champagne at the garden party, and there was no way she was going to consume anything else strong.

Apart from the fact that it was only mid-afternoon, and she would certainly be well into her cups if she did, she didn't want to lose control around him. She needed her wits about her.

“As you wish,” he said, pouring himself a small glass of brandy, and then sipping it thoughtfully. “Well, what do you think of the place? You haven't told me yet.”

Maddie gazed around the room again. “I think it is tasteful. Exactly as I would decorate a lair if I was ever to have one.”

He burst into laughter. “Indeed! Well, you are quite welcome to peruse it and take any ideas you like for your own.” He sipped his drink, gazing at her pensively. “You

have been trying to avoid me. I know it. That is why you have been clinging like a limpet to my cousin for the entire afternoon.”

Maddie glared at him. “I have not been clinging to your cousin! He asked me to take a walk. It would have been abominably rude to refuse. That is all.”

He kept staring at her, sipping his drink, not saying anything. The air had shifted slightly in the room—the playful banter was gone. He seemed angry... or something else.

Her jaw dropped. Was it jealousy? Was the Duke jealous that his cousin was paying her special attention?

To her surprise, her heart surged with sudden, inexplicable joy. For if he was jealous of his cousin, it might mean that he actually liked her a bit, rather than just playing a game with her for his amusement.

But as soon as the thought occurred to her, she rejected it. He wasn’t jealous in that way. He didn’t harbor any finer feelings for her. He was just used to getting his own way, and he saw his cousin as an impediment. That was all.

“Perhaps,” he said, his face set in a hard line. “But regardless of that, you have been trying to avoid me. You have been running away like a frightened hare every single time I get close to you.”

She exhaled slowly. “Of course, I have been trying to avoid you! You disconcert me. I never know what you will say or do. And I do not want anyone else to notice that you are behaving in an unseemly manner towards me.”

“I thought you wanted to be a rebel.” He tossed back his drink, before setting the glass on the cabinet. “I thought you wanted to experience life beyond the strict

confines of your position. Why do you care what they think?”

“Because I do,” she burst out, infuriated beyond measure. “Because I must! A lady’s reputation is paramount. I would be ruined if anyone suspects what is going on between us—if they even suspect the half of it.”

He shrugged. “There can be fun in ruin,” he drawled, his eyes like flint. “There can be fun in running away from everything that has ever been expected.”

They were like wary cats, waiting for the opportunity to pounce.

“Maybe for you ,” she shot back, her heart pounding. “You have the privilege of rank and your sex. Everyone expects a gentleman to sow his wild oats. Everyone turns a blind eye. It is vastly different for a lady. Oh, why do I have to explain to you how the world works?”

“You do not have to explain it,” he said curtly. “I know how the world works very well, indeed. That is why I do not give a fig about it and am determined to live my life exactly as I please.”

Maddie scowled at him, so furious she could barely contain it. There was such casual contempt in the way he spoke to her. But at least she understood him perfectly now. He had just uttered his life philosophy—his credo, which he clearly lived by.

He didn’t care about her at all. The playful banter was just manipulation, designed to soften her up, to get what he wanted from her. This was the real Duke of Everly speaking—a man who took what he wanted, when he wanted, and didn’t care who he hurt in the process.

He didn’t care if they were caught and her reputation was ruined. Apparently, she just had to take that on the chin if it happened and deem it a lark . While he sauntered off

into the sunset, completely immune from damage.

Suddenly, it struck her forcibly that he might take what he could from her, and still not give her back the list. He had claimed he would, but how could she trust him at all when he was such a man? He had already stooped to blackmail, after all, in order to get what he wanted.

“I must go,” she murmured in a withering voice. “I should never have agreed to come here at all. Good day.”

She turned to leave, to rush out of this room—his lair —and out of these quarters entirely. But suddenly, there was a hand on her arm, spinning her around. Before she knew it, he had his arms around her, arching her back, bending her to submit to him, as if she were a mere twig.

Instinctively, she put her hands on his chest, to push him away. They were both panting hard. His grey eyes were glittering fiercely, and she was shocked to discover that she could feel his hardness pressing against her, quite insistently.

Oh, Lord . How have I gotten myself into this appalling situation?

“No,” she whispered, pushing against his chest feebly. “No...”

“Are you certain?” His voice was thick with desire. “Please. Just one kiss. That is all I ask of you,” he added, sounding breathless.

Her body was trembling with fierce arousal, as well as the remnants of her anger. She wanted him to kiss her. Quite desperately. She knew she would regret it... but at this moment, nothing else seemed to matter.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Oh, yes.”

He didn't waste any time. His arms tilted her back further, and his lips descended on her own, feasting on her with a hunger that took her breath away. As if he were a starved man and he had finally stumbled upon sustenance.

Maddie felt a jolt of pure, brutal desire snake through her as she opened her mouth beneath his, as hungry for him as he was for her. His tongue plunged into her mouth, tasting her, devouring her, for what seemed like an eternity.

She was so giddy with longing by the end of it that she barely noticed when his mouth left hers, trailing down her neck, landing hot, fiery kisses on it.

She closed her eyes in pure bliss as he nibbled and softly bit her tender skin. But then, they flew open as she felt his mouth fasten on the side of her neck, towards the nape, sucking hard.

It hurt... but in a way that was almost painfully delicious. Another bolt of desire shot through her body. And now, his hands were rising upwards from her waist, skimming her bodice, roughly caressing her breasts through the thin fabric of her gown.

She felt her nipples instantly harden. She wanted him to pull away the fabric, to rip the bodice of the gown aside, and take her breasts in his hands, twirling the nipples in his fingers. She wanted it so badly that it shocked her.

She knew she was losing all sense of control, that she was becoming a malleable ragdoll beneath his touch, and that she must stop it now, before she did anything more she might live to regret.

With a mighty effort, she pushed him away, her chest rising and falling. Daniel seemed confused. His eyes were glazed, looking like he was in a trance, as if he didn't understand where he was at all.

“I must go,” she stammered. “I... I cannot do this any longer.” Abruptly, she thought of Augusta and the fact that their mother was intent on marrying her sister off to this man. “For pity’s sake, we might be related, one day!”

He looked even more confused. “What?”

Maddie turned on her heel and fled the room before he swept her under his spell again. Her heart was racing sickeningly as she left the quarters, taking a long, winding path behind the lake and towards the grand house. She didn’t want anyone to see her. She was supposed to be resting inside with a headache.

She heard the sound of chatter and laughter from the garden party as she slunk inside. Her heart heaved with relief. The party was still in full swing, which meant that probably no one had checked on her. But that wouldn’t last forever. Already, shadows were lengthening across the lawn. Soon, they would all be drifting inside to rest before changing for dinner.

She made her way up the imposing staircase. At the top, she stopped, biting her lip. There were long hallways leading off in both directions, and she realized that she actually had no idea which room she was staying in—they had joined the garden party immediately after arrival.

I can find it . I will simply open all the doors and see which one contains my trunks.

She started walking again, quickly opening doors and shutting them. She wasn’t in danger of disturbing anyone, as they were all at the party. If she couldn’t find her room, then she would go to the servants’ hall. Someone there would know, for certain.

She opened another door. This was a very large room, larger than the others, with a magnificent four-poster mahogany bed in the center and a connecting door to another

room. She gazed around in awe. She hadn't ever seen such an impressive bedroom. It looked fit for a king.

Suddenly, she saw a dark green jacket hanging on the front of the ornate wardrobe. Her heart skipped a beat. She recognized that jacket—it belonged to the Duke of Everly. He had been wearing it the night she had sneaked away to his home in Grosvenor Square.

These are his chambers . And that door to the side connects them to the chambers that belong to the Duchess... when eventually there is one.

She felt frozen to the spot, unable to move. The urge to walk slowly around these chambers, to inspect them closely, was strong. Very strong. What would she find if she investigated? What pieces of him would she discover, this devilish man who had taken over her life out of the blue... and quite taken her peace of mind?

“Milady? Can I assist you?”

Maddie spun around. A footman was standing there, watching her intently, a quizzical expression on his face.

“Oh!” Maddie flushed, biting her lip. “I seem to be lost! I cannot find my room!”

The footman smiled. “I will help you find it, Milady. Come with me.”

Maddie followed him out of the room, feeling small and foolish. She hoped the Duke never found out about this. He would surely think she had done it deliberately.

She glanced back at the room before the door closed. He was an enigma. A puzzle she longed to solve. But it was far too dangerous.

She must stick to her resolve to stay as far away from him as possible... if only her treacherous body could be persuaded. Her Achilles heel was her overwhelming desire for him. It simply must be tempered... or she would surely lose everything.

CHAPTER 13

Once I have possessed Maddie, this intense desire shall pass . At least, it has always done so in the past, when I have been mad with lust for other ladies.

As he walked into his study, Daniel was teetering on a razor's edge, indeed. He was already sick of playing host, and it was only the first evening of this infernal house party.

A game of snapdragon was being played in the parlor. Lord Acton had suggested it, even though it was usually played in winter, and everyone had seemed eager to play. The candles had been dimmed, and a bowl had been filled with brandy and raisins and set alight. Daniel was quite certain that someone was about to lose their eyebrows to the dangerous game.

I had forgotten what passes for entertainment amongst this crowd . It is a far cry from the more sophisticated antics on the Continent.

He sighed heavily, pouring himself a tall glass of whiskey and then picking up the entire bottle, taking it with him to the upholstered chair by the fireplace. He sat down, staring moodily into the flames. He was deluding himself, of course. His frustration had nothing to do with the house guests and everything to do with Lady Madeline Cole.

He sipped his drink, feeling the liquor seep into his bloodstream like fire. She had slipped through his fingers like an eel. And she had stealthily managed to avoid him for the entire evening.

When he had left the parlor, she had been talking animatedly with Christopher in a corner and hadn't even glanced in his direction. They were the only guests who had refused to play the game, apart from himself, and they seemed as thick as thieves. He didn't think she had even noticed he had left the room.

A pang of jealousy pierced his heart. He frowned. Another one. Clearly, he needed to scratch this itch with Maddie sooner rather than later, to purge himself of this mad lust he had for her before it drove him to the nearest asylum.

He stretched out his legs, taking another long sip of his whiskey. He might as well stay here and drown his sorrows. At least it might temporarily dampen his fervor for her.

His frown deepened. He actually couldn't recall ever feeling this level of jealousy over a woman before. It was quite disconcerting. He really didn't like it. Not in the least.

The door opened. It was Selina, looking a little out of breath. Her eyes were bright.

"What are you doing?" she asked in a censorious voice. "Why did you skulk out of the parlor so early?"

Daniel shrugged indifferently. "They were all having a fine time without me."

She eyed the bottle of whiskey. "You will be rolling around in your cups soon if you are not careful, Brother." She walked into the room, standing over him, her hands on her hips. "You must help. One of Lady Darnley's puppies has gone missing on the grounds. A servant took him and his siblings outside, and he has vanished."

Daniel gaped at her. "What the deuce has a missing puppy got to do with me? Surely the errant servant can search for the beast and enlist help from the other servants?"

“Everyone is out looking for the pup,” Selina said, frowning. “Well, almost everyone. The older ones, like Mama and Lady Ollerton, are still in the parlor, comforting Lady Darnley, who is having a conniption. But the younger guests all threw their hat into the ring. Christopher, Augusta, Maddie...”

Daniel sat up straighter, staring at his sister keenly. That had gotten his attention. “They are all wandering the grounds, searching for this puppy?”

Selina nodded. “Yes. And you must help as well! Lady Darnley is truly distraught, Brother. Her puppies are like her children.”

Daniel jumped to his feet. He really didn’t feel like trawling the grounds in the dark, searching for a missing poodle, but if Maddie was out there... well, the search for her would be another matter entirely.

“I am at Lady Darnley’s service.” He slipped on his jacket. “Tell her the pup will be found in no time.”

Selina looked pleased. “What a good sport you are, Brother.”

“What direction did the others go in?” he asked casually. “Just so I know and can look elsewhere. We do not want to be searching the same area, do we?”

“Christopher and Maddie have already headed towards the lake,” Selina replied. “Augusta and I are about to search around the folly. Perhaps you could check the rose garden?”

“Done,” Daniel said, knowing he had no intention of going in the direction of the rose garden at all. “May the best man find the pup. Tally ho!”

Selina gave a bark of laughter. “It is not a treasure hunt, Daniel! But, yes, let us hope

the poor pup is found safe and well. I do not think Lady Darnley will take it well at all if he is lost forever. She is already suffering from the vapors. Mama had to send for her smelling salts to revive her.”

Daniel just managed to stop himself from rolling his eyes. Lady Darnley’s histrionics were legendary. The lady had an attack of the vapors when she cut her finger.

He tried to look sympathetic.

“The poor lady,” he said, sighing. “Yes, let us find her pup, and all will be well.”

“You do not fool me for a moment, Brother,” Selina drawled, looking amused. “You do not care either way about that pup. But thank you for joining the search, anyway.”

Daniel paused, reaching out to rumple her hair affectionately, dislodging one of her jeweled hair combs in the process. She ducked, laughing.

“You know, it is good spending time with you again, Selina,” he said, feeling another wave of affection. “You have grown into a charming, beautiful young lady. It makes my heart glad to see it.”

Selina looked surprised, then gratified. “It is good spending time with you again as well, Brother. It has been too long.”

They gazed at each other, a bit awkwardly. Daniel ruffled her hair again. Then, they headed out of the study, going in different directions.

Daniel felt suddenly alert and almost thrilled. The evening had progressed in an unexpected way. And if he managed to stumble upon Maddie alone during the search for the missing puppy... well, it might end up much, much better than he had ever anticipated.

Maddie held the flaming torch higher as she scoured the banks of the lake, searching for Lady Darnley's missing puppy. It was cold and very dark. She shivered. She hoped and prayed the poor poodle would be found cowering beneath a bush or something, safe and well.

She looked into the distance. Another flaming torch was bobbing in the darkness, getting closer by the minute. She knew it was probably Lord Christopher, as they had headed out together. He was probably checking on her to see whether she was all right. But suddenly, Maddie didn't want to be near him at all. She just wanted to keep searching by herself.

Quickly, she headed off, away from the other torch. It was oddly exhilarating being out here in the darkness alone. It made her feel as if she really was an adventuress, exploring the world. As if she might be in the Americas, or India, or even far-flung New Holland, on the other side of the world.

Suddenly, she heard the Duke's mocking voice in her head.

You want to be an adventuress, My Lady, remember?

Maddie gritted her teeth. She would show him. She would find the missing puppy and be a heroine. She would be lauded with praise, while he slept away oblivious to it all. He wasn't even out searching for the pup, as he had retired early, missing all the drama.

Stop thinking about him . Forget him, as he will surely forget you. You are just a pawn in his game. Nothing more.

She realized she was close to the quarters where she had met him that day. Her heart flipped over in her chest. His secret lair, where he brought his conquests, just like he did when he was staying at his London house.

He probably does have a harem somewhere .

It probably wasn't a lie at all. He was a rake, through and through.

Still, she couldn't resist going to the lair, feeling as if she were being pulled by a string towards it. It was shrouded in darkness. And when she turned the doorknob, finding it unlocked, she couldn't resist slipping inside.

Her heart was beating hard as she raised the torch, staring around. There was a candlestick in the corner. Quickly, she lit it, before returning outside, placing the torch in the sconce—a mounted bracket—at the front of the quarters.

Back inside, she raised the candlestick, walking slowly around. She didn't know what she was looking for, only that the same impulse that had made her walk around his chambers in the main house today had possessed her once again. Perhaps she was searching for a clue to understand him.

She shivered. It was dark and cold. The fire wasn't even lit. Abruptly, she felt a tingle of fear. She was all alone here in the dark. No one knew where she was. What if this place was haunted by ghosts?

You will have to do better than this if you ever become a true adventuress . An adventuress would never get scared in a dark house. She would think it a challenge.

There was a sharp, sudden movement behind her. She started, her heart pounding, and she whipped around. She felt an icy breeze. The wick of the candle flared dangerously, before dimming, threatening to burn out. Maddie almost dropped the candlestick, gripping it just in time.

Oh, dear Lord . There really is a ghost in this place!

She started stumbling towards the door, ready to flee, her heart pounding harder. But just at that moment, the door flew open. Her jaw dropped. In the dim candlelight, she could just make out the figure and face of the Duke of Everly.

“What... what are you doing?” she stammered.

“I could ask you the same thing, My Lady,” he said dryly. “What are you doing here?”

Maddie raised the candlestick higher. “I was searching for the lost puppy,” she replied, realizing how ridiculous she sounded. “And then, I stumbled here, and thought I might take a look around.”

He laughed softly. “I see. So, the lure of my lair proved too strong to resist?”

Maddie flushed. “It wasn’t like that! Oh, you are impossible!” She hesitated, then the words came tumbling out of her mouth. “I was just curious... but then, I thought I heard a ghost... It scared me witless!”

He laughed again, taking a step closer to her. “I have never encountered a ghost here,” he said, his mouth twitching in amusement. “But that is not to say that there isn’t one. Perhaps it waits for unaccompanied ladies to haunt them. Perhaps it likes a particular lady as much as I do.”

Maddie’s mouth went dry. He was playing with her again. How did he even know she was here? Was it coincidence, or had he sought her out?

She vaguely recalled Selina mentioning that she was going to try to rouse him to join the search. Had he predicted she would be drawn here, like a moth towards a flame?

It is feasible . He calculates everything he does. And he is an opportunist.

“You do not like me, Your Grace,” she stated firmly, taking a step back, trying to dispel her disquiet. “You are merely playing with me as a cat does with a mouse. Do not think I am so naïve that I do not realize the game you’re playing.”

He took another step towards her. “If I am playing a game, My Lady, then you are playing it as well. You came back here of your own free will. You knew that I come here often, and there was a chance that I would appear. Now, what do you think that says?”

Maddie flushed harder. “I... I was looking for the puppy. That was all. It might have snuck inside. You are being impossibly arrogant in assuming that I came here on the chance I would see you!”

He kept staring at her. She swallowed the lump in her throat. She knew he didn’t believe a word she said. And the awful thing was that he was right. For she hadn’t entered the lair in order to search for the puppy. She had been drawn to it because she simply couldn’t resist. It was as if a magnetic charm had pulled her here and she was powerless beneath its grip.

Suddenly, he stepped back, opening the door. A cold wind swept in. She was forced to put her hand over the wick of the candle so it wouldn’t blow out.

“If that is the case, then you can leave,” he said in a neutral voice. “It is your decision entirely, My Lady.”

Maddie hesitated. She should run. He was giving her the choice. But, to her appalled shock, she couldn’t. It was as if her feet were rooted to the ground. As if she were a tree rather than a person.

They looked into each other’s eyes. He waited another moment. Then, slowly and deliberately, he closed the door, turning the lock. There was a sharp click.

When he turned back to her, her mouth went dry again. There was no escape now.
And somehow, that thought thrilled her to the very core.

CHAPTER 14

“ Y ou are trembling.” The Duke’s voice was silky. “Do you truly think you heard a ghost?”

He wasn’t exaggerating. Maddie really was trembling like a leaf as he approached her. Yes, she had made her choice, and it was strangely thrilling to submit to it. But that didn’t mean she wasn’t scared witless as well.

He walked up to her, standing very close, but he didn’t touch her. He simply gazed down at her, his face enigmatic.

She laughed weakly. “I do not know any longer.”

“It was probably a mouse,” he said, smiling crookedly. “Do not fear. I promise I will protect you from it.” His mouth twitched. “I will slay the beast with my sword and lay it at your feet, My Lady.”

A warm glow began to spread through her like honey. He was being charming again, and she was almost powerless to resist him. The contempt that she had felt emanating from him today seemed to have vanished entirely.

Do not be fooled . You know he has two sides. And you know that the charm is for a purpose.

She felt like putting her fingers in her ears to block out the voice. She knew that it spoke the truth, but she didn’t want to hear it. Not at that moment. She had made her

decision to be here. She could have left. He had given her the choice.

But something more powerful had compelled her to stay. She knew it was the overwhelming desire she felt for him. And it was also curiosity. She wanted to know what it would be like if he did more than kiss her. His kisses had aroused her so fully that she felt as if a fire was burning inside her and she would surely die if it wasn't extinguished.

So be it . I surrender to it... come what may.

He took the candlestick from her hand, quite gently, leading her over to the long chaise sofa in the corner. Her body felt oddly heavy, her blood pounding in her veins.

He held the candle aloft for a moment, gazing at her. The silence stretched between them.

“What... what are you doing?” she whispered, feeling shy.

“I just want to look at you,” he whispered back, his grey eyes intense. “My eyes want to drink you in. You are so very beautiful, My Lady.”

“Maddie.” She blushed hard, swallowing a painful lump in her throat. “Please, call me by my name. It seems... odd for you to address me in such a formal way, given the circumstances.”

He laughed softly. “Yes, it does. Maddie . A beautiful name for a beautiful lady.”

Her blush deepened. He thought her beautiful. She felt like she was blossoming, transforming, in front of his very eyes. She knew it was just a word—she had been called beautiful too many times to remember. But it had never affected her like this. Idly, she wondered why.

It is because his eyes tell you that he means it . His eyes show that he really does think you are beautiful. This, at least, is not a lie. It is real.

She raised her chin, meeting his gaze. He was impossibly beautiful to her as well, but she didn't know how to express it. Her heart somersaulted with delight as she absorbed his tall, muscular physique, the way a dark lock fell across his forehead, and his magnetic grey eyes. Truly, she had never beheld a man like him.

I want to touch him. I want him to touch me.

But suddenly, his countenance changed. His gaze hardened, just a little.

“My cousin seems to appreciate your beauty as well,” he said curtly, his eyes narrowing. “I do hope that you are not encouraging him.”

“We have already spoken about this,” she countered, an edge to her voice. “I am merely being polite to Lord Christopher.”

He kept gazing at her. “Really? Because you were ensconced in quite a cozy tête-à-tête with him in the drawing room this evening.” He paused, staring at her. “You didn't seem to even notice when I left the room.”

Maddie's jaw dropped. He truly was jealous that his cousin was paying attention to her. She hadn't imagined it.

“Does it matter to you whether I notice if you leave a room?” she asked, really wanting to know the answer.

They were so close now that she felt his breath on her face.

“You know that it does,” he replied in an anguished whisper. “You know that you

have invaded my bloodstream. And I cannot stand that you would ever let anyone kiss you besides me.”

Her heart fluttered. Slowly, he put down the candle, taking both her hands, and pulling her towards him. Maddie felt like she was stepping into a dream.

Boldly, she reached up, cradling his face in her hands, feeling his skin and the hard, angular lines of his cheeks and chin, just like she wanted to. It felt divine. As her fingers drifted towards his lips, he took possession of one of them, drawing it deeply into his mouth.

She gave a strangled gasp. He was suckling on her finger, pulling it deeper, his eyes fixed on hers. She felt a deep, primal tug inside. Her eyes fluttered shut as the incredible sensations enveloped her. She felt like she was sinking into a bottomless pool of warmth.

“Open your eyes,” he commanded in a husky whisper.

She obeyed him, her eyes opening.

She gasped again. There was such fierce hunger on his face that it was almost frightening. Before she could even truly comprehend it, he wound his arms around her tightly, pulling her to him. His hands were suddenly in her hair, dislodging her pins so that it tumbled down her back.

He kissed her then, devouring her lips. She clung to him, gripping him for dear life as the sensations swept over her anew. She vaguely realized that they were falling onto the floor. It occurred to her briefly that her gown would probably be ruined.

How was she going to explain it to Jane?

But before the thought could take root, it vanished, as she felt his hands sliding up her legs, exposing her stockings, her gown bunching around her waist. He was breathing heavily, his eyes narrowed, gazing down at her legs for a moment, before his hands slid higher, to the bodice of her gown.

Oh, yes .

She felt him pull the bodice down so that her breasts spilled out.

Oh, yes, please.

He looked at her naked breasts for a moment, seemingly glorying in the sight of them. He flicked one nipple with the tip of a finger. A shock sizzled through her.

“Divine,” he whispered, smiling with satisfaction. “Truly divine.”

He bent his head, drawing her nipple deep into his mouth. It was still sizzling from the flick, but now, it was as if something else entirely was happening.

She cried out, in alarm as well as arousal, her head starting to turn from side to side on the ground. It was almost like it was too much pleasure, so much that she could barely take it.

I have died and gone to heaven. A most glorious heaven!

Her back started to arch as wave after wave of those tiny shocks overwhelmed her. He was suckling furiously, intermittently flicking her nipple with his tongue, driving her crazy. His hand had snaked to her other breast, cupping it, grazing that nipple as he suckled. The combination was so intense that she arched her back again.

A sudden, powerful heat raced through her body. Vaguely, she realized that she was

so aroused that it was like a flood coming out of her.

She only just realized his other hand had snaked down her body, lifting her gown higher still, before reaching between her legs and cupping her most intimate area. She stiffened as he opened her, sliding a finger inside her, pressing against her at the same time.

His mouth left her nipple, and he gazed up at her, his eyes dazed. “Oh, Lord,” he whispered. “You are so moist, my darling. It is beautiful...”

She barely heard him, for something was happening to her under the touch of his hand, gaining in intensity by the second. He took her nipple back into his mouth, suckling furiously, as his fingers worked their magic inside her.

She stiffened again, crying out in an agonizing way as a flood of sensation enveloped her, wave after intense wave, with such force that she felt as if she was losing herself entirely.

“Oh!” she cried, lost in the wild wonder of it, as the peak hit her with the force of a sledgehammer. “Oh, Daniel.”

It was diminishing, tapering off, falling away from her. A delicious warmth enveloped her. She felt drowsy and content—more content than she had ever felt in her life. She barely had the energy to react when she felt him kiss her softly on the cheek as he slowly removed his fingers.

“What was that?” she murmured, her eyes fluttering shut.

She heard him laugh gently, as if from a great distance. “That was life itself,” he whispered. “That was the reason we live.”

She tried to reply, but she was so very, very sleepy. The last thing she felt was the warmth of a blanket laid gently over her before she blissfully drifted off to sleep.

Daniel kept gazing at the sleeping woman in his arms. She had crashed entirely. Fascinated, he kept watching her, noting her parted rosebud lips, the widow's peak on her forehead, and her dusky eyelashes, which had golden tips, as if they had been gilded.

Hound's teeth , I could watch her sleep all night. How beautiful she is.

He was so hard that it was painful. He wanted to take her so badly, especially after witnessing the wild abandon of her release, how her body had opened to him like a sunflower opening its petals to the sun. It would be easy. But something stopped him.

Wait . Prolong it. It will be well worth it.

He heard a muffled voice outside. She had slept long enough—people would be wondering where she was. He sighed heavily, putting a hand on her shoulder and shaking her gently. Her eyes opened. She looked dazed.

“Well, My Lady,” he whispered, “we can cross Sleep With A Gentleman off your list now.”

Maddie sat up, looking confused. She didn't say a thing for a moment. He put a hand on her shoulder, squeezing it gently. But to his dismay, she stiffened, jumping to her feet. She gazed down at him.

“This was a mistake,” she muttered, straightening her gown, looking shamefaced. “A big mistake. And it will not happen again.”

Before he could say anything, she ran out of the room, unlocking the door and

disappearing into the night.

Daniel sighed again, getting up from the floor. He had hoped that she had irrevocably surrendered to what was happening between them—to what must happen between them. Alas, it seemed he still had work to do before he could finally possess her.

But what delicious work it was. The best sport that he had ever undertaken.

He would dream of her tonight... of her beautiful face in that final moment of her release, when she had cried out. It was a sight that he could never forget. He was sure of it.

The next day at the breakfast table, Maddie could barely eat. All she could think about was what had happened the night before in the Duke's lair. The shocking thing that had occurred within her body that she had never, ever felt before.

She blushed fiercely as she recalled what he had done to her. He knew her most intimate place. And he had coaxed something from her that she had never even known existed.

She glanced around the table. Mercifully, he wasn't in attendance yet. She didn't know how she could even look at him when the time came. Her strategy to avoid him must take precedence over everything else.

You are a fool . You walked into his trap willingly. You wanted it to happen.

And yet... her body was still glowing, still thrumming from what he had done to her. The amazing thing he had evoked within her. How could such an incredible thing be wrong? She was so confused that she didn't know what to think anymore.

She was so engrossed in her reverie that she barely noticed when Selina sat down

beside her, reaching for some toast. Her best friend coughed.

Maddie started.

“What happened to you last night?” Selina asked, buttering her toast. “You were gone for ages.”

Maddie plastered a smile on her face. “Oh, you know, I just kept wandering, searching for Lady Darnley’s pup.” She hesitated. “I didn’t realize that Augusta had found it already.”

“Thank the Lord,” Selina said, grinning. “I was starting to worry that it drowned in the lake. Lady Darnley was overjoyed when we brought it to her safe and sound.” She gazed at Maddie curiously. “You look different, dearest. You have a glow about you.”

Maddie almost dropped her cup of tea. “Do I? I suppose it must be that new rouge that Jane purchased in London. It is all the rage.”

Selina raised her eyebrows. “Really? But you disdain artifice! You never paint your face like a trollop. I haven’t known you to even use face powder before.”

Maddie shrugged, feeling desperately uncomfortable. “Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time. But if it looks too much, then I will stop wearing it. Maybe Jane applied just a little too much during my toilette this morning.”

Selina bit into her toast, still staring at her quizzically. Maddie sipped her tea, trying to keep her composure. She knew exactly why she was glowing. But the real reason wasn’t something she could tell Selina. Not now, in this public place, and not even in private.

She felt sad. Selina was her very best friend in the world. Normally, they confided in each other about everything. But there was just no way she could tell her best friend about the strange thing that was happening between her and Daniel. She didn't think Selina would approve at all.

The door to the dining room opened. Maddie almost dropped her teacup again. It was the Duke.

Do not look at him. Do not even glance his way!

But, of course, she couldn't resist. To her relief, he took a seat on the other end of the table, next to Lady Darnley. He turned to the older lady.

"And how is your puppy this morning, Lady Darnley?" he asked. "I hope you are spoiling him after his great adventure."

Lady Darnley beamed. "Oh, yes, Your Grace! He has been in the lap of luxury, being fed sweetmeats, the little rascal! I venture he will not wander far again after his scare last night."

The Duke nodded. "I am only sorry I was not the one to find him," he said solemnly. "I searched for a good while. But it hardly matters. All is well that ends well."

Maddie's face burnt with shame. She knew he hadn't searched for the puppy at all. And her search for the lost animal had been curtailed by him. While everyone else was scouring the grounds, they had been locked in his lair, doing scandalous things.

Well, My Lady, we can cross Sleep With A Gentleman off your list now.

His voice from the previous night, just before she had fled the lair, drifted into her mind, as clear as a bell. Her color deepened. She had fallen asleep, and he had

watched her sleeping. The first thing she had seen when she had opened her eyes was his face gazing at her avidly.

Somehow, it was even more intimate than what had happened previously. One was vulnerable when sleeping. She didn't know what to think about it at all.

The list. There are still more things on it...

She put down her teacup, rising to her feet, throwing her napkin on the table. She couldn't eat, and she couldn't stay in this room with him. Not for one more minute.

She glanced at him again. Her eyes widened. Lady Darnley was dabbing at her eyes with her lace handkerchief, clearly distressed, as she recounted in detail the lead-up to the loss of her pup last night to the Duke.

That wasn't surprising. Lady Darnley always wore her heart on her sleeve a little bit, particularly when it concerned her animals. What was surprising was the way the Duke was handling it. He was patting her arm, talking to her in a soothing voice. The old lady smiled at him tremulously.

Maddie frowned. It was a kind, caring gesture, and it seemed genuine. But even if it wasn't, the effect it had on the lady was real. Was it possible that the Duke had a tender side, after all?

"Shall we go for a walk this morning?" Selina asked, making her jump. "Maybe Augusta could come with us."

Maddie nodded quickly, seemingly just as eager to escape. "That sounds perfect, dearest."

"And then, we must confer about our gowns for this evening," Selina added, smiling.

“That shall take some time.”

Maddie looked blank. “Why?”

Selina laughed. “Your mind is like a sieve, Maddie! The ball is this evening. Mama will be preparing for it for the entire day. It will be the talk of the district. Simply everyone is coming.”

“Of course,” Maddie said in a faint voice. “The ball. How could I forget?”

Quickly, she started walking out of the room, looking straight ahead. But when she reached the door, she glanced back. The Duke was gazing at her, a warm expression on his face.

Oh, how was she going to evade him now, after what he had done to her?

CHAPTER 15

“Daniel! Daniel!”

Daniel snapped out of his reverie at the sound of his mother’s strident voice. He had been spellbound, watching Maddie dancing. She was looking particularly delectable this evening in a white silk gown with a silver net overlay. Small sprigs of jasmine were scattered like stars throughout her dark hair.

His face soured. He wasn’t, however, enamored with her dance partner. This was the second time this evening that Christopher had asked her to dance, which was practically announcing their engagement, in this society.

“What is it, Mother?” Daniel snapped, turning to face the Dowager Duchess.

“I want you to go and ask Lady Augusta to dance,” she whispered, fanning her face dramatically. “She is in danger of becoming a wallflower for the entire evening. It is the honorable thing to do, my child.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “Really, Mother? Could you be any more transparent in your matchmaking?”

“There is little harm in simply dancing with a lady, Daniel,” his mother retorted sharply. “And this is your home. You are the host! It is your duty. And it would please me.”

Daniel drained his champagne glass, placing it on the tray of a passing footman, and

grabbing another. His mother raised pained eyebrows, staring at him pointedly. He just knew she wasn't going to give up. She would be harping at him for the entire night if he didn't agree to one dance with Lady Augusta.

"Oh, all right," he relented. "I will do it—just once. But you must promise me that you will not interfere for the rest of the evening."

His mother beamed at him. "Of course, dear boy!"

He passed her the glass of champagne, walking through the crowd, to where Lady Augusta was sitting. He didn't believe his mother at all. She would find something else for him to do—some other onerous chore. He was sure of it.

Lady Augusta was watching the dancers with a pained expression on her face. She looked like she was about to expire from boredom. Clearly, she didn't enjoy balls in this society any more than he did.

He bowed. "My Lady, Would you do me the honor of accompanying me in the dance?"

Lady Augusta looked amazed. "But... why?"

Why, indeed?

But he couldn't back away now. He could feel his mother's eyes boring a hole into his back.

"Because it would please me," he replied, trying to be gallant. He lowered his voice. "And I would wager it would please our mothers even more."

To his surprise, Lady Augusta burst out laughing, jumping to her feet. She took his

proffered arm. “That is a good enough reason, Your Grace. Mothers can be so tiresome to deflect.”

They reached the dance floor, timing it perfectly, as one dance had just ended and another was about to start. Several people walked away, vanishing into the crowded ballroom, but he couldn’t help noticing that his cousin was commandeering Maddie for yet another dance.

He felt a cold shiver run down his spine. He had never seen Chris so openly enamored with a lady before. It just wasn’t his style. Could his cousin possibly be serious about her?

A quadrille started. He turned to his dance partner, bowing. Lady Augusta curtsied. The dance was underway.

He tried to be attentive towards her, but his gaze kept drifting over to his cousin and Maddie. She was laughing at something his cousin had said. He scowled.

“Do you think they would be a good match, Your Grace?”

He turned to Lady Augusta. “Who?”

“Your cousin and my sister,” Lady Augusta replied, smiling slightly. “That is who you keep looking at, is it not?”

“Hmm,” he murmured noncommittally. “I hardly know.”

“I am serious,” Lady Augusta said. “Lord Christopher has been dancing attendance upon my sister ever since we arrived at this house party. His preference is obvious.” She hesitated. “But is your cousin a sincere gentleman? Would he love her if he were to marry her?”

Daniel's heart plummeted to the ground. The jealousy was biting him again, quite viciously this time. He didn't want to even hear about the prospect of Christopher marrying Maddie. But he couldn't tell Lady Augusta that, of course. He tried to school his face.

"I doubt that Chris would love his wife any more than I would love mine," he replied in a dry voice as they passed each other on the dance floor.

To his surprise, Lady Augusta burst out laughing. "I should be offended by that comment, but, alas, it eludes me." She paused. "I assume that you are no more pleased by the plotting of our mothers to match us than I am?"

Daniel flushed. He had been gauche. But the lady seemed to be telling the truth—she really wasn't offended. He suppressed a sigh of relief.

"It isn't anything about you, My Lady," he said quickly, trying to save himself. "You are charm personified. I am certain many gentlemen would be honored to have you as a wife."

Lady Augusta raised her eyebrows. "I hardly think that is true, Your Grace, given my reputation." She paused, gazing at him sharply. "Are you in love with someone else? Is that it?"

He stifled his surprise. Ladies weren't usually so direct in their questions. But then, Lady Augusta wasn't like other ladies. His cousin had declared her a fearsome bluestocking, and he wasn't wrong. But that didn't mean Daniel didn't like her. It was quite refreshing, really, and he had always been fascinated by strong women.

The Cole sisters are unique, indeed . Both of them are beautiful and spirited.

He gazed at Lady Augusta carefully. She didn't look anything like her younger sister,

but she was lovely, with her golden hair and fierce green eyes, which shone with intelligence.

He felt a stab of pity for her. It was very hard for independent-minded, free-spirited women like her to fit into the ton. No wonder she always looked like she was about to wage battle.

“Your Grace?” Her voice was still sharp. “Are you in love with someone?”

He flashed a self-deprecating smile. “Alas, My Lady, I am not. Rest assured that is not the reason I spurn the idea of marriage with you.” He hesitated. “I simply cannot and will not marry for my own deeply held reasons, and in spite of my mother’s machinations.”

To his surprise, she looked displeased, which was odd, given that she had just confessed that she didn’t want to marry him any more than he wanted to marry her.

“Stay strong, Lady Augusta,” he said suddenly. “Do not let them change you or destroy you. Always be yourself.”

She looked surprised at his strange advice. He was surprised as well. He hadn’t been meaning to say that to her. Perhaps it was because he recognized another hounded soul, just like himself, and knew how hard it was to carry on in the face of eternal disapproval.

To his relief, the dance ended. He bowed, and Lady Augusta curtsied, before vanishing into the crowd. His duty was done. He was just about to vanish himself, to try to find a hideout far from his mother’s eagle eyes, when he noticed that Christopher was whispering to Maddie, clearly entreating her for yet another dance.

He felt a stab of pure irritation and something else. Before he could stop himself, he

marched over to them. They both looked surprised to see him.

“You really should not monopolize her, Chris,” he said, trying to smile at his cousin, to take the edge off his words. “And I am the host. I believe it is my duty to squire the lady for one dance, at least. What do you say, Lady Madeline?”

For one tense second, he thought she was going to refuse him. His heart almost stopped beating. This was the closest he had been to her since she had lain in his arms last night.

The scent of her perfume invaded his nostrils, making him so hungry for her that it was a herculean effort to not grab her and drag her to the ground this instant.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Maddie replied, her face looking pinched. “I would be honored.”

Chris didn’t look pleased, but he had no choice but to leave them to it.

The music started again. They bowed and curtsied to each other. And then, the dance began.

Maddie’s heart was racing as fast as a rabbit as she danced with the Duke. To her horror, she discovered she was trembling. Why, oh why, hadn’t she just had the courage to refuse him? She could have begged off, found some excuse, claimed she was thirsty and needed some rest. He couldn’t have forced her to dance with him. Not with so many people around.

They skirted each other so closely that she felt his warm breath on her cheek. It was totally different from dancing with Lord Christopher. The air felt charged, like before a thunderstorm. Her traitorous body was already reacting to him, yearning for him, leaning towards him instinctively, even as her mind told her firmly to keep her

distance.

“You look so fresh, My Lady,” the Duke whispered through gritted teeth, his grey eyes darkening to the color of flint. “Which is surprising, since you have been dancing with my cousin for practically the entire evening.”

Her breath caught in her throat. There it was again—the jealousy that lurked within him. It was still there. It seemed to have possessed him. His face was like thunder.

“I do not know why you care whether I dance with your cousin or not,” she retorted swiftly. “You just danced with my sister. And if our mothers have their way, you will be marrying her soon.”

He didn’t look pleased at that. “That will never happen.”

She eyed him scornfully. “Really? How comforting it is to hear that! Oh, but wait, I just remembered that you are a rake and a liar, so I simply cannot believe a word that comes out of your mouth, can I?”

His face darkened again, so much that Maddie felt a small stab of misgiving. He looked like a desperate man, one who couldn’t be pushed too far, for fear of the consequences. She knew she was playing with fire.

They drew so close to each other that she could see a small vein throbbing in his right temple. He glanced at her, his eyes filled with a tightly controlled anger... and something else.

“You need to remember our deal, My Lady,” he hissed. “You are allowed to cross off the items on your list with me and only me. I am the only one who is allowed to touch you.”

Maddie felt a thrill of desire course down her spine. Oh, she wanted him to touch her. He was the only man she wanted to touch her. Even the thought of another man touching her in such a way was anathema to her. She just couldn't imagine it at all.

But it was too dangerous, for so many different reasons. It had already progressed further than it should have. She must resist him and try her hardest to convince him to just give her back the list and be done with it. Yes, he was a rake, but he must have some basic human decency, deep down. It was possible... wasn't it?

"I want you to meet me in my study tonight," he continued in the same strained voice. "After everyone has left for the evening and the house is asleep. Do you promise?"

Maddie's mouth went dry. The thought of him doing the same thing he had done to her last evening again was just too much. As much as she yearned for it, she knew she would regret it, yet again. But she could appeal to him, when they were alone, to give her back the list and stop this ludicrous game.

She would be strong. She could do it.

"I promise," she murmured, feeling a little faint.

Their eyes locked. She felt another frisson of desire run down her spine. Somehow, she felt as if he had undressed her and she was standing before him utterly naked and vulnerable.

Mercifully, the dance finally ended. She could make her escape—at least for now. Quickly, she curtsied, then she rushed through the crowd and away from him. When she was at a safe distance, she stopped, taking three big breaths, trying to steady herself.

She saw Selina approaching, threading through the crowd.

“You look so flushed, Maddie,” Selina noted, with a curious smile.

“Indeed,” Maddie said, taking her fan from her reticule. She fanned herself vigorously. “I need a glass of lemonade. I danced so much, and you know how tiring it gets, dearest.”

Selina laughed. “I suppose it does! You have been the popular one tonight. Christopher has barely let you escape from his clutches for the entire evening. I am surprised he even let my brother take a turn with you at all.”

Maddie smiled weakly. “I am sure Lord Christopher was only being polite and dancing with me out of duty.”

Selina raised her eyebrows. “Do you? I am afraid you are quite wrong, dearest. My dear cousin is taken with you. He is not a ladies’ man, so if he is showing a particular interest in you, it is sincere. Believe me.”

Maddie shrugged. She didn’t know what to say. She had no interest in Lord Christopher at all, even if he was charming and attentive. It wasn’t that she disliked him. It was just that he seemed rather like an older brother, rather than a suitor. But she didn’t want to offend Selina.

“It was nice of Daniel to dance with you,” Selina continued, frowning slightly. “My brother seems fond of you, Maddie.”

Maddie burst out laughing. “Oh, that is not true, Selina! He was only doing his duty as well.”

Selina looked like she was about to say something, then changed her mind. She pursed her lips, looking over at her brother, who was talking to someone on the edge of the dance floor.

“Well, perhaps you are right,” she said in a strange voice. “He did dance with Augusta as well. That was a surprise. I am shocked that your sister agreed to it at all, as she hasn’t danced with anyone else this evening. Do you think that our mothers might actually succeed in their matchmaking endeavors?”

“I hardly know,” Maddie mumbled, her heart fluttering. She needed to change the subject. “I really need to get a glass of lemonade, dearest, before I expire from thirst. I will be back soon.”

She started navigating the crowd, seeking a footman. It wasn’t a lie. She was still so hot and aroused from the dance with the Duke that she felt quite giddy with it.

She felt his eyes on her as she passed by. But she refused to turn her head and look at him. Her mouth was dry, and her skin was tingling. She could still hear his commanding voice in her mind.

You are allowed to cross off the items on your list with me and only me. I am the only one who is allowed to touch you.

She shivered. It would be hours until they could be alone together again. And then, she must find the courage to end this, once and for all, before she lost her senses entirely.

CHAPTER 16

I am going to get my list back . I am going to demand it!

Maddie was heading towards the Duke's study. She could hear the slight thud of her footsteps down the hallway. It was a far cry from the sounds of revelry and music that had been emanating from the ballroom for most of the evening.

The guests were all long gone, spirited away in their carriages, safely tucked in their beds now, she would wager. Just as the entire household was now asleep. Except for the two of them.

She saw the pool of candlelight beneath the door to his study. Her breath caught in her throat. She was still aroused from their charged dance earlier that night, but she had taken the time to steel herself for this. She was ready to tell him how this was going to proceed. She was going to stay strong and resist him, even in the face of his displeasure.

She knocked softly. She heard the sound of his footsteps, and then the door opened just a crack. Before she knew it, he took her hand, pulling her inside before shutting the door firmly behind her.

"You didn't see anyone?" he whispered.

She shook her head. "No. Everyone is abed, even the servants."

"That is not surprising," he said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "They worked

themselves to the bone all day and this evening for the ball. They should sleep like they are in their graves.”

Maddie gazed around. This was the first time she had seen his study at Stansgate. It was comfortably furnished, in the traditional way, with a large mahogany desk and bookshelves lining the walls. Two upholstered chairs sat by the fireplace. Over the mantelpiece hung an oil portrait of a severe-looking man with silver-threaded black hair and hard grey eyes.

Maddie felt a shock. She knew it was a portrait of the late Duke of Everly. There was a similar one hanging in the parlor at the Huxleys’ London residence. But it struck her forcibly now how much the late Duke looked like his son. The resemblance was quite striking.

“What are you looking at?” the Duke asked tersely, following her gaze.

“The portrait,” Maddie murmured, walking towards the fireplace to examine the painting more closely. “You look like your father. The resemblance is remarkable.”

He scoffed, picking up a glass of brandy. “I prefer not to be reminded of that fact.”

Maddie glanced at him curiously. “You did not like your father?”

He gazed at her steadily, sipping his drink. “I forget how young you are,” he said, his lip curling. “Do you know anything about what happened five years ago?”

Maddie shook her head. “I know there was a scandal. I know that Selina does not like to talk about it. But as for the details...”

He walked up to her, leaning so close that the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. “That is good,” he drawled, tucking a stray curl behind her ear in an absent-minded

way. “That is the way it should stay. For I do not like to talk about it either, My Lady.”

“Maddie,” she whispered, her heart pounding. “My name is Maddie. I have told you to call me by my name before. Why do you insist on being so formal? Is it to keep me at a distance, so I am not even a person in your eyes?”

He didn’t like that. He took a step back, regarding her coolly. There was a strained silence.

“I am a person,” she continued, trying to ignore the tremble in her voice. “I am not a pawn in this game you insist on playing with me. And I demand that you return my list to me. As a man of honor.”

He gave a bark of laughter. “I am not an honorable man. Haven’t you worked that out yet?” He shook his head incredulously. “But I am on fire for you. That is real. And we agreed to the conditions on the return of your list. I will not give it to you until they are all satisfied.”

They were facing each other, both breathing heavily. Abruptly, Maddie turned away, staring into the fire, without seeing anything. This was hopeless. She was going to have to resort to snooping in here, and in his chambers, to steal her list back.

It isn’t theft if the item belongs to you, after all.

“I no longer agree to the conditions,” she said stiffly, turning back to him. “So I will bid you a good night.”

She went to brush past him, but he placed a firm hand on her arm. She gazed down at it suspiciously.

“You have not yet heard what I propose that we cross off the list tonight,” he whispered. “It is the first item. That is all.”

Maddie stared at him. The first item on the list was the most benign— Learn How to Play Chess . She didn’t even know why she had written it down. She supposed she had been warming up to the more scandalous items.

“Learn chess?” Her voice was full of doubt. “That is all?”

He nodded. “I swear.”

She hesitated. She knew she couldn’t trust him. However, if he just taught her chess, then there was no real harm. And it would cross off another item and give her a chance to strategize as to how to steal the list back before anything else on it could be enacted. Maybe she could even distract him and steal it out of his jacket pocket when he wasn’t looking.

She took a deep breath. “Well, I suppose that couldn’t hurt.” She smiled sweetly at him. “And I have always wished to learn how to play chess. My papa didn’t think Augusta and I would need it, so he never bothered to teach us.”

“It is the game of kings,” the Duke said in an amused voice. “A game of strategy. It isn’t easy.”

“I am up for the challenge,” she declared, raising her chin imperiously. She sat down in one of the upholstered armchairs. “Set up the board.”

He laughed. “Yes, Madam.” He walked to a bookshelf and retrieved a board. “I am at your service. Always.”

He sat down opposite her, placing the board on the small table between them, taking

out the pieces and lining them up.

“How pretty they are,” she commented, staring at the pieces. “They are beautifully carved.”

“Very pretty,” he said dryly. “But they are your army. You have a queen, two bishops, two knights, two rooks, and several pawns, whose aim is to protect your king. The objective of the game is to secure the other player’s king—to force it into a position of checkmate, where it is unable to avoid capture. You must try to protect your king at all costs.”

“I see.” She leaned over and peered at the board. “That makes sense. And how do I move the pieces?”

He smiled. “Ah, well, that will test your powers of memory,” he said. “Each one moves in different directions. I shall explain which way when you decide to move the piece.”

Maddie nodded. “That is straightforward! Shall we begin?”

“Not yet.” He gave her a piercing look. “There is something else.”

“What is it?”

“When either of us loses a piece,” he said, his mouth twitching, “we must remove an item of clothing.”

Maddie’s jaw dropped. “I have never observed a game of chess where the players removed their clothes!”

He shrugged, giving her a wicked smile. “That is a rule I have just added. Just for the

sheer fun of it.” He stared at her, his grey eyes glittering dangerously. “Are you up for it?”

Maddie’s heart started racing. She should have known that he would do something like this to her. Learning how to play chess wasn’t quite so benign, after all.

She knew she should politely decline and get up and walk out of his study. But he had challenged her, and she was already experiencing shivers of desire just by looking into his smoldering eyes.

“I am,” she asserted, raising her chin again. “I never back down from a challenge.”

His eyes glittered. Did she see admiration in them?

“Let us play, then,” he said solemnly. “White always moves first. So, I shall begin. Watch carefully.”

Maddie tried to focus on the game. Under his tutelage, she cautiously progressed, moving her pieces in the direction he indicated they could move, trying to keep mindful of where he was moving his. But suddenly, he whisked one of her pawns off the board, placing it on his side of the table.

“Oh,” she gasped. “That was foolish of me.”

He grinned. “You must remove one item of clothing,” he reminded her, his mouth twitching. “As agreed.”

Maddie sighed dramatically. Puzzled, she looked down at her gown. There was nothing else she could remove. She had taken off her gloves in her room.

“My shoes?” she asked in a hopeful voice.

He shook his head in a mock sorrowful way. "I am afraid not. It must be an item of clothing."

"But I am only wearing my gown," she protested, shrugging her shoulders. "Not even a shawl or a jacket!"

His eyes were boring into hers. "You are wearing other items of clothing," he said slowly. "Or at least I assume you are wearing them."

Maddie blushed fiercely. He must be referring to her undergarments. She was still wearing her chemise, her stays, her petticoats, and her stockings beneath her white silk ball gown. She hadn't changed at all, except to peel off her gloves.

She had given Jane an early night, feeling sorry for the lady's maid, who was often falling asleep by the time she arrived at her chambers after balls. Thus, she had seen to her toilette alone tonight.

"That... that is rather risqué," she squeaked.

"It is, isn't it?" His eyes widened. "How scandalous. A true adventure for you. Before you know it, you will be attempting to climb Mont Blanc."

"Stop teasing me," she chided, her blush deepening, even as her mouth twitched as well. "I cannot bear it!"

He laughed easily. "One piece of clothing for every piece taken. That is what was agreed."

"Oh, all right," she muttered, taking off a shoe, before rolling down one of her stockings. She tossed it at him in a defiant way. "There. One piece of clothing. Shall we play on?"

He caught the stocking, smiling broadly, looking delighted. She watched him slowly run his fingers along the silk. When he looked at her again, her stomach lurched, seeing the raw hunger in his eyes.

Her heart was fluttering like a bird in her chest. Determinedly, she bent her head towards the chessboard, considering her next move. It took her a long time to decide that she must be bold, moving one of her knights, feeling satisfied that she had done the right thing. So, she was appalled when he calmly removed the knight.

“But...” She was bewildered.

He laughed, showing her what she had done wrong.

Maddie frowned. Chess was harder than she had anticipated. Sighing crossly, she removed the other stocking. Her heart was pounding now. At this rate, she would be stripped of all her undergarments in next to no time.

“You look adorable when you are pouting,” the Duke teased. “It makes me want to take you across my knee and spank you.”

“What?” Maddie gaped at him. “What did you say?”

“Nothing.” He cleared his throat, looking down at the board. “Carry on.”

The next thing she lost was one of her rooks. That took care of her petticoat. She huffed and puffed as she wiggled out of it, laying it over the desk chair, knowing he was watching her the whole time, and quite enjoying it.

As she sat back down, facing the board, she knew it was hopeless. She was bad at this game and wouldn’t get much better over the course of this evening. She had walked into his trap like a fly into a spiderweb.

When he calmly took one of her bishops, whisking the piece off the board with lightning speed, her heart was racing erratically again. She only had her chemise and stays now. And to remove them, she must remove her gown. It was quite impossible to take them off from underneath her gown.

Slowly, she stood up. She turned around so that her back was to him. “I am afraid you must unlace the ribbons at the top,” she said breathlessly. “I cannot reach behind to do it.”

Her heart started to thump as he slowly stood up to do her bidding. It wasn’t entirely true—she could have managed somehow, but she might risk tearing the gown. And, after all, it was one of her best gowns. She really did like it.

She held her breath as she felt him slowly unlace the gown, one ribbon at a time, in an unhurried manner, as if he was peeling an apple. The gown grew loose. She jumped as she felt his hands on her shoulders, easing it off so that it fell down in a quick swoosh, landing in a puddle around her feet.

“Turn around,” he commanded in a hoarse whisper.

Slowly, she turned around, stepping away from her gown. Her instinct was to use her arms to cover her body, even though she was still wearing her stays and chemise. She felt exposed. The only person who saw her in this state of undress was her lady’s maid.

She felt her whole body flush violently from head to toe as he gazed at her. The silence was deafening. She held her breath.

“Beautiful,” he whispered, eventually. “You look like a nymph that has just emerged from the water.”

Maddie's skin started to tingle slightly. She glanced at her arm. Goose flesh had broken out. She tried to tell herself it was because it was cold in here, standing in her undergarments, even if there was a fire. But she knew it was more than that. Much more.

To her surprise, the Duke took off his jacket and then wrapped it around her shoulders.

"I saw you shiver," he said in a soft, almost tender voice. "I don't want you to catch a cold while we play."

Before she could respond to his unexpectedly caring gesture, he sat down again, glancing up at her, almost impatiently.

"Well, sit down. We haven't finished the game yet." His eyes lingered on her. "You are still in danger of losing some more items of clothing. You really do need to concentrate."

CHAPTER 17

“Well, it appears that you are at a disadvantage, My Lady,” the Duke drawled, whisking her queen off the board before sitting back in his chair, gazing at her with a satisfied expression on his face. “The last of your garments. If you please.”

Maddie trembled beneath the jacket he had placed around her shoulders. Her stays were long gone, taken along with another one of her bishops. And now, her one and only queen was gone as well.

She really should have thought this through more carefully when she agreed to this dangerous game.

Her heart was pounding so hard that it was all that she could hear in the quiet room. If she removed her chemise—the very last garment that covered her skin, apart from his jacket—then she would be entirely naked before him.

Run . Get up and run out that door as quickly as your feet can carry you!

She took a deep breath, trying to stay levelheaded. She couldn't just obey the instinct to flee and scurry through the dark hallways clutching her clothing, looking like this. She would have to painstakingly dress before she did anything.

Anyone might see her in this state of undress, and then she would be in the midst of a scandal... and she was here expressly to get her list back, so she wouldn't be embroiled in scandal.

The Duke coughed. “My Lady?” He picked up her queen, waving it in the air as if it were a trophy. “I am waiting.”

Maddie glared at him. She was very irritated with him, but also so very aroused by the game they had been playing. The game within a game. Seeing his arousal as she shed her undergarments, one by one, was intoxicating. For the first time, she realized the small power she held over him. But it was more than that—she wanted to see his admiration as her body was slowly revealed to him, to hear his sharp intake of breath, to witness the fire darkening his eyes.

The air was thick with sensual tension. She looked at the queen in his hand. She could barely breathe.

“Very well,” she said, standing up, shrugging his jacket off her shoulders. “I agreed to your terms. And I am a woman of my word.”

She looked him straight in the eye as she shimmied out of her chemise, squaring her shoulders, tossing back her hair, which had fallen loose.

Let him look.

She heard his sharp intake of breath again. The hand still holding her defeated queen gripped the chess piece tighter, his fingers wrapping around it so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

“Oh, yes,” he breathed, his eyes feasting on her body. “You are even more glorious than I imagined. And I have been imagining how you would look like a lot . It’s been all I can think about.”

Maddie felt her nipples stiffen at his words, the longing within them, as he kept gazing at her. She knew she should be ashamed of herself, standing entirely nude

before this man. In her wildest dreams, she had never anticipated their dangerous game would go so far.

Quickly, he stood up, crossing the short distance between them. His face contorted with desire. Her senses leaped to life once more. It took all her strength to remain standing before him, to not let herself fall limp into his arms.

He reached out, twisting her hair into his fingers, bringing her face towards his. He was breathing heavily.

“I hope you understand now that you are mine,” he murmured in an anguished whisper. “That your glorious body belongs to me and only me.”

She couldn't reply. Her voice seemed to have vanished entirely. Her eyes were locked on his as if by a magnetic force. She couldn't have looked away even if she wanted to.

She sucked in a breath sharply as his head bent, seeking one of her nipples, his fingers tightening in her hair. She felt the sudden warm wetness of his tongue, flickering like a snake, teasing her nipple. A shuddering bolt of desire snaked through her body as he kept suckling, pulling at her, gently at first and then so frantically that she felt like he was going to devour her entirely.

She didn't know how long they stood there like that, his mouth suckling her nipple, before she felt his arms around her, lowering her to the floor, laying her out in front of the fire so that her hair spilled around her like a halo on the rug.

He was above her, gazing down at her, his eyes narrowed in arousal. His face was flushed. She held her breath as he dipped his head again, assuming that he was seeking her nipple once more, wanting it so badly that she felt as if a firestorm was raging inside her.

But he didn't linger at her breasts. She felt his mouth trail kisses down her stomach—hot kisses that felt like a brand. His hands trailed lower, gripping her derriere and squeezing it, before slowly opening her legs. To her shock, his head was venturing lower still, to the mound of her dark curls, nipping and kissing her flesh.

Maddie cried out in shocked alarm as she felt his tongue probe her tender, moist flesh. He buried his face between her legs. Her back arched upwards like a cat. Her hands gripped the rug beneath her, her fingers clawing at it helplessly as his tongue flickered against her most intimate place.

She gave a strangled gasp. It felt so amazing, so powerful, that she could barely stand it. And when he started suckling her folds, just like he suckled her nipple, she truly felt as if she might faint right away.

Her head tossed from side to side, and she drew a hand to her mouth, biting hard, to keep herself from screaming with stunned delight. What sweet madness was this? Was it decent?

She had never, ever heard of such a thing!

But the shocked, almost incoherent ramble of her mind was dismissed entirely as sensation started to overwhelm her. She felt as if she were climbing a very high tree, every branch bringing her ever so closer to the top, which she couldn't see. She felt sweat break out over her entire body. Her body was bucking now, straining against him, yearning for a release that she couldn't name.

Vaguely, she felt his hands gripping her tighter still as he suckled harder. Suddenly, she swung towards that far-off, high branch, straining and sweating...

It crashed over her, so hard that it was like a thousand stars exploding simultaneously in the sky.

“Oh!” she cried, unable to stop herself, before biting hard on her hand again, to stop herself from screaming aloud.

Her body twisted, shuddering violently, as sweet release coursed through her. It seemed to last forever. In her delirium, she never wanted it to end...

She blinked rapidly. She was descending back to earth. Her hips fell to the ground. His tongue flickered against her again, lazily this time, drawing out the last tremors of her release.

Maddie sighed, her eyelids closing in that delicious aftermath that she well remembered from the night before in his lair. She felt the warmth from the fire against her hot skin. She wanted to curl up and just drift off into a languorous sleep...

She sighed again, feeling his body slide upwards, taking her in his arms so that her back was pressed against his chest. It felt good to rest against him like this. It felt so right being in his arms that she couldn't imagine it any other way. She was on the verge of drifting off when she felt his hot breath on her skin.

“Happy?” he whispered in her ear.

She couldn't resist twisting in his arms, her hand snaking through his hair, staring at his face. Oh, how handsome he was. The most handsome man she had ever seen.

“What did you just do to me?” she breathed, her face flushing with color. “Is it decent?”

He laughed, looking delighted. “If it were, would you enjoy it half as much?”

She flushed harder. It was just like him to answer her in such a cryptic fashion. She knew she should probably feel ashamed, but she didn't. For how could something

that gave such strong pleasure be shameful?

I want to do this all the time with him.

The thought came like a lightning bolt to her mind. For some reason, it disturbed her even more than the shocking act he had just performed on her. She started wriggling out of his arms, getting to her feet.

“I need to dress,” she whispered. “I need to go back to my chambers.”

He sighed heavily but didn’t protest, getting to his feet as well.

She slipped on her gown, before scrambling around, gathering her undergarments. She wouldn’t bother trying to get back into them—she could carry them to her room, and she was just going to slip on her nightgown once she was there, anyway. There was no point getting fully dressed again. She would just have to be very careful that she wasn’t seen...

She gasped as he abruptly snatched the garments out of her hands, hiding them behind his back.

“What are you doing?” she hissed. “Give them back!”

He laughed, shaking his head. “No, I will not,” he said, his eyes still smoldering with desire, as well as mirth. “I expect that you will appear exactly as you are now tomorrow morning at the breakfast table.”

“What?” she stammered.

A wicked smile appeared on his face. “So that we can cross two things off that list of yours,” he whispered. “Learn How To Play Chess was the first we accomplished

tonight. And tomorrow morning, we can cross off Walk Around Without Undergarments as well.”

Maddie blushed fiercely. She had forgotten that she had put that on the list.

“It is in your best interest to do so,” he continued in a mock thoughtful tone. “After all, the more that we cross off that list of yours, the closer you are to getting it back.”

She sighed crossly. “Very well! But you must agree to give them back to me as soon as breakfast is over. Otherwise, my lady’s maid will be sure to notice they are missing.”

“Agreed,” he said, his smile widening. He reached out, taking her hand, raising it slowly to his mouth as his eyes pinned her to the spot. “Until tomorrow, My Lady.”

Maddie felt a shudder of pure delight. As she slipped out of the study, closing the door softly behind her, her heart was racing again. He was keeping her on her toes, even if it felt like she was about to fall off a ledge, most of the time.

She made it to her chambers without incident, slipping off her gown and into her nightgown. She was so tired that she didn’t even bother hanging the gown in her wardrobe, just leaving it in a heap on the floor, before crawling into bed. It had been a very long night.

But even though she was exhausted, sleep eluded her. She tossed and turned, pondering the events of the night. It seemed like days ago that she had danced with him, but it was only a few short hours.

So much had happened since then. The scandalous game of chess. The shocking thing he had done to her afterwards, lying in front of the fire, and the earth-shattering release that had swept through her, raging like a wildfire...

Slowly, she sat up in her bed, staring into the darkness, barely able to breathe. There was no doubt of it in her mind any longer.

She was falling in love with the rake who was probably destined to become her sister's husband.

She gasped. She knew it was ludicrous to feel this way about him. He didn't even care about her. He had never expressed that he cared about her—not once. And even if he had, there was no future in it, anyway. There couldn't be. Their mothers were hell-bent on a match between the Duke and Augusta.

It was intolerable. It was impossible. And yet... it was true.

It wasn't just that he evoked that wild tempest within her that she hadn't even known existed. It was that she felt she was truly alive with him, in a way that she hadn't been before. As if she had been walking through her life like a somnambulist before meeting him.

As if she had been waiting for him.

Maddie felt a single tear trickle down her cheek. Her feelings were pointless. Even if he were available to marry her, and actually cared about her enough to commit to her, he was a rake. Could he remain faithful to one woman for the rest of his life? She doubted it.

But it was all useless speculation. He didn't care about her, and he was going to be maneuvered into marrying her sister, whether he liked it or not. And whether Augusta liked it or not.

Her sister was strangely resigned to the possibility of it, even if she didn't really want the union. She was at the end of her tether, dealing with their mother. And Maddie

could never hurt her sister.

At least I will always have these memories . They will be enough. They simply must be enough... for I will not get anything else.

CHAPTER 18

T here she is.

Daniel entered the dining room the next morning, his heart constricting as he spotted Maddie looking as delectable as the night before, when they had played chess... and done so much more.

It feels like a thousand days since I last laid eyes on her.

He had barely slept at all. The whole night, after she had left him, he had been assailed by visions of her. Her glorious beauty, in full nakedness, was imprinted like a brand on his mind. She had the figure of a goddess, like Venus herself, rising out of a conch shell, breathing new life into him.

Today, she was wearing a gown of pale lemon with tiny nosegays embroidered on the sleeves and bodice. It was simple and almost plain, especially when compared to the ball gown she had worn the night before, but it became her, clinging to her chest. His eyes lingered on her magnificent décolletage, in particular her nipples, which he could just discern beneath the fabric.

A frisson went down his spine. Had she dared come to the table without wearing her undergarments, as he had instructed her? Was there nothing but those glorious curves beneath the light muslin of her gown?

Quickly, he walked towards her, claiming the seat next to her before anyone else did, glancing around the room as he sat down.

Lady Augusta was seated on his other side, but she was intent on her breakfast and ignored him. To his surprise, almost everyone was there. He had been expecting that most people would stay abed later this morning after the late night. However, they did all look a little worse for wear, especially the Dowager Duchess, who was rather bleary-eyed. He noticed she was picking at her food as if it slightly revolted her.

He nodded curtly to his mother, unfolding his napkin and placing it on his lap, before turning to Maddie.

“Have you done what I requested last night?” he whispered.

Maddie blushed hard but nodded. A wave of desire swept over him as he pictured her delectable body beneath that pale lemon gown, completely free of her undergarments. He was so hard that it was almost embarrassing. He thanked the Lord that it was hidden by the napkin on his lap underneath the table.

His hand gripped the white tablecloth tightly as he tried to control his reaction. Fervently, he wished that they were alone right now. He imagined grabbing her and lifting her onto this very table as the dishes crashed to the floor, plunging into her over and over...

His other hand drifted towards her across the table. Perhaps he could sneak it beneath the table, find her, gently pull up her gown, and caress her leg, before climbing ever higher until reaching her delicious honey pot, making her writhe and shudder beneath his fingers?

The thought was so arousing, so very tempting, that he was almost going to do it, before the voice of Lady Darnley reached him from across the table. She was staring at a piece of paper in her hand through a quizzing glass with a stunned expression on her face.

“Well, that is shocking!” she exclaimed, putting down the glass, and gazing around the table. “I simply cannot believe it!”

“Whatever is the matter, Lady Darnley?” the Dowager Duchess asked in a weary voice, rubbing the back of her neck ruefully. “I do hope that not another of those mischievous puppies of yours has vanished. We cannot be sending out constant search parties for the little beasts.”

Lady Darnley gripped the paper in her hand tighter. “No, indeed, Your Grace! This has nothing to do with my dear pups.”

“Well, what is it, then?” The Dowager Duchess sighed, looking exasperated. “What are you reading?”

“It is Mrs. Camberwell’s scandal sheet,” Lady Darnley replied, her voice rising. “It was delivered just this morning...”

Daniel rolled his eyes. He detested scandal sheets, not only because they were highly invasive, prying into the private lives of people, but because most of the ton were addicted to them. Cheap gossip was their lifeblood. They were like vampires, feeding off the misfortunes of others.

“Oh, dear.” The Dowager Duchess looked offended. “Must we listen?”

“I think you might like to hear this, Your Grace.” Lady Darnley picked up the quizzing glass again, squinting at the paper. “For it concerns you. It concerns everyone here, really.”

The chatter around the table died down. Everyone was looking at her now.

“Go on, then,” the Dowager Duchess urged crisply. “You have our attention.”

“It concerns this house party,” Lady Darnley began slowly. “And it is quite scandalous. It claims that there is an unmarried couple that are spending time alone together every night... after the rest of the party are abed!”

There was a shocked hiss around the table. Heads were whipping around, looking at the party, evidently trying to figure out who the illicit couple were.

Daniel froze. He couldn't look at Maddie. But he heard her small gasp of distress. His blood ran cold. There could be no doubt that the scandal sheet was referring to them.

His hands balled into fists. Who on earth knew they had been meeting in private? And who wished to cause them harm by leaking it to a common scandal sheet?

Maddie gaped at Lady Darnley as the full impact of her words crashed over her. She couldn't breathe.

There is an unmarried couple spending time alone together every night... after the rest of the party are abed.

She felt beads of sweat break out on her forehead. Desperately, she tried not to react. She tried to regain her composure. But it was hard. So hard.

She stared straight ahead, forcing herself to look at the lady, trying to ignore the Duke seated beside her. Only a few short minutes ago, he had whispered to her, alluding to the fact that he knew she was wearing nothing beneath her thin muslin gown.

She blanched. She was sitting in this dining room, surrounded by people, wearing no undergarments at all. What had she been thinking? What lunacy had driven her to behave in this utterly reckless fashion?

But she knew the answer to that question all too well. The answer was seated beside

her.

She felt the world tilt and sway. They had been caught. Someone knew they were secretly seeing each other and wanted the world to know. That person wanted to shame them and ruin her.

Who was it?

Fearfully, she glanced around the table, studying each face. They all looked shocked. No one was looking at her in any particular way, though. Whoever it was, they were hiding the fact they knew. They were playing their cards close to their chest.

Maddie felt sick. Was the motivation blackmail?

No one had spoken a word since Lady Darnley's shock announcement. They all looked flabbergasted.

Lord Christopher cleared his throat. "It is nonsense, Lady Darnley," he declared crisply. "It is poisonous gossip, that is all. Those scandal sheets are famous for it. I am rather disappointed that you are so avid as to believe a word they say."

Lady Darnley flushed. "I am only reporting what is written, Lord Christopher..."

"Indeed," he uttered, his lip curling in disdain. "But I think we should not pay it any more attention than it deserves."

He turned to Lord Ollerton, who was looking rather confused and befuddled by it all, his spoon suspended in midair.

"Lord Ollerton," he said, clearing his throat again. "I might take this opportunity to change such a disagreeable topic. I wish to discuss a potential courtship with your

lovely daughter, Lady Madeline.”

Maddie gave a small yelp of surprise. Everyone turned to look at her. But all she could focus on was the Duke’s hand on the table next to her, balled into a fist. She could feel the shock and anger running through his body as if it were a palpable entity.

“I see,” Lord Ollerton stammered, looking even more confused. “Yes, yes, of course, we can discuss it, Lord Christopher. Perhaps we can confer after breakfast?”

“Oh, that is wonderful, Lord Christopher!” Lady Ollerton exclaimed, looking triumphant. “I am thrilled at the very thought of it! Our family is honored.”

Lord Christopher nodded, looking pleased. No one had asked what Maddie thought about this sudden turn of events at all. Her parents hadn’t even glanced at her.

Maddie’s head began to spin again. It was all too much—first, the revelation that her illicit meetings with the Duke were gossip fodder, and now Lord Christopher’s sudden public announcement that he wanted to formally court her.

But at least Lord Christopher’s announcement had taken the wind out of what was written in that scandal sheet. For now.

“I am also thrilled,” the Dowager Duchess declared, her eyes sharp, as she looked around the table. “For it means there is the possibility that our families will be bound twice.”

Everyone’s head swiveled to her, looking agog. Maddie thought it was rather like observing a game of tennis, with the ball careering from player to player on a whim.

“How so, Auntie?” Lord Christopher asked.

The Dowager Duchess threw her napkin on the table. “My dear son, the Duke, has declared to me his intention to formally court Lady Augusta Cole as well.”

There was an excited buzz around the table. Maddie was stunned anew. But this time, she knew that she should have seen this one coming. She had seen it coming. She had just chosen to ignore it.

She stared at her sister, trying to gauge her reaction. Augusta didn’t look shocked, she just looked resigned. If Maddie weren’t so upset, she would feel pity for her.

Suddenly, it was all too much. She was sitting here, without wearing any undergarments in order to please her lover, while his union with her sister was formally announced. And even though she had seen this particular revelation coming, it hurt the most, out of all of them.

He wants to formally court Augusta. Not me.

She felt cheap and used. Clearly, he only thought of her as a plaything. He didn’t take her seriously. She had always known it, but somehow, some small part of her believed that perhaps his feelings would change—that he would take her seriously.

And she was falling in love with him. In fact, she had fallen in love with him. She was head over heels in love. She knew now that it was the only reason she had kept playing this dangerous game with him, time and again, when her mind had screamed at her that she should turn on her heel and run.

It had never been about the list. Or it hadn’t been for a long time. She had been deluding herself about that as well.

The whole table was abuzz with talk now. It was the perfect time to slip away without anyone noticing. She couldn’t look at the Duke. She thought she might burst into

tears, and that would never do.

She got up, walking quickly out of the room, with as much dignity as she could muster. It was only when she got to her chambers that she let it out, sobbing quietly, her face in her hands as she sat on the edge of her bed.

“Oh, dearest.” It was Selina’s voice, calm and gentle. “Is this about my cousin’s announcement? Is that why you are so upset?”

Maddie started. She had been so absorbed in her pain that she hadn’t even heard her best friend sneak into her room. Selina sat down on the bed beside her, taking her hand.

Maddie shook her head. “No,” she whispered, her heart fluttering in her chest. “At least, that is not why I’m crying.”

Selina was silent for a moment. She looked searchingly at Maddie. “Then why?”

Maddie took a deep, shuddering breath. “I am in love with your brother,” she whispered, tears streaming down her face. “And he is going to marry Augusta.”

There was silence. Maddie turned away. She didn’t want to see the shock and horror on her best friend’s face. Selina, after all, didn’t know a thing about what was going on between them. And her friend had told her, a few times, what a rake her brother was.

“At last.” Selina sighed. “Finally, you admit it!”

Maddie gasped, turning around to face her friend. She was so stunned that she couldn’t even speak for a moment. “You knew?” she whispered.

Selina nodded. “Yes, I guessed,” she admitted. “I suspected something was going on between the two of you.” She paused. “It is like the air is charged when the two of you are together. And you are always stealing glances at each other.”

“I am sorry I did not tell you,” Maddie said, her heart clenching. “I wanted to confide in you, but I thought you would get angry with me. You have told me often enough what a rake he is.”

Selina sighed heavily. “He is a rake,” she agreed slowly. “But that does not mean he cannot be reformed... if he finds the right woman.”

Maddie laughed brokenly, which turned into a sob. “I am not that woman,” she mumbled, feeling as if her heart was splintering into a million pieces. “He is only playing with me, Selina. He doesn’t feel the same way about me as I feel about him.”

“Are you certain?” Selina looked at her closely. “Daniel keeps his heart tightly locked. He does it because of our father. But underneath it all, he feels deeply. And I have never seen him look at a woman the way he looks at you. It is even more than that—he is possessive of you, Maddie. He cannot stand it when Christopher flirts with you and monopolizes your attention. Tell me, why would he care so much if he is only playing with you?”

Maddie didn’t reply. She had deluded herself that the Duke’s jealousy meant more than it did. That time was over.

“He has had ample opportunity to express himself to me,” she said slowly. “If his intentions were honorable, he had only to say the word.”

Selina blinked rapidly. “You and my brother are the couple in the scandal sheet, are you not?”

Maddie blushed fiercely. “Yes,” she admitted. “I believe so. Unless there is another unmarried couple in this house party who have been doing exactly what we have been doing.”

Selina’s jaw dropped. “I did not realize it had progressed that far.”

Maddie stood up, gazing down at her friend. “I appreciate your advice, dearest,” she said gently. “But none of it matters now. As I said, your brother has had ample opportunity to express finer feelings towards me, if he has any. He has not done so. There is nothing more to say about it.”

She walked to the wardrobe in the corner, gathered her gowns, and threw them haphazardly into the open trunk next to it. It felt good to be active. It felt good to have a purpose.

“What are you doing?” Selina sounded puzzled.

“I am leaving this house party,” Maddie replied, glancing at her friend. “I cannot stay here a moment longer. Will you tell my family that I have come down with a malady and must leave immediately? It would mean the world to me.”

Selina sighed. “Are you sure? Can you not talk to Daniel?”

“I am sure,” Maddie insisted, throwing another gown into the trunk. She knew she could get Jane to pack it properly, but it felt strangely good doing it herself. As if she were flinging her past mistakes away. “I must leave this instant.”

“I entreat you to not be hasty,” Selina begged. “You should not act when in the grip of such high emotion. We can find a way to work out this muddle. Do not run away, Maddie!”

Maddie stopped what she was doing, turning to look at her friend. “My mind is made up,” she said in an oddly calm voice. “And that is the end of that.”

Suddenly, there was a rap at the door. They both froze, gazing at each other. Maddie could barely breathe.

Another rap, more insistent this time. Maddie couldn’t move a muscle. In the end, Selina walked over to the door and opened it.

“Selina,” a deep, familiar voice said, making Maddie’s heart do somersaults. “I must speak with her alone, Sister. Now.”

CHAPTER 19

“It is highly inappropriate, Daniel.” Selina’s voice was steely. “You know that it is.”

Slowly, Maddie walked towards the door. The Duke was filling the doorframe, towering, almost as if he had grown extra inches. His face was scowling and dark, filled with anger that seemed to have consumed him. She felt a small trickle of misgiving, then squared her shoulders to confront him.

He wasn’t going to push her around.

“There is nothing for us to say to one another,” she stated coldly. “And Selina speaks the truth. It is highly inappropriate.”

He looked thunderous for a moment. And then, to her surprise, his anger seemed to deflate, rushing out of him. He gazed at her beseechingly.

“Please,” he said in a low, urgent voice. “I know you are angry. I know that you are hurt. I must explain.”

Selina looked unsure, glancing from one to the other.

“Could you leave us, Sister?” His voice was almost gentle now. “Please?”

“I will only leave if Maddie wants me to.” Selina raised her chin and then turned to her friend. “What say you, Maddie?”

Maddie glared at the Duke. It was just like him to try to push his way into her chambers. Just like he had pushed his way into her life. But still... she wanted to hear what he had to say to her. She was leaving this house party, finally ending what was between them, and there would never be another chance.

“You may leave us, Selina,” she said, making up her mind. “His Grace can say what he wishes to say to me. But that is all.”

Selina nodded, but she looked worried. “Please, be quick about it,” she urged as she walked past her brother. “I will stop anyone who attempts to come in here, but I cannot put them off forever.”

“Thank you, Selina,” the Duke said softly. “I mean it.”

Selina raised her eyebrows. She wasn’t smiling. “Thank me later, Brother, when you have resolved this matter properly.”

She left, with one last lingering look at Maddie.

The Duke closed the door, locking it behind her.

Maddie frowned. “What are you doing?”

“I know that Selina said she would stand watch,” he began, walking towards her. “It is just in case someone slips by her.”

“Very well.” Maddie raised her chin, looking him directly in the eye. “You have what you wanted. We are alone. You wish to say something to me?”

He took a deep breath, running a hand through his hair. “My mother is lying,” he said in a low, urgent voice. “I have never declared that I intend to formally court your

sister. And I will never marry her.”

Maddie’s heart skipped a beat. “It rather seems that the cat is out of the bag now. At least a dozen people heard your mother declare your intentions towards my sister, which you did not deny. You cannot dishonor her in such a way.”

He swore under his breath. “My mother cornered me. She knew that I would never contradict her in such a public setting.” He gazed at her intently. “I never said that I wish to court her, never mind marry her. I swear it.”

Maddie’s heart skipped a beat again. He sounded so sincere. He looked sincere. And suddenly, she knew, in her innermost heart, that he was telling the truth.

He didn’t want to marry Augusta and had never encouraged her. He had been pointedly staying away from Augusta for the whole party, except when he had danced with her at the ball last night. But even that had been orchestrated by his mother. Maddie had watched the Dowager Duchess push him to do it when she had been dancing with Lord Christopher.

It wasn’t an outrageous thought that the Dowager Duchess had simply used the opportunity at the breakfast table to declare his interest in Augusta. She was a determined mother. Just as determined as her own. The tactics of matrimony were often covert but still sophisticated in this society.

But it still didn’t change anything. The Duke still didn’t care about her. And the damage had been done. There were many witnesses to his intentions towards her sister, even if he hadn’t declared those intentions himself. He hadn’t denied it. The carriage had well and truly bolted.

“I always knew it would come to this,” Maddie said in a sorrowful voice. “Always.”

He frowned. "I told you?—"

"I know what you told me," she interrupted. "I even believe you. But I was a fool to believe that there was anything special between us." She took a deep, ragged breath. "I have been a fool, Your Grace, but I will not let you make a fool out of my sister."

He looked stunned. "What? What do you mean?"

Maddie straightened her spine, gazing at him steadily. "I mean that it is time to end this... this..." Her voice faltered wildly. "This thing that exists between us, which has no name, and has gone further than it ever should have. And I will do it for my sister's sake, for the Lord knows that I have never been able to do it for my own sake!"

She was appalled to find she was shaking. She knew she was on the verge of bursting into tears again. Mortified, she turned away, blinking rapidly, desperately trying to keep the tears at bay.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. Her nerves were so frayed that she almost jumped out of her skin.

"Please, Maddie," the Duke entreated, his voice uneven. "It is you. It is only you."

She rounded on him. "You use my name now? After I have been entreating you for so long to call me by my name, to treat me as a person, and you have resisted?" She shook her head incredulously. "You believe that all you need to do is snap your fingers, and I will come running like a well-heeled pup!"

He looked shaken. "That is not the way I think about you," he insisted. He ran a shaking hand through his hair. "I know that I haven't courted you with roses and soppy poetry, but it is hard for me to do that. It isn't who I am. But that doesn't mean

I do not care about you.”

Maddie couldn't breathe. Their eyes were locked. She saw the devastation in his eyes. Either it was real, or he was a better actor than she had ever imagined.

“I do not believe you,” she said in a shaky voice. “You are only saying this now in a vain attempt to salvage the illicit game that we have been playing. You, Sir, want to have your cake and eat it!”

He flinched as if she had physically struck him. “I deserved that,” he said, looking pained. “I have not done anything so far to make you trust me, not even an inch.”

She nodded. Her heart was racing, and she felt sick. “You speak the truth, at last.”

He frowned. “I admit that it was just a game in the beginning,” he began slowly. “You are so beautiful, so very desirable, that I was mad for you and took the opportunity to use your list to my advantage.” He hesitated. “But it is not like that now. Please, how may I convince you?”

Maddie took a step back. She was shaking so hard that she felt as if her knees might buckle beneath her. Even now, the sensuality was brewing between them, thickening like a fog. If she wasn't careful, she would lose her mind again and submit to him.

“It is over,” she stated sharply while trying to convince herself. “It no longer matters what you feel, or what I feel, or what anyone else feels. You are destined to marry my sister. And that is the end of that.”

“I will not marry your sister,” Daniel declared hotly, his eyes flashing. He paused, looking at her closely. “Unless... this is nothing to do with your sister, but my cousin. Let us not forget that Christopher asked to formally court you this morning as well. Have you decided to cast me off, now that you have snagged an earl? Have I just

been your plaything while you were working to secure a good match?"

Maddie was affronted. "That was done without my knowledge or permission! I have never been angling to marry your cousin, and I am offended that you are suggesting it."

He gave a short laugh, but it wasn't a pleasant sound. His face darkened again. Instinctively, Maddie knew he was being held in jealousy's tight grip, once more.

He took a step closer to her, bridging the gap between them once again. His physical proximity was overwhelming. She noticed a small vein twitching in his right temple. He was angry, in the grip of a jealous rage, and it was starting to consume him. His conciliatory, pleading demeanor had vanished entirely.

"I am leaving Stansgate," she said quickly. "I cannot stay here any longer. Apart from everything else, someone knows about us. They have tattled to a scandal sheet. It is far too dangerous. My reputation is at stake!"

"And we wouldn't want you to ruin your reputation," he snarled. "You are just like all the other mundane ladies in Society, consumed with appearances and obsessed with the thought of matrimony. And I thought you were different."

The unfairness of his claim hit her like a brick. He had hurt her, and now she was consumed with the desire to hurt him back.

"Why exactly are you so against matrimony?" She squared her shoulders, a scornful look on her face. "Why do you run from it like a puppy dog with its tail between its legs? Tell me, why are you so scared of it, Your Grace?"

"I am not scared of it," he growled. "I simply do not wish to place my neck in that particular hangman's noose."

She gave him a withering look. “You are a coward. You have been running ever since your father died. You were running over the entire continent of Europe for years, and you are still running.”

He recoiled again. She had clearly struck a nerve. But now, she was consumed with the question. She really wanted to know why he was so violently opposed to matrimony.

She realized, quite suddenly, that it wasn’t even personal. Yes, he had been playing with her, but he would never have married her anyway. He didn’t want to marry anyone, and his obstinacy on the matter wouldn’t change, even if he met the woman of his dreams—which she was clearly not. What wound had been inflicted on him that was so gaping, so large, that it simply would not heal?

She knew it had something to do with his late father and the scandal that had erupted upon his death. He didn’t like his father. He didn’t want to be reminded of him at all. And now, she cursed the fact that she hadn’t pressed Selina for the details of what had happened all those years ago. It might tell her what she desperately wanted to know.

What she needed to know.

“I am no coward,” Daniel growled. “I choose to live my life the way that I wish to live it. I refuse to let Society dictate my life. That is courage, My Lady, not cowardice. You told me that you wish to live a full life, an adventurous life, but Society constrains you. Tell me, is it better to live in a gilded cage or fly free?”

“You have not answered the question.” She glared at him. “You waffle on about freedom, and that it is your choice, but I see a man who is running from something. A man who is gripped by compulsion. Is that true freedom, or is it just another cage?”

They scowled at each other. Maddie was shocked to discover that they were merely inches away from each other again. She had been so consumed by anger that she hadn't even noticed.

It suddenly struck her that they were alone in her chambers. The door was locked. And even though Selina had said that she would keep watch, anyone could arrive at any moment, banging on that door. Someone already knew what they were doing.

If she was discovered with him, it would be the end of her. Once again, it was all intellectual for him— he wasn't the one who would be ruined by it. He didn't even want to marry!

"I am leaving," she repeated, her chest heaving. "I will see you at your wedding, Your Grace."

She brushed past him, back to her trunk, to resume her packing. Now, she was flinging garments into it, one after the other, a blur of crumpled fabric. A part of her was pained by it. Her beautiful gowns were going to be so creased by the time she made it back to London.

"What the deuce are you doing?" His voice was close. So close that she jumped involuntarily. "You cannot leave. You must not leave!"

"Watch me," she challenged, glancing up at him as she stuffed her favorite pink gown into the trunk. "You cannot stop me!"

Suddenly, his hands were on her, pulling her up. He swung her around. They were both breathing heavily, sounding as if they had just been running a mile.

He swore, pulling her closer so that she fell against his chest. Her body instinctively responded to him. Her nipples hardened. She felt a jolt of desire course through her,

stronger than anything she had ever felt before.

Oh, Lord, how can I resist? How can I resist the man that I love?

She knew it was hopeless. She knew there was no chance for them. He had claimed he cared about her in his own peculiar way, but it amounted to nothing. He hadn't declared that he couldn't live without her, and he hadn't begged her to marry him, so as to circumvent any of it.

She knew that he would probably be pressured to marry her sister. She knew that she would probably be pressured to marry his cousin. But at that moment, none of it mattered.

It was the last chance to be with him before the real world burst their bubble. Her very last chance to lie in the arms of the man she loved.

She would seize this moment. There would be no other.

When his lips found hers, she shuddered, wrapping her arms around his shoulders, pulling him closer still, reveling in this final contact with him, before it all must end. Her body knew it, too, leaping to life, pulsing with a hunger that was insatiable.

She would always have this memory, at least. And it must be enough.

CHAPTER 20

“ I can pretend you are mine,” Maddie breathed, briefly pulling away from his fiery lips. “For the very last time.”

She didn’t realize she had spoken the words aloud until his face changed. His grey eyes darkened to the color of slate. He reached out, touching her bottom lip with his thumb.

“I want you,” he growled. “I want you so much. I feel as if I will die if I do not have you.”

“Then take me,” she whispered, her head dizzy with desire, the rawness of the moment, her reckless abandon. “For I want you as well.”

His eyes shone with joy as well as desire. “It will not be the last time,” he promised, his voice full of conviction. “It is just the beginning.”

Maddie didn’t contradict him, but she knew it wasn’t the truth. It was the end for them, not the beginning. He didn’t want to admit it at that moment, but he would see eventually that it was for the best.

She had meant what she said. She was offering herself to him. She wanted him to take her completely. Perhaps she would regret it, in the fullness of time, but she doubted it.

I will always have the memory. I will always know that my very first time was with

the man I love. No one can take that away from me.

Boldly, she reached up, pulling his lips down to hers again. There wasn't much time. At any moment, Selina might be knocking on her door, saying that he must leave.

Daniel didn't need any encouragement. Instantly, his hands found Maddie's breasts, kneading them through the thin fabric of her gown, tweaking her nipples with his fingertips. Maddie groaned, her head falling backwards, reveling in the sweet sparks of desire that shot through her body like tiny pinpricks, one after the other.

Suddenly, he spun her around, roughly unlacing her gown, pulling at it frantically. She heard a small rip before it fell to the floor. He let out a small, agonized groan as he beheld her.

She shivered slightly. After the shocking revelations and the high emotion of the morning, she had quite forgotten that she wasn't wearing any undergarments at all.

"Hound's teeth," he murmured. "I have never seen anything as beautiful as you are, Maddie. Let me worship you like the goddess you are."

She shuddered as his head dipped to her breasts, taking a nipple into his mouth with a sigh, suckling her deeply. His hands snaked around to her derriere, kneading and squeezing it. She was so aroused that she almost couldn't take it any longer.

Vaguely, Maddie was aware of his member pressing against her stomach quite insistently. She started. It was alarming but arousing as well. And she gloried in the evidence of his high arousal, that he really did want her as much as she wanted him.

Our bodies do not lie . They tell the only truth that matters.

Suddenly, he broke contact, panting, as he lifted her in his arms, carrying her to the

bed, before gently laying her down on it. She gazed up at him, giddy with desire, basking in his narrowed eyes taking in every last inch of her.

He ripped off his shirt, lowering himself on her. For the first time, she felt the smooth, silky bare flesh of his muscular chest. Slowly, she ran her hands over the planes of his torso reverentially. He was beautiful. His skin seemed to spring to life beneath her hands.

He was kissing her again, fiercely, his hands buried in her hair as if he couldn't get enough of her. And then, she felt his hands sweep lower, pausing at her breasts to knead and caress them, before drifting lower still, finding her moist sex. She was so ready for him that it was almost painful.

Maddie cried out in delight as he peeled her nether lips apart, delving into her. Her hips arched instinctively as she felt him slide a finger inside her and his palm pressed against the nub at the apex of her sex.

The sensations were starting to overpower her. Sweat broke out over her entire body like a fever. She didn't know how much longer she could stop the torrent from bursting forth.

"Are you ready?" he whispered, his voice thick and husky with desire. "Because now is the time to tell me if you are not."

"I am ready," she panted. "More than ready."

He nodded quickly, positioning himself between her legs. She blinked, savoring the sensuous sight of him, before he plunged into her.

Maddie gasped, her eyes widening in shock. It was an invasion, and it hurt momentarily, before the pain subsided entirely, replaced by her desire for him. He

rocked against her, almost hesitantly. Questioningly.

She looked at his face. He seemed to be in another world entirely, lost in the sensation of being inside her. She didn't know when she had ever seen such bliss on a person's face.

She took a deep breath, arching her hips high so that he slid deeper inside her. He groaned, clutching her hips, raising them again. Over and over. It was so deliriously wonderful that she moaned, her head twisting from side to side, her hands clawing at the bedsheets beneath her.

The man I love is inside me. We are joined. I never imagined it could be so beautiful.

The sensations were overwhelming her now. With each powerful thrust, she strained, closer to the edge. It was so amazing that she couldn't stop moaning. She felt it gathering around them like a force, his eyes pinning her to the bed, as much as his body.

"Daniel, please..."

When it crashed over her, she cried out, unmindful of where she was or even who she was. She had drifted into another dimension entirely. She was only vaguely conscious when he cried out, grinding into her, before collapsing on the bed.

Maddie blinked, opening her eyes as she slowly came back down to earth. Her body was covered with sweat, and she realized his body was slick with it as well. She felt a warm stickiness between her legs, as well as a gentle throb.

She was no longer a maiden. Her prized maidenhead was gone and could never be recovered. She had willingly given it to him. She had wanted the man she loved to make love to her for the very first time.

It had been the most incredible experience of her life. She wanted to lie in his arms forever. She wanted to do it all over again. But none of that was possible. They had already been in this room together for far too long.

And yet... and yet... she couldn't move. Not quite yet. She needed to taste the last sweet, sad drops of this encounter before it vanished forever. It was bittersweet.

She had never felt so happy or so sad in her entire life.

She looked at him. To her surprise, he wasn't turned away, half falling asleep. Instead, he was looking at her intently. His eyes traveled over her face searchingly, as if he were seeking an answer to a silent question.

"I... I do not know what to say," he whispered, his hand reaching over hesitantly, to caress her face. "It was more powerful than I ever expected. More powerful than anything I have ever experienced before."

Maddie felt her cheeks redden. She had no experience with this at all. Perhaps this was just something that men said to women to reassure them in the aftermath. Especially when the woman's maidenhead had been taken.

He was so much more experienced than she was. He had probably made love to dozens of women. He was a seducer and a rake. This is what he did.

"Are you... hurt?" he asked, still caressing her face.

She bit her lip, shaking her head. "I am fine," she mumbled, trying to steel her heart against the tender look on his face. "It was amazing. I have no regrets."

She knew, as the words left her mouth, that it was the truth. She didn't regret it. And she wouldn't regret it tomorrow. This belonged to her now, and whatever happened

between them was irrelevant. Or at least it couldn't take away from it.

"We should leave this room," she said, glancing at the door anxiously. "It has already been far too long."

Daniel sighed heavily but nodded, swinging his legs off the bed. She watched as he slipped back into his shirt, her heart tugging painfully. Trembling, she slipped off the bed, gathering her gown and pulling it over her head.

He was behind her, gently lacing her gown. She felt his breath on her neck. And then, to her surprise, he put his hands around her waist, kissing her neck gently, tenderly.

Maddie squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn't breathe. It was on the tip of her tongue to just turn around and tell him how she truly felt about him. To spill it all out and lay it at his feet. Come what may.

She balled her hands into fists, resisting the impulse. She knew she was feeling especially vulnerable because they had just made such amazing love together. But she wasn't about to show how inexperienced she was in such matters.

He made love to many women. She was certain he would recoil in distaste if she expressed that her feelings for him went deeper than desire. He would leave hastily, and she would feel like a broken fool.

It wouldn't change anything if she told him. If anything, all it would do was make him feel he had more power over her than he already did.

"I will leave and make sure the coast is clear," he said softly. "We will find a moment to talk. Perhaps we could meet in the gardens, near the lair?" There was a hint of gentle humor in his voice now.

Maddie turned around, facing him. “Very well. In half an hour?”

He nodded, his eyes full of tenderness as he beheld her. “A perfect plan.” He hesitated, reaching out to caress her cheekbone with one hand. “We will defeat them all, Maddie. I swear it.”

She forced a smile on her face. “Yes. Perhaps we will.”

He took her hand and kissed it, before quickly departing.

When he was gone, Maddie slumped against the bed. It had taken all the strength she had to send him away. All the strength she had to not reveal her true feelings for him.

She took a deep, ragged breath before straightening her spine. She walked to the trunk and closed it with a decisive thump. She had no intention of meeting him in the gardens in half an hour.

By that time, she would be long gone. And with luck, he would not be any the wiser... until it was too late.

CHAPTER 21

Where is she? I cannot see her anywhere.

Daniel loitered outside his lair, gripped with impatience. He grabbed a twig off the ground and snapped it in two. He had been waiting for her for over half an hour.

He sighed heavily, running a hand through his hair, trying to keep his cool. Images of their lovemaking were playing in his head, over and over. He couldn't stop them.

The feel of her skin, like the softest silk I have ever touched. The feel of her body moving seamlessly with mine. The glorious moment when I entered her for the first time. We fit together like we were always meant to be.

He sighed again. It wasn't like him to moon over the act after it was over. Usually, it was the thrill of the chase for him. When he had finally conquered, the allure of the lady dissipated.

It wasn't like that this time. Not at all.

His heart flipped over. He had told her the truth—it hadn't been just words to get her to submit to him. He did care for her, in his own way. It had been growing on him slowly. He cared what happened to her. He didn't want to hurt her. It wasn't just about the intense lust he felt for her.

But now... now, it was like something else again. Making love to her had stirred something deeper within him. He couldn't stand the thought of losing her. He

couldn't stand the thought of never making love to her again. He especially couldn't stand the thought of his cousin claiming her.

Her body belongs to me. We are made for each other.

Suddenly, in the far distance, he saw a carriage circling to the front of the house. It pulled up. He waited to see who would emerge out of it, but no one did.

And that was when it dawned on him that the carriage was waiting for someone.

His heart seized. It was waiting for Maddie.

Instinctively, he started running through the gardens, surprising Lord and Lady Carruthers, who were taking a morning stroll. He veered around them, too intent on his task to even greet them. The lady almost dropped her parasol.

He kept running. His breathing was ragged, but he pushed on, skirting the side of the house, reaching the front just as Maddie was stepping into the carriage. To his dismay, Christopher was there, helping her climb into it.

He stopped abruptly. His hands balled into fists.

She was leaving Stansgate. She was leaving the house party. She had told him she was before they made love, but he had thought she had changed her mind. He thought he had convinced her, through touch if not words, that they could work this out.

He couldn't bear it.

He rushed forward, almost jostling Christopher out of the way.

"My apologies, Cousin," he said through gritted teeth. "I was walking and didn't

realize Lady Madeline was leaving us. I must say farewell and wish her a safe journey.”

Christopher smiled indulgently. “Of course, Daniel. Lady Madeline has been seized by a sudden illness and needs to go home. You couldn’t have known.” He peered into the carriage, staring at Maddie. “I will be in touch, My Lady. I will call on you when I return to London. I hope you feel better soon.”

“Thank you, Lord Christopher,” she replied in a faint voice. “I look forward to it.” She smiled at him politely.

Daniel waited for his cousin to walk back into the house. But he didn’t. Christopher simply stood back, waiting for Daniel to say farewell. It was intensely frustrating, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Maddie wasn’t alone in the carriage either. Her lady’s maid was sitting opposite, looking a trifle disgruntled, probably out of sorts at the haste of the departure.

Daniel stared at Maddie. She was pale, looking like she truly was ill. Gently, he took her hand, staring into her beautiful honey-brown eyes that seemed to stir his innermost soul.

“Farewell, My Lady,” he said in a formal tone. “Thank you for coming, and I do hope that you feel better soon.”

She inclined her head politely. “Thank you, Your Grace. You have been a charming host, and Stansgate is truly magnificent. It has been a pleasure.”

There was silence. She looked down, trying to pull her hand out of his. In response, he tightened it. He couldn’t help it.

She laughed uncomfortably. "I must go, Your Grace. I feel so ill that I simply must get home. It is a long journey."

"Of course," he relented in a tight voice.

From the corner of his eye, he saw that Christopher had turned away, saying something to one of the coachmen. He leaned towards her. His heart was beating fast.

"This is goodbye," she murmured, her eyes flickering.

Daniel's heart seized again. "This is not over," he whispered so that the maid couldn't hear. "I swear it."

Maddie pulled her hand out of his sharply, rapping on the roof of the carriage. Christopher turned back to them. Daniel stepped back, closing the door. The coachman cracked the whip, and the carriage pulled away, rambling down the driveway and through the high gates.

She was gone.

Daniel watched until it vanished from sight. His heart was beating hard, and he felt slightly ill.

"How about a game of billiards, old chap?" Christopher asked casually. "We haven't spent much time together since the horde descended on the house. What say you?"

Daniel gritted his teeth. He didn't even want to look at his cousin.

You are claiming what is mine. You have no right.

The thought shocked him. He swallowed it down, trying to suppress the anger and

jealousy, turning to his cousin. None of this was Christopher's fault—at least, his cousin didn't realize what was happening between him and Maddie. He didn't know that he was stepping into his territory.

"Of course," Daniel replied, trying to sound jovial.

Christopher clapped him on the back, quite hard. Harder than he usually did. Daniel tried to smile at him, but he was certain it was a grimace. They stared at each other for a moment, before Christopher laughed, striding into the house.

Daniel gazed after him. He took a deep breath. He couldn't wait for this infernal house party to be finally over and done with. He couldn't leave until it was. He was the host. That would be the height of rudeness. His mother would never let him hear the end of it. He couldn't pursue Maddie. Not yet, at any rate.

He glowered as he thought of the Dowager Duchess. He had a bone to pick with her, and now was the time to do it before this ridiculous business got out of hand entirely. His mother would have him engaged and dragging Lady Augusta to the altar before the day was out if he let her.

He strode back into the house, following his cousin. His heart seized again as he thought of Maddie. She ran away, and he hadn't been able to stop her—but he had meant what he said to her.

It wasn't over. And she could only run so far. He would sort this mess out once and for all. One step at a time.

Maddie sat in the window alcove in the drawing room in her family's London residence, listlessly staring out the window as her mother and sister sat with their embroidery patches on the sofa.

A week had passed since she had fled Stansgate, feigning illness. The house party had broken up two days ago. Her family was back home now... and so was everyone else. She knew that Selina's family was back in London. Lord Christopher had told her when he had called on her yesterday, casually mentioning that the Duke was there as well.

He is only a few streets away from me. And yet, he has not attempted to see me at all.

She tried not to let that knowledge affect her, but it was so hard. Ever since her family had returned from Stansgate, her mother had been talking nonstop about the "twin courtships."

Augusta looked bored but resigned to her fate. She would often walk out of the room when the wedding talk grew too much. But Maddie tried to endure it. She didn't know what else to do. She felt as helpless as a piece of driftwood floating down a river.

"I was thinking," Lady Ollerton said in a high-pitched voice, "that we could perhaps have a double wedding, girls? What do you both think?"

Augusta rolled her eyes. "How original, Mama. As if that hasn't been done a hundred times before."

Lady Ollerton sighed dramatically. "Augusta, just because something is fashionable, does not make it gauche. I think it a charming practice." She turned to Maddie. "What do you think, dearest?"

"About what?" Maddie blinked rapidly.

Her mother put down her embroidery patch, clearly irritated. "Honestly, Maddie, you are even more distracted than you usually are since our return from Stansgate! Are

you not interested in taking part in your wedding preparations at all?"

Maddie's heart clenched. "There is no wedding to prepare, Mama. At least, not for me. Lord Christopher is courting me, to be sure, but he has not proposed. I am not even engaged."

"Neither am I," Augusta chimed in. "As much as you and the Dowager Duchess conspire to unite me and the Duke, it is idle chatter, as far as I can tell." She paused. "He hasn't said he wants to court me at all. He isn't courting me. Tell me, how on earth have you jumped to planning weddings, Mama?"

"The Dowager Duchess assures me she has it in hand," Lady Ollerton argued, looking a bit perturbed. "She says he will come around to the idea. He is just a bit stubborn. That is all."

"Stubborn?" Augusta's voice was full of derision. "I would say that he is showing you both, in a passive way, that he has no interest in marrying me at all. Or anyone, for that matter."

Maddie's heart lurched. Her sister spoke the truth—more than she even knew.

"The Dowager Duchess announced his intentions towards you in front of everybody, Augusta," Lady Ollerton pointed out, pursing her lips. "She said that he asked her if he could formally court you. You heard it yourself."

Augusta sighed irritably. "The Dowager Duchess just said that. She seized the moment because she wanted to trump Lord Christopher's announcement that he wished to court Maddie." She paused, her eyes flicking to her sister. "And to make sure that no one was talking about what had been written in that scandal sheet, of course."

Maddie froze. She could feel Augusta's eyes on her, staring at her speculatively. Did her sister suspect that she was one of the parties involved? Or even that the Duke was involved in it with her as well?

Oh, if you only knew the half of it, Sister.

Their mother cleared her throat. "Speaking of scandal sheets," she continued, gazing at Augusta, "there has been something written about you this week as well, my dear. A mention about your previous scandal."

Augusta's jaw dropped. An uncomfortable silence fell over them. Maddie felt her heart start to pound with dread.

"Well, go on," Augusta said, eventually, her face impassive. "Tell me what it says."

Lady Ollerton took a deep breath. "It says that there is a whisper that you and the Duke of Everly may be engaged soon," she replied. "And that the author hopes that you will not leave the groom at the altar this time around."

Augusta stood up, throwing her embroidery patch on the sofa, before marching out of the room.

"Oh, dear." Lady Ollerton tutted. "She is offended. Although I do not know why. She must realize that it will follow her around like a bad smell until she has a wedding ring on her finger."

Maddie stood up. Her heart was pounding now. "You are being insensitive, Mama. You know how much even the slightest reference to it distresses her. Why did you have to tell her that she was mentioned in this scandal sheet at all?"

"Because it might change her attitude," Lady Ollerton snapped. "She is dragging her

feet about the Duke. She is always making smart comments when I try to involve her in the wedding planning. I just wished to remind her that she does not want to embroil herself in another scandal.”

“Of course, she does not want to create another scandal,” Maddie said in a strained voice. “The first scandal impacted her profoundly. Augusta would walk over hot coals to avoid another one.”

Lady Ollerton looked shamefaced for a moment. “I do not wish to hurt her, Maddie. Truly, I do not.” She took a deep breath. “But I am at my wit’s end. This opportunity with the Duke of Everly cannot be wasted. She will never get such an opportunity again.”

Maddie’s heart twisted. She didn’t know what to say.

“Augusta needs her own household,” her mother continued. “She has such a strong personality. She argues with me constantly because she is far too old to be living with her parents any longer. If she marries, it would mean she could live her own life, at least.”

“That is true,” Maddie acquiesced in a tremulous voice.

“I know that she wishes she could live independently,” Lady Ollerton acknowledged quietly. “She wishes she could go to university, or tour the Continent, or do a hundred other things. But none of that is possible for a lady of her station. The sooner she accepts it—and accepts that the only way she will gain some autonomy and a modicum of power is through marriage—the better.”

Maddie felt deflated. She knew that her mother spoke the truth. It wasn’t pleasant to hear it, and she knew that her mother’s agenda wasn’t entirely altruistic. Lady Ollerton wanted to be rid of the headache that was Augusta once and for all. But that

still didn't mean it wasn't the best thing for Augusta, when all was said and done.

She couldn't live the life she wished to live. She was never going to become a bluestocking bohemian, living independently, with no care in the world. Marriage was the only way she would gain any autonomy over her life.

And it was true that Augusta probably wouldn't get any more offers. She was on the wrong side of five-and-twenty. She scared most gentlemen witless. Marrying the Duke would be her last chance. If she didn't marry him, Maddie feared she would turn into a bitter spinster indeed, snarling and snapping at their mother for the rest of her life.

Maddie knew she should encourage her sister to marry him. It was the right, and selfless, thing to do.

It felt like a knife plunging into her heart.

Maddie took a deep breath, facing the hard, bitter truth. The Duke didn't love her. He had gotten what he wanted from her, and that was the end of that.

She would do well to look after her sister—and herself—from now on and forget him entirely.

And what did it matter whom she married if she could not marry the man she loved?

"I have been remiss, Mama," Maddie said, her heart twisting anew. "I will speak with Augusta about encouraging the Duke. And I will encourage Lord Christopher as well."

Her mother jumped to her feet, rushing to her, and taking her hands. Her eyes were shining with joy.

At least someone is happy . Lord knows that is something.

CHAPTER 22

“I need to speak with you, Chris. Now.” Daniel’s voice was hard.

Christopher was lounging on the sofa in the parlor. Morning tea had finished. The Dowager Duchess had just left the room, saying that she was going to call on the Cole family to discuss wedding preparations. She had insisted that Daniel join her, but he had managed to wriggle out of it. He had bigger fish to fry at the moment.

Christopher put down his teacup, staring at him. “You are more jittery than a cat on a roof, Cousin,” he noted mildly. “Whatever is the matter?”

Daniel sat down opposite his cousin so that he could see his face. He needed to see his face when he laid the evidence at his feet. Christopher’s expression would be the best measure of whether this was true or not, or whether it was some kind of odd misunderstanding.

Daniel’s heart lurched. He loved his cousin. Chris had always been the closest thing to a brother he had ever had. He had relied on him, leaned on him, looked up to him. Chris had been the steady rock to Daniel’s rocky boat.

He had trusted him. And now, he had no idea who the man sitting so calmly opposite him was.

“I was going through the accounts for both houses,” Daniel began, narrowing his eyes, as he placed the ledgers on the table between them. “I’ve been meaning to get around to it.” He paused. “There’s a few discrepancies that I cannot account for.

Perhaps you could explain them to me.”

He watched his cousin carefully as he put down his teacup. Christopher’s expression hadn’t changed, but did he see a flicker of alarm in his eyes?

If so, it was quickly gone.

Christopher gazed at him mildly. “Discrepancies? What do you mean?”

Daniel sighed, picking up the first ledger, the one that detailed Stansgate’s accounts. He flicked through the pages, running a finger along the margin until he found what he was looking for.

“Here,” he said, showing the book to his cousin. “You have listed the expenditure for the month in the last column. And yet, the figures do not add up. There is a discrepancy of one hundred guineas.”

Christopher shrugged. “And so? I must have made a mistake, Cousin. It does happen, especially when one is doing bookkeeping at night, which is my habit.”

Daniel stared at him. “Yes, that is what I thought myself when I came across it,” he said slowly. “However, when I went back over the previous months, the same mistake occurred, for exactly the same amount of money. One hundred guineas, every single time.”

Christopher met his eyes steadily. “More mistakes.” He shrugged, looking indifferent. “I am not trained in this, you know, Daniel. I took over the books for your estates as a favor to you and your family. Lord knows that you were not here to do it.”

Daniel flinched slightly but stood his ground. “And my family and myself have appreciated it,” he returned, his heart twisting. “We have always relied on your steady

nature. Perhaps we have relied on it too much. Perhaps you have been resentful of it.”

Christopher’s expression changed. A look of guilt and shame flashed across his face.

There it is . There is the proof.

Daniel hadn’t wanted to believe it at first when he had gone over the books. But the realization that his cousin had been carefully skimming the same amount of guineas each month from the estate accounts was eventually overwhelming.

He had gone over the books again, and again, double-checking, then triple-checking. The result was always the same. It had taken up all his time this week since they had returned from Stansgate, the house party blessedly over.

And in some ways, his preoccupation with it had been a blessing—it had meant that he didn’t have time to think about Maddie and what had happened between them at Stansgate, just before she had run away from him.

Still, it had been niggling at the back of his mind, eating at him, like a rat gnawing on a wheel of cheese. He had taken her maidenhead. The game should be over. And yet, it wasn’t over. He had meant what he said when he had whispered it to her in the carriage, more than he had ever meant anything in his life.

But the dilemma wouldn’t solve itself easily. His cousin was courting her. Her parents wanted her to marry Chris. Was he going to challenge his cousin over her? But that meant that he must marry her himself. And he couldn’t do that. He couldn’t marry her.

If you succumb to the temptation, then it will end badly, just like it ended badly between your parents. You are your father’s son. You will end up betraying her. You will end up breaking her heart.

He knew he must find a way to let her go. He must find a way to resist her.

He had never been in this position before, wanting something that he couldn't have. In some ways, that fiery, wonderful union between them at Stansgate had made it worse. Because now, his hunger for her had increased exponentially. The union hadn't slaked his thirst, as he had believed it would—it had multiplied it by a thousand.

Daniel took a deep breath, trying to banish the problem of Maddie from his mind. At least, for now. Now, he must deal with his cousin.

"I know what you have done, Chris," he said slowly. "The proof is there. I just need to hear it from your lips. I deserve that much."

Christopher's expression tightened. There was a taut silence, broken only by the ticking of the clock on the mantel. Daniel waited, ignoring the need to rush in and fill it, wrestling with his anger and sorrow and disappointment.

"All right, I admit it," Christopher relented, his eyes flickering again with shame. "But I deserved some recompense for my devotion to keeping the duchy afloat. I thought of it as my wage for the hours I have put into it. Hours where I could have been living my own life, you know."

Daniel's face contorted. "You have been paid handsomely for the responsibility. You have been paid a stipend. As well as the increased status of being the Duke by proxy." He paused, swallowing a painful lump in his throat. "It is theft, Cousin. Pure and simple."

Abruptly, Christopher stood up. A vein was throbbing in his left temple. "It is all right for you," he hissed, his face turning as red as a brick. "You were born to a great position. You were born with more wealth than you know what to do with. I am just

the poor relation, hanging on your coattails. A poor relation who has worked damn hard to keep your estates running while you flittered around the Continent, having a grand time.”

Daniel stood up, facing him. He was shaking with anger. “You were never the poor relation,” he said sharply. “Your estate is not as flush as the Everly duchy, but you are no pauper. Go on. Say what you really think. It is well overdue.”

“I will,” Christopher snarled, his eyes glinting fiercely. “My father was an honorable man. He should have been born first and been the Duke. Then I would have inherited the title.” He drew in a deep breath. “Instead, it fell into the lap of your father, a dishonorable man, whose last act on this earth shamed your family. Tell me, where is the justice in that?”

“None of us can control that,” Daniel stated in a hard voice. “It is simply fate. The roll of the dice. You talk of honor, and yet you have been dishonorable, Cousin. You have lied and stolen, all the while pretending to be our friend and ally.”

They faced each other, both breathing heavily.

“Go on, then,” Christopher said, staring at him with such contempt that it felt like a slap in the face. “Are you going to call the constables? Because before you do, you should know that I know what you and Lady Madeline have been doing... and I can let Mrs. Camberwell know as well.”

Daniel gaped at him. “It was you,” he whispered fiercely, feeling all the blood drain from his face. “You were the one who tattled to the scandal sheet!”

Christopher laughed derisively. “You have become slower on the uptake since you went to the Continent,” he hissed. “It seems that a dissolute, idle lifestyle does not suit you, Cousin. Of course, it was me. I have been spying on you and Lady

Madeline. I know that you brought her here and took her to your garden shed to have your wicked way with her, and that you did so at Stansgate as well.”

“What?”

Daniel reeled back as if his cousin had punched him. He hadn’t expected that. He hadn’t even suspected that Chris had known what was going on between him and Maddie. His cousin had never intimated that he did.

But now... it all made sense, of course. His cousin’s resentment towards him had spilled over into interfering in his private life, as well as stealing from the estate.

Daniel rubbed a hand over his face. It was all such a mess. He had never suspected that his cousin had favored Maddie just because he did. Or that he wanted to take her away from him for his own purposes.

But now, that also made sense. Christopher had never been a ladies’ man. Daniel had never seen him act in such a deliberate, obvious way towards a lady. It just wasn’t in his nature. He had always been a cold fish. A calculating cold fish, as it turned out.

Still waters ran deep.

“You never even liked her at all,” Daniel said, shaking his head incredulously. “You pursued her so obviously just to rattle me.”

Christopher scowled at him. “I would never be interested in one of your trollops. She’s just like all the others, lifting her skirts for you as soon as you snap your fingers. I just enjoyed watching you boil with jealousy. That was all.”

Daniel seized his cousin by the lapels of his jacket. Their faces were only inches away. “Do not dare talk about her like that,” he growled, shaking him. “Do not ever

talk about her like that! You aren't fit to lift her petticoat."

Christopher laughed in his face. "Go on! Hit me! And then I shall go to Mrs. Camberwell to tell the world that Lady Madeline Cole is indeed a trollop! She will be ruined. No one will ever marry her!"

Daniel shook him again, throwing him across the room. His blood was boiling. He wanted to hit his cousin so badly that he could taste it.

But he wasn't going to stoop to his level. Christopher thought he had outwitted him. He thought wrong.

"Go on, then," Daniel challenged, his face contorting. "Go and reveal her identity to your scandal sheet. It won't matter, because as soon as the sheet is published, the word will be out that I intend to marry her. No one will care anymore if she is about to become a respectably married duchess."

Christopher glared at him. "You are bluffing. You don't want to marry anyone. You will never marry!"

"You are wrong," Daniel countered, his heart suddenly lifting in the strangest of ways. "I will marry her. And I will count myself lucky that such a glorious woman would have me, for I do not deserve her." He paused, his voice trembling. "For I love her, you see. More than life itself."

Christopher stared at him uncertainly.

"So, you have nothing to hold over me any longer, Cousin," Daniel spat, his chest heaving. "Leave this house, and do not return. If you do, I will have you arrested. Do I make myself clear?"

Christopher glowered at him for a moment, before shaking himself like a dog and leaving the room.

Daniel heard the bang of the front door as his cousin slammed it shut behind him. He then walked over to the liquor cabinet in the corner, pouring himself a double whiskey. His hand was shaking so much that he spilled a little of the brown liquid.

He took a long sip. The liquid was like a trail of fire to his stomach. He put down the glass, pacing around the room, like a lion in a cage.

I love her . I truly love her. And if I hadn't been so muddle-headed about marriage, I would have realized that I was falling for her from the very start.

His hand tightened on the glass. Everything was clear to him now. The reason why he was so struck by her, unlike anything he had ever felt before. The reason why she haunted him, why he couldn't let the game go, why he kept pursuing her so relentlessly. The reason why it had felt like a punch to the gut when his cousin had started pursuing her.

He had been afraid. He had been scared of the enormity of it, repressing it, deluding himself that it wasn't what it was. But now... now, he felt the release of it, like a tight ball of string unwinding within him.

It felt good. It felt freeing.

He wasn't going to run anymore. He had run for long enough.

He put down his glass and then walked quickly out of the room. He grabbed his hat and gloves off the hallstand. There wasn't a moment to lose.

“Where are you going, Brother?”

It was Selina, drifting down the hallway towards him. His heart lurched.

“To Maddie,” he said slowly, wondering what she would think. “I... I think I love her.”

Selina’s eyes lit up like candles. “At last. What on earth has taken you so long, Daniel?” She smiled. “Good luck.”

Daniel grinned at his sister. He didn’t need any more encouragement. He rushed out the door, running down the street. Maddie’s house was three blocks away, but he didn’t care. He could have run across the whole of the city for her.

His heart contracted. Would she listen to him? Would she accept him? Or was it all too late?

CHAPTER 23

“M adeline? Are you listening, dear child?”

Maddie started guiltily at the sound of her mother’s voice. All eyes were on her. She must have drifted away again without even realizing it.

She blinked owlishly, gazing at them, sitting around the drawing room. The Dowager Duchess had arrived around half an hour ago, and she and Augusta had been summoned from their rooms to receive their visitor.

Her heart had been in her mouth, expecting that Lord Christopher would be there as well, but to her intense relief, he wasn’t.

Maddie felt a flash of guilt. She had promised her mama that she would encourage Lord Christopher and that she would encourage Augusta to marry the Duke. Something that she hadn’t done. She hadn’t even spoken to her sister about the Duke.

And as for Lord Christopher, she hadn’t had the chance to encourage him. She hadn’t seen him since the last time he had called on her, which was before she had made the promise to her mother.

She also hadn’t uttered a single word since she had entered the drawing room, aside from the pleasantries. Instead, she had been foolishly indulging in daydreaming about the Duke, as always.

She sighed deeply, trying to gather her thoughts. The Dowager Duchess and Lady

Ollerton were sitting side by side on the sofa, looking at her pointedly. Lord Ollerton was in his usual armchair, looking a trifle bored. And Augusta looked rigid with boredom. Her sister was fiddling with the sleeve of her gown, her eyes glazed.

“I am sorry, Mama,” Maddie said, forcing herself to pay attention. “What were you saying?”

“I was asking for your opinion on the flowers, dear child.” Lady Ollerton frowned slightly. “To decorate the church. Her Grace has agreed with me that a double wedding would be charming.”

“I have always believed it is better to kill two birds with one stone,” the Dowager Duchess chimed in dryly. “It saves on cost as well.”

“Indeed,” Lady Ollerton agreed, laughing uncertainly. “You are right, of course, Your Grace. Prudence wins the day.” She turned back to Maddie. “We were thinking roses, lilies, and perhaps delphinium. Those three would look divine together in urns, scattered around the church.”

“That sounds perfectly lovely,” Maddie replied in a strained voice, her heart skipping a beat. “I can picture it now.”

Her heart skipped another beat. She didn’t want to think about flowers and the wedding breakfast menu or whether the fabric of her gown should be silk or lace. She didn’t want to imagine any of it. For if she did, then she would be forced to imagine Lord Christopher as the gentleman at the altar waiting for her, while the Duke waited for her sister by his side.

Somehow, in all the talk about sharing a wedding day with her sister, that thought had never occurred to her before now.

Oh, no . I must dissuade them from this talk about a double wedding. I do not think I could bear to walk down the aisle when he is standing there, waiting for someone else. When in my deepest heart, I want him to be waiting for me.

She felt a cold sweat break out over her body. She could feel Augusta's eyes on her, looking concerned.

“And what is your opinion on the matter, Lady Augusta?” the Dowager Duchess asked, taking a sip of tea. “What flowers inspire you? What would you like to see on your wedding day?”

Augusta kept staring at Maddie. “I hardly know. Flowers are not my forte, Your Grace. I will leave it in the hands of those who are far superior in knowledge than I on the matter.”

The Dowager Duchess nodded, looking satisfied. “Then we shall have the roses, lilies, and delphinium. I shall arrange them myself.” She took another sip of tea. “There shall only be close family and friends at the church, of course, as tradition dictates. But what about the guests at the wedding breakfast? Shall we settle on a number?”

Maddie heard muffled voices in the hallway, beyond the closed drawing room door. Nobody else seemed to notice. They were all listening to the Dowager Duchess, or at least pretending to listen to her.

“I propose fifty guests,” Lady Ollerton said.

The Dowager Duchess frowned. “No, there should be more. Around seventy, at least. I shall make the grand hall at Stansgate available for it. And perhaps the ceremonies could take place in the Stansgate chapel as well?—”

She was unable to finish her sentence, for, at that moment, the drawing room door burst wide open.

The Duke was standing there. He was panting, as if he had been running.

Maddie's heart leaped wildly. It was the first time she had seen him since the house party. As always, it was as if it had been a hundred years ago, rather than a few short days ago.

Stop it . You must try to temper your reaction to him! He is going to marry your sister. And you are going to marry his cousin!

“Your Grace!” Lady Ollerton's voice was a squeak of surprise.

Hastily, everyone rose to their feet, bowing. The Duke didn't even seem to notice. His eyes turned to Maddie. He looked wild. Then, he turned to his mother.

“There will be no more talk about this wedding,” he said slowly.

The Dowager Duchess frowned. “You cannot just barge in this house and make a proclamation like that, Daniel! We were discussing the possibility of having a double wedding...”

The Duke shook his head, cursing under his breath. “ I do apologize for the intrusion, Lord and Lady Ollerton.” He hesitated. “But the answer is no. Not at all.” He turned his eyes back to Maddie, gazing at her beseechingly. “I have something more important to discuss with Lady Madeline. I must speak with her now .”

There was a sharp intake of breath. Maddie gasped, feeling like she was about to faint.

“What is going on?” the Dowager Duchess demanded, looking perplexed. “Daniel?”

But he didn’t turn and acknowledge his mother. He just kept staring at Maddie.

“Please?” he entreated. “May I speak with you?”

Maddie’s jaw dropped. It was so sudden and unexpected that she didn’t know how to react at all. A silence descended on the room. Clearly, no one knew how to react to this odd intrusion.

“Do you recall when you told me you would do me a favor when I asked?” he said, his eyes never leaving hers.

Maddie gasped again, coloring violently. Everyone’s head swiveled towards her.

“Do you?” he pressed, taking a step towards her.

She nodded uncertainly.

“Well, I am asking you for that favor now,” he continued, his voice wavering with emotion. “Marry me.”

There was a collective gasp of shock around the room. The Dowager Duchess was so stunned that she had to lean on the back of a chair for support. Lord and Lady Ollerton looked utterly bewildered. The only person in the room who didn’t look at all surprised was Augusta.

“I think we should let His Grace and my sister talk privately,” Augusta said, in a crisp, authoritative voice, a small smile on her face. “Let us leave.”

She started heading towards the door. To Maddie’s shock, everyone followed

her—even the Dowager Duchess—like docile sheep trailing behind a shepherd. She supposed they were all so floored by the Duke’s shocking announcement that they hadn’t had time to get their wits together.

Augusta closed the door. They were alone.

Maddie’s heart was thumping so loudly that it sounded like a war drum in her ears. She could barely breathe. Was this actually happening? Had the Duke just marched into this room and asked her to marry him?

I am feverish . I must be imagining it.

Slowly, he walked over to her, until they were only inches away from each other. She smelled his cologne. His grey eyes were burning into her own. Gently, he reached out, taking her hand in his.

When he sank to his knees, gazing up at her earnestly, she snapped out of her trance, finally knowing it was real.

The Duke was formally proposing to her.

She felt like she was about to faint.

“I don’t understand,” she stammered.

He squeezed her hand tightly. “I am sorry, Maddie,” he whispered solemnly. “Sorrier than I can ever express. I was a fool—a witless fool. My only excuse is that I was fighting it, for my own reasons, which had nothing to do with you.”

“Fighting it?” Her voice was a faint whisper.

“Fighting falling in love with you,” he said, his voice husky. “I knew that I felt more intensely about you than any woman I have ever been attracted to, but I still couldn’t admit it to myself...”

“You have fallen in love with me?” She could barely speak.

He stopped, staring at her earnestly. “But... yes. Of course, I have. That is why I am here, begging you to marry me. I ran all the way from Grosvenor Square when I realized it.” He blinked. “I love you, Maddie. I love you fiercely, furiously, like I have never loved before. I want you... and only you. There is no one else for me in this world.”

Her heart stopped beating for a moment. She had waited for this moment. She had dreamt about it. She had never believed it would happen. She almost wanted to pinch herself to believe that it truly was real.

“I... I love you, too,” she admitted. “You are the only man that I can see. The only man that I will ever see.”

He exhaled, leaning his head on her hand. The air seemed to gather around them, like clouds in the sky, moving fast and furious, filled with momentum. Slowly, she reached out with her other hand, placing it on his head. They stayed like that for a long moment.

“I do not deserve you,” he whispered, eventually, gazing up at her. “To think I almost lost you.” He shook his head incredulously. “I thought I was cursed, Maddie. I believed that I was my father’s son and would end up breaking the heart of any woman if I submitted to love. You were the one who made me face my fears, to stop running from it. To have the courage to love. But I almost missed my chance...”

“I was always here,” she whispered back, her heart swelling with such fierce love that

it was almost painful. “I was here, waiting for you.”

“Say you will marry me,” he pleaded. “Put me out of my misery. Say that you will be mine forever.”

“I will,” she breathed, feeling the sweetest joy of her life. “I am yours. I have always been yours.”

He kissed her hand fervently, before rising, gathering her in his arms. He placed his hands on her face, gazing down at her with such love that she couldn’t breathe. They were lost in each other’s eyes. His lips descended on her own, kissing her until she was quite dizzy.

Time seemed to stand still. His lips on hers were like a benediction. A promise. A vow. The most solemn vow she would ever take. She knew, at this moment, that they were already fully committed to each other, and that a ceremony would be a mere formality.

Her scandalous list had brought them together. But it was love that would keep them together. A love so fierce and true that it could never be extinguished.

The door swung open. They both jumped, turning towards it. Augusta was standing there, looking like the cat that had just eaten the cream.

“Is it done?” she asked, smiling broadly. “Are we allowed to come in and offer our congratulations?”

They both laughed. Daniel nodded.

The next moment, everyone trooped back into the drawing room, surrounding them.

“You are a dark horse, Daniel,” the Dowager Duchess chided, yet she looked delighted. “You could have just told me that you had fond feelings for Lady Madeline, you know.”

Lady Ollerton took her youngest daughter’s hand, squeezing it tightly. “Oh, Maddie! I am delirious with pleasure, my dear child!”

“Congratulations to you both,” Lord Ollerton said, his eyes misty. “I must say, I never saw it coming, but I know a love match when I see one.”

The Dowager Duchess clapped her hands together. “So, we will not be having a double wedding, after all. But that does not change much. I am still thinking of an autumn wedding, in the chapel at Stansgate...”

The older ladies drifted away, chattering like starlings, already planning the wedding. Lord Ollerton kissed his youngest’s cheek, then shook hands with the Duke, drawing him aside.

Augusta approached Maddie, took her arm, and then led her towards the fireplace, where they could talk privately. “Be happy, little sister,” she said quietly. “I always knew you were in love with each other. It just took you both a while to figure it out yourselves.”

Maddie was so overcome that she couldn’t speak for a moment. Then, she stared at her sister.

“I am so full of joy that it does not seem quite real,” she gushed, blinking rapidly. “I wish the same joy for you that I am feeling, Sister. I want you to find your love. He is out there somewhere. I just know it.”

Augusta laughed. “Oh, Maddie, you are such a romantic!” She looked sad for a

moment. “I am afraid there will be no such happy ending for me. But I am resigned to it, Sister. There are other joys in life.”

Maddie bit her lip. She wanted Augusta to find love. She wanted her sister to experience this joy. She wanted her to live her own life, fully and completely. But it was out of her hands entirely.

Augusta leaned over, kissing her cheek gently. “I wish you joy, dear sister. I know that you have everything that you ever wanted.”

The two sisters were drawn back into the group. Maddie’s head started to swim as the two matrons grew ever more frantic with their wedding preparations. They called for champagne. Many toasts were raised to the happy couple. She had to pinch herself again that it was really happening.

And then, Daniel drew her aside.

“Meet me tonight?” he whispered in her ear, smiling archly. “I will send the carriage for you again.”

Maddie felt a delicious thrill of anticipation. She turned to her intended husband. The man she loved more than anything in this world. The man who had swept her off her feet.

“That sounds perfect,” she said.

They kept gazing at each other, the air thickening around them as the chatter went on. But they had eyes only for each other.

Once again, she was going to sneak out to meet him. She could barely wait.

EPILOGUE

“Tell me the moment you first knew again.” Maddie sighed, leaning back into the chaise lounge. She laughed giddily. “And then once more.”

Daniel laughed, reaching out to caress her face gently. “How many times must I tell you?”

“A hundred,” she whispered, picking up her glass of brandy, and sipping it gingerly. “A thousand!”

“Well, since we are going to be together forever, then I suppose that is not too bad,” he said, scratching his chin, his grey eyes glittering with mirth. “Over the course of a lifetime, it should only be at least once a week.”

Maddie laughed, gazing around the room—his lair at the house on Grosvenor Square. One of them, at least. The very first he had lured her into. She blinked, unable to believe that she was actually sitting here again. It seemed a lifetime ago that she had last been here.

At that time, they had barely known each other. She had been so nervous and scared, unable to believe her gall.

And now, here she was again, only this time, they were engaged to be married. Somehow, the thrill of sneaking out of her room in the dead of night to meet the waiting carriage in the mews had been even greater, knowing at last how they felt about each other.

“I finally knew that I love you when Christopher threatened that he would reveal your identity to the scandal sheet,” Daniel said, his face growing solemn. “But I had always known it, deep down. The knowledge was waiting for me to discover it. I had just built my walls so high that I had trouble knocking them down.”

Maddie’s heart twisted. He had finally told her about the scandal that had befallen his family all those years ago. How his father had died in the bed of his mistress, who was apparently one of many. How the news of it had broken his mother’s heart, and how he had vowed that he would never do the same thing to a woman. He had vowed that he would never marry.

Her heart broke a little, picturing him learning the shocking news, and then dealing with his heartbroken mother, as well as his grief. She could tell that he had loved his father, once upon a time. But that love had become twisted and distorted, turning into resentment, and a fervent desire to never be like him.

“I understand now,” she said softly. “I understand why you fought our love so hard. It must not have been easy for you.”

He grinned ruefully. “It was the hardest battle of my life,” he admitted, running a hand through his hair. “I was tormented, trying desperately to keep my feelings for you at bay, while hungering for you with a fervor I have never felt before. I felt like I was going mad.”

Maddie reached out, taking his hand. Instantly, she felt the spark that she always felt whenever they touched. He drew in a sharp breath, which told her he felt it as strongly as she did.

But as tempting as it was to submit to it, she ignored it, at least for now. It was so wonderful just sitting here with him, nursing brandy, as they finally spoke about their feelings for each other.

The physical side of it was a huge part, but it wasn't everything. She had believed that it was the only thing for him, and now, it was amazing to bask in the knowledge that it wasn't. That he felt as deeply for her as she did for him.

He was controlling their passion as well, which told her, more than words ever could, that it wasn't just about their insatiable desire for one another. In the past, he would have simply given in to it, for, in the past, he was fighting against getting to know her better.

"I thought that our mothers were going to explode with happiness today." She sighed. "After they got over their shock, of course."

Daniel laughed wryly. "My mother is in the seventh heaven. Finally, she will see me married. It has been her life's ambition to marry me off. I am sure she thought she would never see the day."

"It will make them both so happy when we marry at Stansgate," Maddie said. "They practically completed the wedding preparations this afternoon. All they need to do is set the date."

Abruptly, Daniel sat up, putting down his glass. He turned and looked at her with a strange expression on his face.

"What is it?" she asked, mystified.

"I am glad that we are making our parents happy with our union," he said solemnly. "But already, I feel as if they have overtaken everything. This is about you and me, Maddie. It is about declaring our love and devotion to each other for eternity."

Maddie's heart swelled with love. "Yes. It is."

“Then let us do it our way,” he suggested, his eyes glittering. “Why don’t we just get married now?”

She blinked rapidly, thinking she had misheard him. “Now? But... what do you mean?”

“Let’s run away to Gretna Green,” he said slowly. “We can start the journey to Scotland tonight.” He paused. “We could be married over the blacksmith’s anvil in a few day’s time.”

She gasped. “You are not serious?”

“I have never been more serious in my life,” he stated, his voice breaking a little. “It would be just the two of us, taking our vows before God. No fuss. No wedding breakfast for a hundred people whom we don’t care about.”

Maddie was so shocked that she didn’t know what to say for a moment. “But it would cause a scandal,” she pointed out, eventually. “People would assume you are only marrying me because you had your wicked way with me!”

He gave a bark of laughter. “I had my wicked way with you,” he returned in a husky voice. “And I do assure you that I intend to do so many more times. What does it matter what anyone thinks? We know the truth. That is all that matters.”

Maddie sat back, staring at him. “Both of our families have been blighted by scandal,” she said slowly. “We know what it is like. How could we do that to them all over again?”

“It would be an adventure.” He gazed at her earnestly. “An adventure just for us. I have lived under the shadow of scandal and let it rule my life. I was governed by fear. How liberating it would be to simply not care if we shock people. To start our lives

on our own terms.”

Maddie gaped at him. She was still stunned by his outrageous suggestion. But alongside the shock, she was starting to feel a small thrill of excitement.

She had always longed to be an adventuress. She had always wanted to live her own life, to not be totally bound by Society’s strict shackles. That was why she had written the list. It had been her only way to express her innermost heart’s yearnings.

She had not really given much thought to the wedding—she had just been delirious with happiness that they were getting married at all. She had been willing to be passive while their mothers took over the planning. What did it matter, at the end of the day, except that they were man and wife?

But now... now, she realized that it did matter. It mattered a lot. For they were both restless rebels, at heart. That was one of the reasons they had been drawn to one another.

If they did this, they certainly would be starting their lives together on their own terms. They would be starting their lives as they wished to continue them.

What an amazing adventure it would be.

And their parents would get over it, eventually. It would be only a minor scandal, after all. They would still get the union they desired.

Maddie felt giddy. She laughed aloud in sheer joy. It felt simply wonderful to not be shackled by Society’s rules. Exactly as the list had always intended.

“All right,” she agreed, her heart racing with trepidation and excitement. “Let us do it.”

Daniel jumped up, whooping with laughter, grabbing her hands and pulling her up with him. They danced a lopsided jig around the room, breathless with laughter. When they eventually stopped to draw breath, they gazed into each other's eyes.

"I cannot wait for the rest of our lives to start, Maddie," he whispered. "I feel as if I have waited a lifetime for you already."

It didn't take long to prepare the carriage. Giggling, they left a note in the foyer for the Dowager Duchess and another one beside it, written in Maddie's hand for her family.

When they climbed into the carriage under the shroud of darkness, Maddie felt breathless with anticipation. The coachman cracked the whip, and they were on their way to Gretna Green.

The fight was over now. Their lives spread before them like the unfurling of a magic carpet, ready to fly to the skies. A life lived on their own terms.

They turned to each other. Without a word, they fell hungrily into each other's arms, kissing passionately. After all, it was a long trip to Scotland, and they had to pass the time in some way. The very best way of all.

The End?

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:50 am

Stansgate Manor

Two Years Later

“Look at you! How beautiful you are!”

Maddie leaned over the crib in the nursery, gazing at the baby within, who was babbling softly as he reached a chubby hand out to her.

Her heart flipped over in her chest. She could watch him forever. Sometimes, she stayed in here for hours, just watching him while he slept, counting each breath that he took.

“You know that your mama loves you so much,” she whispered, reaching out to stroke his round face, as soft as the petal of a rose. “You are so dear to me, little one.”

The baby gurgled happily, basking in her soft, loving voice, like a cat basking in a ray of sunshine. Maddie’s heart swelled again. Edward had just turned six months old, but it seemed like only yesterday he had been a tiny newborn in her arms, red-faced and squawking furiously.

Now, he was always smiling, his cheeks dimpling. He was bright-eyed and curious. Her eyes swept over his beloved face, drinking in every detail. He had his father’s grey eyes and strong personality. If he didn’t like something, he voiced his displeasure loudly.

She reached for the small bear lying in the crib, tucking it next to him. The bear was

his favorite thing in the whole world, and he couldn't sleep without it. It had been his first gift, given to him by his adoring father, who had walked around in a joyous daze on the day of his birth.

Maddie touched the small stone in the necklace hanging around her neck. It was a precious ruby, given to her on the same day by her husband, to show his love for her. She always wore it now.

She started crooning, rocking the crib gently. The lullaby was Edward's favorite. Soon, his eyelids started fluttering and then closed. Still, she kept singing and rocking, until she was quite certain he had drifted away into slumberland.

"Is he asleep?"

She turned at the voice behind her. Daniel was standing there, watching their son, his face creased with tenderness. He tried as much as he could to be here for their son's bedtime ritual, but sometimes, the estate demanded his attention.

Maddie nodded. "He has just drifted off. I think he will sleep through the night now."

"That is good," Daniel said, taking her in his arms. "For I have plans for tonight, and I would not have taken it kindly if Master Edward decided to ruin them."

Maddie laughed softly. "And what are those plans, pray tell? I did not know we were expecting any guests."

Daniel grinned at her. "My plans do not involve guests, wife." He took her hand in his. "Come with me."

Mystified, Maddie let him lead her out of the nursery, smiling at the nanny sitting in the corner, sewing, who would take over Edward's care, for now.

Already, that tiny thrill of excitement and anticipation that Maddie always felt for Daniel was flaring to life within her. They had been married for two years now, and it never went away. In fact, it was stronger than it had ever been. Life with Daniel was always an adventure. Her husband kept her on her toes in more ways than one.

The arrival of their son had constrained their lives a little. They didn't set out on spontaneous rambling adventures anymore, like they had in their first year of marriage. Once, he had surprised her with tickets on a ship to Spain.

They had spent many happy days and nights exploring small towns and eating in romantic tavernas, making love for hours at night as a soft breeze from the ocean drifted through curtains.

Then, he had whisked her away to Italy. It had been a dream come true to see the Sistine Chapel, which he remembered she had always wanted to see. But the best thing of all, as she had gazed up at that remarkable ceiling, was that he was by her side, holding her hand.

Her partner in life and adventure.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, laughing, as he led her down the hallway, quickly walking past the grand rooms.

"You will see," he said in a mysterious voice.

He led her into the grand ballroom, across the cold marble floor. Maddie blinked, remembering the very first ball that she attended here, when she danced with him for the first time. The night that he had been consumed with jealousy over his cousin's commandeering her dance card, and couldn't bear it any longer, pushing Christopher aside to whisk her onto the dance floor.

Maddie's face turned pink. And she remembered what they had done after the ball as well, when he had lured her into his study. Her body still shuddered with ecstatic delight at the memory.

They reached the French doors that opened onto the wide balcony, overlooking the grounds. He let go of her hand, opening them with a theatrical flourish.

Maddie stepped outside. She gasped.

The balcony had been transformed as if a fairy godmother had hovered over it, casting a magic spell. She blinked as she took it all in.

There seemed to be a hundred twinkling lanterns, strung together, illuminating the space. Flowers in urns festooned the space, filling it with the sweetest scent imaginable. On a table near the edge of the balcony, there stood an opened bottle of champagne and two glasses.

Beyond the balcony, the night sky loomed dramatically, arching above them. It was the deepest, darkest blue, filled with a thousand glittering stars that appeared to go on forever. She had never seen a night sky so beautiful.

Now she understood why he had been late getting to the nursery tonight.

"Oh, my," she breathed, her heart lurching in delight. She turned to him. "What is the occasion? Have I forgotten?"

He laughed, taking her hand again. "Can I not just celebrate my love for you?" he asked gently. He took her in his arms, gazing down at her. "You are the best thing that ever happened to me, Maddie. I want you to know that all the time. There does not need to be a special occasion for it."

She couldn't breathe. He had done all this, on an ordinary night, to celebrate his love for her. She knew she had made the best decision of her life to marry him, even if the start of their journey together had been fraught with difficulty.

He led her to the table, pouring the champagne. After they had toasted each other, putting down the glasses, he reached into the pocket of his jacket, taking out a crumpled piece of paper, which looked oddly familiar.

"The list!" she exclaimed. "You kept it!"

He grinned at her. "Of course, I kept it. It is like our very first love letter." He paused. "And there is another reason as well."

"Which is?" Her voice was breathless.

In response, he passed the list to her. "Read it," he said, his grin widening.

Maddie stared down at the aging piece of paper, gazing at her own handwriting.

It seemed an age ago that she had sat down at her desk in her parents' house, writing the list, her heart filled with longing for adventure and life.

She had no idea Daniel had kept it. She had forgotten about it entirely in the whirlwind of their marriage. It was the list that had brought them together, playing their sensual game that had culminated in their marriage. It was like staring at an old relic.

She read the first five items on the list, all neatly crossed off.

Learn How to Play Chess

Cheat at A Card Game

Kiss A Rake

Walk Around Without Undergarments

Sleep With A Gentleman

When her eyes landed on the sixth—and last—item on it, she gasped. She had forgotten all about that one.

Make Love Under The Stars

She looked up at him, her heart beating frantically, unable to speak.

“Yes,” he whispered, his voice husky, as his eyes glinted with desire. “We never did cross off the last one.”

“No,” she agreed in a breathless voice. “We never did.”

“It seems about time,” he said slowly, taking her hand. “In fact, I would say it is long overdue.”

He led her down the stone steps at the side of the balcony, onto the grounds. Her heart was thumping loudly now, and her mouth had gone dry. Overhead, the stars blinked dazzlingly, as if they had chosen this night to put on this brilliant display for them alone. As if they were the last two people left in the world.

He led her deeper onto the grounds, heading towards a tall elm tree. She saw there was a blanket spread beneath it, waiting for them. Her heart flipped, and she couldn’t help smiling. He had thought of simply everything.

They didn't speak as they lay down on it, side by side, staring up at the luminous sky. The air was starting to thicken between them, the sensual tension brewing, as it always did, but there was no rush. There was all the time in the world.

"It is like we are sailing on a ship towards the stars," she murmured, filled with wonder, as she gazed up at the night sky.

"I could not ask for a better traveling companion than you," he whispered back.

Slowly, they turned to each other. He wound his hands into her hair, drawing her to him. His lips were like cold silk as his tongue plunged into her mouth. She felt a stab of desire, so intense that it startled her.

It was as if a candle flared to life within both of them. Hungrily, they tore at each other's clothes, unable to get enough of each other.

In the back of her mind, she marveled that it never changed, that their desire for one another was as strong as it had always been, from the moment he collided with her in Hyde Park.

His hands were on her legs, dragging up her gown, before delving into her sex, which was already moist and ready for him. Instinctively, she knew that this wasn't a time for leisurely lovemaking and finesse. This was animal hunger, which must be sated as quickly as possible.

She gripped his back tightly as he plunged into her, over and over, arching her hips to meet his, straining against him. Their rhythm was as old and timeless as the tides. Together, they were sailing towards those stars, reaching out for the highest one in the sky.

She opened her eyes, gazing up at the sky in wonder, letting all that brilliance fall into

her, as her release finally washed over her. It was so powerful, so thrilling, that she couldn't help crying out over and over. The breeze caught her voice, carrying it into the night.

Daniel moaned, gripping her tightly, as his own release tore through him. They fell back onto the blanket, gazing up at the sky, trying to catch their breaths.

“So, that is it,” she whispered as her heartbeat slowed. “The final item can be crossed off now.”

Daniel laughed softly, reaching out to take her hand. “We can add more things to the list if you want, you know.”

Maddie sat up, gazing down at him, loving him more at that moment than she ever had before. “Actually... that is a very good idea, indeed. Shall we put our heads together and think of something?” Her lips twitched. “I'm ready if you are.”

The End.

CHAPTER 1

Daphne rested her forehead against the cool glass, tracking individual droplets racing each other down the window.

The rain was coming down heavier than ever, sleeting down the windowpane in a gray veil. Outside, the London streets were slick with water, puddles growing out of the gutters and spreading across the roads.

If the one on the left reaches the bottom before the one on the right, everything will be all right. Emily and I will pack our things and run. I will say something to Mama, tell her the truth, and she will stop all of this.

The right-hand droplet won.

“It’s bad luck, you know,” Emily said, her voice flat and cold. “Rain on one’s wedding day. It’s bad luck. Like leaving the house with your left foot first.”

Daphne twisted around to look at her twin, slumped over on her dressing table.

“You aren’t superstitious, Emily. And you’re left-handed. You do everything with your left foot or hand first.”

“Telling, isn’t it?” Emily lifted her head from the dresser. Her eyes were red-rimmed from crying, but the tears had stopped. For now, at least. Her spectacles were gone, carefully folded and left on the edge of the dressing table.

Without her spectacles, the two of them looked more alike than ever.

Not today, of course. Emily was trussed up in her wedding finery, drowning in acres of ice-blue satin. A translucent lace veil was wrapped around her elaborate hairstyle and hung down around her head and shoulders, threatening to choke her.

Daphne was suitably inferior today, as befitted a bridesmaid. Her gown was a simple one, the same green as her eyes, with a demure, little posy of flowers to carry.

“You don’t have to do this,” Daphne said after the pause had grown too painful. “Nobody understands why. If I could just tell Mama, or at least Anna, then?—”

“No,” Emily interrupted, shaking her head. “Nobody knows about my secret, and if it came out, I would be ruined. Don’t underestimate him, Daff. He was very clear. I marry him, or he tells everybody and I am ruined. Mama and Anna knowing about it won’t change a thing.”

“But perhaps?—”

“Stop it, Daphne,” Emily burst out, jumping to her feet. She paced up and down the room, hobbled by the stiff, uncomfortable bridal shoes she was wearing. At last, she gave up pacing and threw herself down on the edge of the bed with a cry of frustration. “Oh, Daff, I’m sorry. I can’t do this. But I must do it. How could I have been so foolish?”

“It isn’t your fault,” Daphne insisted, lowering herself to sit beside her sister. “It’s all his fault for blackmailing you. I’m quite sure that Anna and Theodore could do something about it. He’s a duke, after all, and they’re so terribly rich.”

Which, of course, was why Anna had been so baffled at her younger sister’s inexplicable choice of husband.

“You are one-and-twenty , Emily!” Anna had said, on more than one occasion. “We aren’t poor and vulnerable anymore. You don’t have to marry simply for convenience. And frankly, I do not like your choice of husband. Won’t you reconsider?”

Emily would not reconsider. Daphne, who knew the full story of why her sister would not—and could not—change her mind, stayed silent.

The guilt gnawed at the edges of her mind.

There were a great many things they did not know, not least of all why the infamous Duke of Clapton would be so happy to exchange his silence for a bride, but frankly, Daphne did not care. The man had no right to force her sweet, sensitive sister into a marriage that she did not want.

“You always wanted to marry for love,” Daphne murmured aloud. Emily said nothing, only placing her hand over her sister’s. “Everybody thought that I would be the sentimental, romantic one, desperate to marry for love.”

Emily snorted. “You were, and are, an absolute hellion, Daff. We all thought you’d marry early because you were always ogling men. I think Mama nearly fell over in shock when you announced your intention never to marry.”

“Well, one must admire the scenery, yes?”

Emily chuckled at that, bumping her shoulder against Daphne’s. The twins leaned together, silence falling over them like a comforting blanket. Reflected in the dresser, they looked more different than ever. Emily’s ice-blue dress seemed to drain the color from her face, and her dark hair was hidden under the disheveled veil. Her eyes were like chips of blue ice, whereas Daphne’s were a sharp green.

“I don’t know what I will do,” Emily murmured. “I wish I had been more sensible. Like Anna, you know? Anna was ready to marry a man for convenience, simply to save us and Mama from that awful creditor of Papa’s. She did marry him. I suppose she was lucky that she and Theodore fell in love. I’d like to hope that the Duke and I would fall in love. He’s handsome enough, I suppose, and he’s never been cruel. To me, at least.” She plucked at her voluminous skirts. “He bought me this. It must have cost a fortune.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Daphne snapped. “He blackmailed you. Why can’t he marry some brainless debutante who doesn’t know any better? Why can’t he leave you alone?”

Emily squeezed her eyes shut. “Do you think I haven’t asked myself these questions over and over again? I’d ask him if I wasn’t so afraid of him. It’s no use, Daphne. We aren’t going to get any answers. At least, not until it’s too late.” She breathed out slowly. “It’s already too late.”

Daphne clenched her fists. Abruptly, she leaped up and turned to face her twin.

“It’s not too late,” she announced. “It’s never too late. I’m not going to let you do this, Emily.”

Emily blinked up at her, baffled. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that you won’t be able to bear it, being married to him. I, on the other hand, can handle anything.”

Daphne placed her hands on her hips and tilted up her chin, a little impressed by her own heroism. Of course, it made perfect sense. She would take Emily’s place, and nobody would know the difference. She could manage it.

I can save her.

Daphne's heroic self-image was neatly shattered when Emily sighed and slumped back on the bed.

"Don't be silly, Daff."

"I'm not being silly," Daphne shot back, piqued. "Look!"

She snatched up Emily's spectacles, round and wire-rimmed, and shoved them onto her face. The world blurred with the spectacles on, making her eyes sting right away, but that hardly mattered.

Emily propped herself up on her elbows. "What are you trying to prove, Daphne? It's not that I think you can't impersonate me. It's more that you shouldn't. Why should you have to marry the Duke?"

Daphne shrugged. "I'd like to be a duchess. Besides, I'm too shocking to make a good match among the ton. Remember how old Lady Silversmith fainted when she saw me riding like a man? And none of the Greens will speak to me after?"

"Enough, Daphne," Emily interrupted. "I can't let you do this."

Daphne crouched down before her sister, taking both of her hands in her own. "And I can't let you do this. It'll kill you, marrying a man you don't love. Look at how you've wasted away over the past month. Everybody is concerned. Anna corners me every other day and demands to know what's going on. Mama cries herself to sleep with worry. It's not just you who will suffer from this. And how will I ever forgive myself?"

Emily bit her lip, turning away.

Even through those awful, blurry spectacles, Daphne could tell that Emily was fighting back tears.

“I’m so afraid,” she whispered. “I don’t know what to do, Daff.”

“But I do,” Daphne said, firmly. “I can do this.”

“What if you can’t? It’s one thing to talk about this sort of thing here, safe in our room, but what about when it’s real? What about when it’s really happening?”

“He’ll never know the difference,” Daphne assured her. “We must hurry, though. I need to put your dress on, and you’ll have to wear mine.”

“Very well,” Emily said, at last, suddenly decided. “Unlace me, quickly.”

The girls dressed in silence. Emily’s wedding gown felt strange on Daphne, even though they’d shared clothes since they were babies. There wasn’t much to be done about Daphne’s simply dressed hair, but fortunately, the veil hid most of it. As a final touch, she pushed the spectacles onto her nose and turned to face Emily.

“How do I look?” she said.

There was no time to answer, because at that moment, footsteps echoed in the hallway outside, and the girls barely had time to face the door before it flew open.

Octavia Belmont, the Dowager Viscountess St. Maur, stood there. Redoubtable, handsome, and more than a little terrifying. Privately, Daphne thought that Anna was growing more like their mother with each passing day.

Octavia glanced between the two of them, her eyes narrowed. For a moment, Daphne thought that they had succeeded and had fooled even their mother.

But then Octavia heaved a sigh and spoke. “What are you girls playing at? Daphne, why are you wearing your sister’s clothes?”

The twins deflated.

Emily glanced at Daphne, her eyes wide and unfocused without her spectacles. Drawing in a breath, Daphne took a step towards her mother.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Mama. I am on my way to get married, aren’t I?”

Confusion streaked across Octavia’s features. “Daphne, what?—”

“It’s Emily. I am Emily. I am Emily, and we’re late.” Daphne held her mother’s gaze for a long moment. “It’s time to go, Mama.”

Octavia glanced at Emily, then at Daphne, then back to Emily again. She swallowed hard, lifting her chin.

“Sometimes I think I will never understand you girls,” she said, her voice quavering. “I suppose I should give up trying. Well, come along, then. We are going to be late.”

The church was packed. All sorts of fine carriages and horses were lined up outside, and some of the less illustrious guests were forced to stand outside or in the hallway of the church. The chatter and laughter drifted out across the courtyard, to where the bridal carriage was approaching.

I am not afraid, Daphne told herself. I am saving my sister. Am I not the stronger of the two of us? It is my responsibility to keep her safe, and if that means marrying some monstrous duke in her place, then so be it.

Emily had mentioned that the Duke was rather handsome, but Daphne had never found him so. He was cold and unfriendly, and would clearly resort to blackmail. He had never spoken to her , at least.

I'm going to be married. To him. For the rest of my life.

Well, that's not so bad, is it? You said you would not marry, but really, what woman believes that when she tells it to herself?

The carriage lurched to a halt, and the door was opened. There was a straight, short path between the carriage and the church doors. Daphne could almost feel the prickle of countless eyes on her, judging and assessing.

"You do not have to do this, you know," Octavia said abruptly, carefully not looking at either one of her children.

Emily was watching Daphne, an odd, pleading look in her eyes.

If I lose my nerve now, Emily will take my place. I will have failed her.

Daphne drew in a breath. "I'm afraid I must, Mama."

Not giving herself an instant to indulge her cowardice, she climbed out of the carriage and strode into the church.

She remembered a moment too late that ladies, especially brides, were meant to mince around with dainty little steps. Daphne, however, had covered half of the distance between the church doors and the altar in the space of a few seconds.

Murmurs rose all around her, and as expected, she felt the gazes of the congregation like a thousand tiny pinpricks. She imagined that Anna and her husband Theodore

were in the audience somewhere, both grim-faced.

Anna had been very open about her feelings regarding Emily's wedding. Beatrice, their old family friend, would be there too, with her swollen belly and her husband, who by all accounts adored her.

Daphne did not particularly want to see them. An ordinary person would not see the difference between her and Emily, but their close friends might.

Remembering the veil, Daphne hastily pulled it down over her face. The wretched spectacles were unbearable, but Emily never appeared in public without them, so Daphne could not appear without them.

Her husband-to-be was mercifully blurry through the spectacles. She remembered very little about his form and face, except that he had sharp, unblinking green-gray eyes that were more often than not fixed on Emily.

She reached the top of the aisle. For some reason, she found that she was out of breath. Why? She hadn't walked that fast, and the distance was not very far. Why was she struggling to breathe?

With the spectacles in front of her eyes and the veil over that, Daphne had the strangest sensation of being blindfolded, and then gently smothered. Her chest was tight. Had they laced the gown too tight?

She forced herself to breathe in, trying to concentrate on how her lungs inflated.

I am breathing. I am.

Still, the tightness persisted, and she began to feel lightheaded. Her head thumped, and there was a strange echoing in her ears as if she were submerged underwater.

She was aware of Octavia and Emily standing behind her, moving to take their seats. Daphne had a feeling that if she turned and looked at her sister or their mother—or anyone —she would scream aloud and run for her life.

I cannot do this.

Her heartbeat was audible in her ears. Was a person meant to feel their heart thrumming in their chest? No, she thought not. And had the Duke always been so tall? So imposing?

Daphne hated tall men.

She risked a glance up at him and immediately wished she hadn't. He was staring down at her, and although his expression was blurry, she guessed that it was not a pleasant one.

“Wait a moment,” he said, interrupting the rector, who was just about to begin his speech. “Let's throw back that veil.”

“The removal of the veil is generally done after the vows, Your Grace,” the rector said, a trifle nervously.

The Duke did not appear to have heard him, or if he had, he was ignoring him.

“Come, I insist,” he said, still staring down at Daphne.

She clenched her jaw. The feeling of lightheadedness persisted, and she still felt as though she could not breathe. Logic dictated that she was breathing, she must be breathing, but that quiet, calm voice was drowned out by a louder voice screaming in terror.

Saying nothing, Daphne deftly swept back the veil.

Go on, then. Have a good look at me. You can't tell the difference between me and my sister, I know it.

The crushing feeling in her chest intensified the longer the Duke stared down at her. Daphne did not allow herself to look away, although the spectacles really were starting to hurt her eyes now.

She had the feeling that the entire congregation was holding their breath. Well, perhaps they were. Octavia and Emily certainly were.

I cannot do this.

The thought cut through the chaos of her mind like a hot knife through butter. The tangled ideas and half-baked plans all melted away on either side of this plain, simple truth.

I can't marry this man.

I must. To save Emily.

But who is going to save me?

"I had thought," the Duke said, his voice flat and emotionless, with no inflection either way, "that my bride had blue eyes, not green."

He did not speak loudly. But even so, Daphne was sure that the guests in the first few rows heard. A murmuring broke out, or perhaps that was just the buzzing in her head, the feeling that there was not enough air in the church—and how could there be, with so many people in here?—and that if she wanted to breathe again, she had to leave

immediately.

“I think you are mistaken,” Daphne heard herself say, her tone matching the Duke’s.

He tilted his head to the side, like a bird. “I am never mistaken.”

“There is a first time for everything,” she shot back.

He narrowed his eyes at her—or so she assumed, with those wretched spectacles that she wished to tear off her face—and her heart sank.

This isn’t going to work. He is going to stop the wedding.

On cue, the Duke turned to the rector. “I believe there is a mistake, good sir.”

Daphne reached out, grabbing his sleeve. Gasps rose from the congregation.

“You shall have to make do with me,” she hissed.

The Duke blinked once, slowly, like a cat.

“I do not make do, my dear,” he responded.

Well, that was that, then. She’d failed. Her humiliation was complete. This would be an even bigger story than Anna being jilted by her oldest friend.

I cannot do this. I’ve failed.

She couldn’t breathe. She truly could not breathe this time. Daphne began to gasp, turning to short, sharp breaths in an attempt to draw air into her lungs. The Duke noticed, glancing down at her with a frown. His lips parted—whether to comfort her

or to publicly denounce her, Daphne was not sure—but he never got the chance to speak.

Suddenly, there was a hand on her arm, and she turned to see Emily standing beside her. Emily's eyes—blue, as the Duke had clearly noticed—were desperate and wide.

As always, Daphne knew exactly what her twin was thinking, and exactly what she needed to do.

The Duke's mouth closed with a snap, his eyes flicking between the twins. Daphne didn't need to see his face to understand the emotions fluttering over his face. Anger, confusion, frustration.

Privately, Daphne thought he was an idiot not to understand. What man could not grasp that blackmailing a woman would not make for a willing bride? Whatever the man's reasons for blackmailing Emily—and they would never be good enough, in Daphne's eyes—he was clearly too stupid to secure a wife in an ordinary way.

Or so Daphne thought. She believed this was a fairly accurate assessment of the man standing beside her at the altar.

“No,” Emily whispered. “This is enough.”

“Emmie...”

“I can't. You can't.”

“I can't breathe, Emily.”

“I know. I know, dearest. But you have to run. Run!”

Daphne dropped her bouquet and ran.

CHAPTER 2

The world shot by in a chaotic gasp. Daphne was aware of strangely disconnected things—the yelps of surprise and outrage from the audience, her mother sobbing, Anna shouting her name at the top of her lungs. She also heard the rector cry out, “Somebody stop that girl!” probably out of shock.

And then, to her bewilderment, she heard the man she had almost married speak up, drowning out the rector.

“Let her go if she wishes.”

And then Daphne was out of the church, and the air was so fresh and clean that she wanted to laugh or cry or sing or do it all at once.

She couldn’t, of course, on account of having her escape to effect first of all.

Skidding to a halt in the courtyard, Daphne glanced this way and that, panting for breath.

I’m not going to have to marry him, she kept thinking, over and over again. I’m free. I’m free.

Emily might not be entirely free, not yet, but one thing is clear—there’ll be no wedding happening today.

I’ve bought us time, at the very least.

The rain had slowed to a drizzle, plastering her veil to her face. Suddenly furious, Daphne tore the wretched thing off. It floated to the ground beside her and was immediately absorbed into a large, muddy puddle.

And then she saw what she was looking for—a lone horse, not hitched up to a cart or carriage. It was a plain brown mare, with a well-polished saddle, tied to a railing and left to stand in the rain by a thoughtless owner.

Hiking up her skirts, Daphne hurried towards it. The horse watched her approach with disinterest. It was saddled up and ready to go, and she hauled herself neatly onto its back without the need for a mounting block.

It's been ages since I had a proper horse ride, she thought, swinging her other leg over the saddle. It was not, of course, a lady's saddle. Daphne knew how to ride side-saddle, naturally. Emily always rode side-saddle, very demurely.

Daphne could not stand it. It was uncomfortable, she would feel unbalanced, and she couldn't go nearly as fast as she would like.

Octavia had given up trying to convince her otherwise.

People were beginning to filter out of the church, talking loudly amongst themselves, clearly reeling from what they had just witnessed.

A runaway bride! How exciting. One of them pointed in Daphne's direction. Biting back a curse she'd overheard from one of the grooms and had been dying to use ever since, she kicked her heels against the horse's flanks and they took off.

The horse must have had a good deal of pent-up energy because it shot forward, the scenery flashing past in a blur. The church was left behind in a trice. She tried, and failed, to guide the horse onto the road, but it tugged its head free and plunged into

the forest.

Yelping, Daphne bent forward over the horse's neck to avoid being whipped in the face by branches as they shot by. She tore off her spectacles, and the world surged back into focus. She had meant to hold onto them, to return them to Emily as soon as she could, but the horse suddenly leaped over a fallen tree, and the spectacles flew out of her hands and fell somewhere in the undergrowth. Lost, of course.

Where are we going?

She began to panic.

Perhaps it was her imagination, but Daphne was sure she could hear the thud of horses' hooves behind her. Was she being pursued?

Ridiculous though it was, Daphne had a sudden, horrifying vision of being dragged bodily back to the church, where the Duke waited for her.

Gritting her teeth, she leaned forward. The horse took this as a hint to gallop faster and increased its speed.

Daphne lost track of time very quickly. They plunged in and out of the forest, sometimes crossing fields and rolling hills. The rain drizzled on for an hour or two, and then abruptly grew heavier, until her hair grew bedraggled over her shoulders and her wet dress began to chafe her skin.

Where am I? Which direction did I ride in?

Now that the initial panic had eased off, the first real twinges of worry began to set in. Daphne reined the horse into a little clearing and glanced around her.

Well, I have no idea where I am. And on the day I leave my compass at home, too!

The compass had been a present from her father many years ago. Daphne had a compass, and Emily had a spyglass. Emily's spyglass was pristine, well-polished, and displayed atop a selection of astronomy texts in her room.

Daphne's compass was dented, scratched, and generally well-used, with odd quirks like a few grains of sand beneath the glass cover, and she had no idea how they had worked inside. She used it almost daily, taking it out and looking at it even when she knew exactly where she was. It was a stark contrast to Emily's obsessive, vigorous maintenance of her gift, and it nicely highlighted the difference between the twins.

The compass was, if Daphne remembered correctly, in a specially sewn pocket in her bridesmaid dress.

Which, of course, Emily was wearing.

She bit back a sigh.

"Better retrace my steps, then."

By her estimation, it was somewhere in the middle of the afternoon, as the wedding had been scheduled for midday. By now, Daphne was sore, her back and legs aching painfully, and the bones in her corset were digging into her sides. She did not relish the prospect of a painful, wet ride back, but really, there was nothing for it.

She steered the horse towards home.

Abruptly, a crack of lightning split the sky, the iron-grey clouds looming darker than ever. A roll of thunder followed straight after, loud and close enough to rattle her teeth.

The horse screamed, flinging itself onto its hind legs. Daphne yelled, grabbing for the bridle, but the leather was slippery, and her hands were numb and wet. She lost her grip, tumbling backward out of the saddle just as the horse lurched forward.

Thump.

She hit the ground hard enough to knock the breath from her body. The horse galloped away, its ears pressed back against its head, and disappeared into the forest.

Daphne lay there for a moment, spreadeagled on her back. The squelchy, muddy ground beneath her was soaking her dress, and rainwater pelted down on her from above.

I think it would be best all around if I were just struck by lightning. Right now. Boom.

She lay there for a few minutes more. Lightning jolted down a second time, but this time the thunder took a count of five seconds to come. The storm was moving away.

It seemed she was not going to be struck by lightning right away.

Daphne heaved herself into a sitting position, not daring to look at her once-ice-blue gown. It was, of course, soaked with mud, torn in several places, and essentially good for nothing but rags.

She put her hands on her hips and whistled for the horse. Belatedly, she remembered that it was not her precious Gulliver she had been riding, but a strange horse, one that probably did not come when it was whistled at.

Well, now what?

Retracing her steps was out of the question, of course. A ride of several hours, while uncomfortable before, was now clearly impossible. Glancing around, Daphne saw nothing but more trees. No paths, no roads, no dwellings.

Just before despair set in, however, she spotted something else. A fence, well-built, sturdy, and fairly modern, weaving through the trees.

A fence means farms and fields, which likely means houses. And, of course, roads. Perhaps I might find a stagecoach to take me back to town.

She had no money for a stagecoach, of course, but it was better not to think of that. She would cross that bridge when she came to it.

With her first step forward, Daphne noticed to her chagrin that she had somehow twisted her ankle in her fall, in addition to the many new bruises and cuts she had acquired. It was not broken, or even badly sprained, which was fortunate, but now every second step hurt.

Just a little further, she told herself, even though she had no idea whether it was much further or not, or even where she was going.

Climbing the fence was a tricky business. There was an ominous tearing sound from her skirts, but she ignored it.

She trudged onwards, hoping to come across some cozy little farm cottage. After only a few minutes, she spotted a little folly peering out of a clearing. Brightening, she hurried towards it.

I'll be out of the rain, at least.

The folly was made in the Grecian style, circular, with a few artfully weathered

pillars and a domed roof, half-covered in moss. She stepped out of the rain with a sigh of relief and set out wringing out her hair and skirts.

In the silence that followed, Daphne distinctly heard a long, miserable sniff. She froze.

“Ahem!”

There was no answer to her questioning cough.

She peered around a pillar. “Is anybody there? Show yourself!”

There was a shuffling sound and another half-smothered sniff.

Daphne inched forward, peering around the next pillar.

“I warn you,” she said, hoping to sound confident and unafraid, “my sister and I often engaged in fisticuffs, before she decided it was not ladylike. I was rather good at it!”

A small figure appeared from behind the pillar in front of her, making her jump. It was a young boy of about eight or nine, his face blotchy and red. He sniffed disdainfully.

“Is that supposed to scare me?” he demanded. “Telling me that you used to play fisticuffs with your sister?”

Daphne put her hands on her hips. “It was all I could come up with on such short notice.”

“Well, you might want to think up something better next time. If I were a robber or a murderer, I would have split my sides laughing at that.”

She snorted. "I'll bear that in mind. And who are you, if you don't mind my asking? And what are you doing here, all by yourself, in the rain?"

The boy dragged a long, pointed glance over her bedraggled frame, lingering on the pool of water growing around her feet. She tried unsuccessfully to pull her wet hair up from her neck.

"I was caught in the storm," she said, a trifle defensively.

The boy sniffed. "My name is Alex. I came out here because I like it here, and I wanted to be by myself."

"Why were you crying?"

He wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "I was not crying."

Daphne decided not to push the issue. "Well, my name is Daphne. I have a niece only a few years younger than you, and it would upset me very much if I saw her all by herself in such weather, and in such distress."

"I'm not in distress," Alex muttered, somewhat half-heartedly.

"I see."

Daphne eyed the boy closely. He was dressed well, his clothes only a little damp, and had black curls all over his head and large deep blue eyes. He was the sort of sweet-looking, little boy that artists liked to depict as cherubs and small angels, or rosy-cheeked, angelic children of indeterminate gender.

At least, they would have, were he not in the middle of crying his eyes out, with snot running liberally down his face. Daphne wished she had a handkerchief to offer him.

He dragged his sleeve across his nose, and she winced.

He glowered at her. "I lost my handkerchief."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't tut and sigh. Tell me what is wrong, and I'll talk to you frankly about it."

Alex eyed her suspiciously. "Like a grownup?"

Daphne inclined her head. "Like a grownup."

He sniffed. "Very well. If you must know, it is my father. I am the greatest disappointment in his life, and he takes no trouble to hide it."

Daphne flinched. "I'm sure that can't be true."

"I'm sure you don't know my father. He hates me."

She bit her lip, trying to think of something to say.

Alex moved over to the back of the stone structure and sat down on the ground, his back against the wall. Drawing his knees up to his chest, he wrapped his arms around them and perched his chin on top. Suddenly, he looked simultaneously much older and much younger than his eight years.

She sighed and moved over to sit beside him.

"My father made a great many mistakes in his life," she said, after a pause. "He did things he should not have done. He hurt me and my sisters, and my mother, too. He was only human, and humans do make mistakes, whether they want to or not. But despite it all, he loved us. He loved us so much, and we loved him."

Alex stuck out his lip petulantly. “Well, that’s all very well for you, but my father is different.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. He’s cruel.”

Daphne flinched a little at that word. “Cruel?” she repeated carefully. “What do you mean by that?”

She glanced over his small frame, looking for bruises or scrapes, signs that he was underfed or abused in some way.

Alex caught her eye and sighed theatrically. “He doesn’t hurt me if that’s what you mean. At least, he doesn’t hit me, or cane me, or anything like that. He’s never done that.”

Daphne relaxed a little. “Well, I’m glad to hear that. But then what do you mean by cruel?”

Alex shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. It’s too much to explain. But let me assure you that I quite hate him, and he hates me.”

Daphne nibbled on her lip, trying to come up with something clever to say. It was no good assuring Alex that his father really did love him when she didn’t know the man in question. He might be a monster, cold and heartless like so many of the ton.

Daphne personally knew many gentlemen who truly believed that their children had nothing to do with them, and never bothered themselves with parenting in any way, leaving it entirely to the ladies. And sometimes the ladies did not bother, either.

And then, of course, when their children grew up wild and cold, they had the audacity to be baffled and wonder what they had done to deserve it.

No, she had better keep her mouth shut until she understood the situation.

Not that I will be staying here long enough to understand the situation, she reminded herself.

“Well, I’m sorry for it,” she said, at last. “Families can be tricky.”

Alex snorted. “You can say that again. And then there’s Grandmama, always poking her nose in and telling tales. She seems to have a knack for making everything worse.”

“My sister is a little like that,” Daphne agreed. “My older sister, that is. She’s married and has children, and rather believes that she knows everything. It’s irritating that she is so frequently right.”

Alex nodded in agreement.

They sat there in silence for a few more minutes, until the rain appeared to ease off a little more.

“I suppose I should go home,” Alex muttered. “They’ll all be out, looking for me.”

“Is your home nearby?”

“Yes, fairly close.”

“Well then.” Daphne got to her feet, brushed off her damp palms, and extended one hand towards the boy. “I shall take you home, to make sure you get home safe.”

Alex flushed. “You don’t have to do that. I’m not a baby.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I hoped to ask for a favor in return. Would your family mind if I stayed the night? As you can see, I’m rather wet and very far from home myself. Could I trespass on your hospitality? You seem like a proper gentleman, and I am sure that I can trust you.”

Alex brightened at that, taking her hand and getting to his feet.

“I think they wouldn’t mind you staying. We have plenty of space. Oh, and by the way, I ought to let you know that I am not blind, and despite all the dirt, it’s pretty clear that you’re a bride.”

Daphne reddened. “Yes, I know I look quite a sight. I’m hoping your kind family will offer a change of clothes.”

“I’m sure they will. But don’t worry, I am not going to ask any questions about your wedding day, as Papa always told me that it’s impolite to ask uncomfortable questions.”

“A wise man,” Daphne agreed.

She shook out her skirts—damp and filthy—and together they picked their way down the hill, sticking to the tree line.

The path was difficult, the ground slippery and steep. Daphne was so absorbed in watching where to put her feet that she did not look where she was going. More accurately, she did not look at what was happening at the bottom of the hill.

“They’re looking for me,” Alex whispered.

She glanced up, and her gaze sharpened.

At the bottom of the slope, alongside the house they were approaching, a dozen or so people were milling around in the gardens, torches and candles glimmering in the gloom.

At her side, Alex sucked in a sharp breath. “There’s Papa! He’s come to look for me!”

Daphne saw at once who Alex was talking about. A tall, stocky man was striding up the hill towards them, holding up a lantern. The buttery yellow light flickered across his face, revealing a square, sharp jaw and a grim expression. He was a powerfully built man, as far as Daphne could tell, making even Emily’s duke seem a little weak. He had a strong profile and heavy, dark eyebrows hanging over his eyes.

He did not seem happy in the slightest.

He had certainly spotted them, too.

Alex released Daphne’s hand and began hurrying towards the man.

“Papa, Papa!” he called. “Here, Papa!”

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:50 am

“Don’t tell me where he isn’t !” Edward thundered, slamming his fists on his desk.
“Tell me where he is !”

The governess, Mrs. Trench, was a woman of middle years, perhaps several years short of forty. She was rather stocky and wide about the waist, with a pleasant round face and prematurely graying brown hair knotted back in a simple bun. Nothing ever seemed to rattle her or upset her, least of all Edward’s outbursts. She barely even blinked.

“He opened the schoolroom window and climbed out,” she responded smoothly. “I was downstairs, fetching the tea tray, as usual, so I daresay he had been gone at least ten minutes by the time I returned. I could not possibly say where he had gone, only that he was not in the house. The servants and I have searched thoroughly. We ought to expand our search to the grounds, Your Grace.”

Edward threw himself back into his seat, rubbing his hand over his face. He was too tired for this. Why couldn’t Alex stay out of trouble just for a while? Why must everything be so difficult?

At least his neighbors—who were thankfully few and had gotten the hint that he did not like unexpected guests, or any guests at all, and would not send him invitations—had finally stopped telling him that Alex’s problems would cease if he could only have a mother.

“I’ll round up some of the gardeners and groundsmen to search for him,” offered Peter, the third occupant of the room.

Peter Tinn was around thirty-five years of age, tall and rather too slim, with a head full of duckling-fluff hair and a surprisingly strong and full brown beard. He was an excellent steward, with a tendency towards timidity.

Frankly, Edward was not sure how he hadn't managed to drive off his oldest—and only—friend.

Was it pathetic for a gentleman to admit that his closest friend was his steward? Probably.

“Mrs. Trench can do that, Peter,” Edward answered. “I want a word with you.”

Mrs. Trench inclined her head and left the room silently, closing the door after her. Peter turned to watch her go.

“It's not Jemimah's fault,” he said, as soon as the door closed. “Master Alexander was in a strange mood all day, and she only turned her back for a handful of minutes, and?—”

“Yes, Peter, I know. I don't blame Mrs. Trench. I'm fairly sure you shouldn't call her Jemimah, by the way.”

Peter reddened. “She did say that I could, Your Grace.”

“Did she? Fine, not my business. But really, I'm at my wits' end with Alex, Pete. Nothing I do works. He hates me.”

Peter bit his lip. “You're too hard on yourself, Your Grace. And on him, perhaps.”

Edward sighed, raking a hand through his hair. It was a little too long for fashionable society—not that he cared about fashionable society—and lately, he had started discovering the occasional strand of silver hair amongst the black.

I am not doing a good job of keeping my promise.

As always, that thought—the daily reminder of how deeply he had failed Jane—dropped him into a stark black mood.

“I’ll join the search outside,” Edward said, leaping to his feet so suddenly that he made poor Peter jump. “I would like you to make arrangements to have the schoolroom moved to one of the higher floors. I won’t have my son jumping out in the middle of his lessons. Once he goes to Eton, he won’t be able to pull that nonsense.”

“Yes, Your Grace. Where are you going to search?”

“I don’t know,” Edward muttered.

“Should I inform the Dowager Duchess?”

“No!” Edward answered, a little too quickly.

Peter blinked, not entirely surprised.

Edward sighed, glancing away. “There is no sense in bothering my stepmother. She’s retired to the dower house for the night. I don’t want her disturbed. This is not her concern.”

Peter scratched his temple. “Are you sure that she will see it that way, Your Grace?”

Edward didn’t bother to reply. He picked up a waxed jacket from his coat hook by the door, pulled it on, and hurried out into the dark hallways.

The country house was very old, of course, and decorated in a style several decades out of fashion. Occasionally, his stepmother would make noises about changing some

things, but he never seemed to get around to it. Edward couldn't quite say what had kept him from making the house look more like his own, but it probably had something to do with his father's mocking, amused voice in the back of his head.

"You can't possibly think that all of this is yours, can you, Edward?"

The wave of cold air when he stepped outside washed away the thoughts, jerking him out of his reverie. It was late afternoon, and darkness was already crowding in, filling the garden with gloom and shadows. As it often did, the mist had rolled in from the fields, a greenish-white carpet creeping through the grounds. He could see distant, bobbing lanterns and a few candles carried by various servants combing the gardens. They were all calling for Alex, all sounding faintly concerned.

Alex was popular with the servants. He was a precocious boy, according to Mrs. Trench, with a thirst for knowledge and a maturity beyond his years.

Perhaps if the boy were less mature, less sensitive, he wouldn't take to running off every time his father spoke sharply to him.

My father said things a thousand times worse to me. And I never ran off. I wouldn't have dared.

On second thought, perhaps moving the schoolroom up a few floors was a bad idea. It might simply add a few layers of danger to Alex's future escapes.

Sighing, Edward snatched up a lantern and strode around the side of the house, towards the hills and distant treeline. Alex often liked to take walks up there—accompanied by his trusty governess, of course. He had stopped asking Edward to walk with him.

That should have been good news—Edward was always too busy to come, anyway—but for some reason, not being asked sent a pang through his chest.

I'm trying, Jane.

Now, where was that part of the grounds that Alex raved about? Some ugly, little building that had been there for decades, one that he kept sketching. Sketching!

That was something Edward was never permitted to do. Gentlemen, his father had said more than once, enjoyed hunting, cards, whiskey, and not much else. Learning to dance was a necessary evil, but never to be enjoyed or practiced more than absolutely necessary. Art, painting, and music were out of the question, as was reading novels.

Edward wondered what his father would think of his grandson, who was already proficient with watercolors, loved to dance, and was learning the pianoforte. He would be ashamed, of course.

Am I ashamed?

Edward prayed and prayed that the answer would be no.

The ground sloped sharply up towards the folly, silhouetted high on the hill and half-buried in trees. After the heavy rain they'd had that day, the ground was slippery and muddy. Edward lost his footing more than once.

Not for the first time, he felt a prickle of fear.

Where has Alex gone? He's never been gone for so long before. He could have slid down somewhere and broken his neck. He could have gotten lost. With the rain, the rivers would have swelled. If he got swept away...

Edward cut off that thought, panic swelling inside him. He imagined fishing Alex's bloated, unblinking corpse out of the river in a week, looking down at his only son and knowing that everything was his fault. Knowing that his son was dead and nothing would bring him back. No chance to apologize. No hopes of ever seeing eye

to eye in the future.

Edward cupped a hand around his mouth and bellowed into the growing gloom.

“Alexander! Alex! Where are you?”

A rustling came from further up the hill. He squinted, shading his eyes.

“Here, Papa!”

Edward nearly dropped the lantern. He ran up the slope, losing his footing and finding it necessary to slap a hand on the ground to steady himself.

When he was about halfway up, he saw them.

Them being his son, hand in hand with a strange, almost ghostly woman. They were picking their way down the hill, which was steep and slippery enough to make for very hard going.

Alex beamed, releasing the woman’s hand and stumbling across the hill towards his father.

Edward could have wept. He didn’t, of course, because gentlemen did not do that, either. Instead, he set the lantern firmly down on a nearby rock and grabbed Alex’s shoulders with both hands.

“What were you thinking of?” he snapped. “The entire household is out looking for you! Have you any idea of the worry you have put us all through?”

The smile faded from Alex’s face. He jerked his shoulders out of his father’s grip.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered. “I should have left a note for Mrs. Trench.”

“You should not have snuck out at all. Come, we must return at once.” Edward straightened up, picking up the lantern again, and extended his hand towards his son.

Alex didn’t take it. Instead, he turned and looked at the woman.

“What about my new friend, Papa?”

Edward looked properly at the woman for the first time. She was not, upon closer inspection, a ghost. She was younger than he’d imagined, twenty-one or twenty-two, and was in quite a shocking state. Her hair hung loose and was wet and matted. Her ice-blue gown was so filthy that he could barely tell that it was blue at all. The skirt was torn in several places, and she appeared to have lain on her back in the mud for some time, judging by the back of her dress.

But even the grime and untidiness did not quite hide how pretty she was. She had a smooth, pale, oval face, with strong eyebrows, thick dark hair, and a pair of very large, vivid green eyes. A rare color, in fact. She was looking at him with an intense, unwavering expression.

“Your friend?” he echoed. “I think not.”

He turned to walk away, but Alex tugged at his sleeve. “Papa, I told her she should stay the night.”

Edward blinked down at his son. “I beg your pardon?”

Alex flushed. “She’s gotten lost, and she’s very wet and cold. She was kind to me and said she would walk me home. I said she could stay with us.”

“She offered to walk you home because she wanted a bed for the night, you little fool. She didn’t offer out of the kindness of her heart. Now, come along. We?—”

“He’s not a fool,” the woman interrupted. He was a little surprised to hear a clear, genteel accent come out of her mouth, the sort that was produced by expensive finishing schools. “You shouldn’t talk to your son that way.”

“What business is it of yours how I talk to my son?” Edward shot back. “What business do you have in laying your hands on him?”

“Laying my hands on... Oh, you are ridiculous! I came across a sad boy all alone, and then I took him back to his family. He’s a fine, clever boy, and very kind indeed. I can only assume he takes after his mother.”

That hurt. Edward flinched back, rocking on his heels, but regained his composure quickly. Alex said nothing.

“Yes, well, that’s really no concern of yours. Good day.” He turned to go, snatching Alex’s hand, but the woman spoke again.

“You can’t talk to me like that,” she snapped, stomping around to face him. “I’m a lady.”

He stared down at her. She certainly spoke like a lady, but what lady would wander the countryside alone, in such a state? She barely came up to his shoulders, but that did nothing to dampen the absolute ferocity in her gaze as she glared up at him, muddy hands on her muddy hips.

“You don’t look like a lady,” he heard himself say.

She barked out a mirthless laugh. “Oh, that’s how it is, eh? We’re going by looks alone? Well, in that case, you are certainly not a gentleman, judging by the way you have treated me. I don’t think I’ve ever met a ruder man.”

“Well then, you haven’t met many men at all, have you?” he snarled.

He made to step around her and head down the hill, but she neatly side-stepped and blocked his path once again.

“Your poor son was crying his heart out over the way you had treated him,” she said, jabbing a finger towards his chest.

She didn’t touch him, but Edward felt his irritation soar as if she had.

“That is between my son and me. You have no business intervening.”

“That is exactly the kind of attitude that ought to be left in the past. Modern men and women do not accept it. I read all sorts of progressive journals, you know,” the woman added, tilting up her chin.

Edward was suddenly aware of a headache throbbing behind his eyes. It didn’t help that he was suddenly remembering Jane’s collection of tomes on the subjects of morality, philosophy, and other various learned essays that he’d never bothered to read before she died.

He had kept the books and essays, of course. Some of them were quite thought-provoking, in fact.

“If you are a lady, then you had better get yourself home,” Edward said at last, the heat gone out of his voice.

He was just tired now and wanted to get back home and talk things over with Alex. If Alex would talk to him, of course.

“It’s dark, and the rain is only going to get worse. You already look a state, but I’m sure you don’t need me to tell you that.”

He stepped around her again, and once again, she blocked his path.

“Look,” Edward said, the anger coming back. “I am going to push you down this hill if you don’t get out of my way.”

Her eyes narrowed. “No, I don’t think you will.”

His shoulders sagged.

It was true. He had no intention of assaulting any woman, even one that was clearly mad, but he’d hoped that the threat alone would work.

“What do you want?” he managed, at last.

“What is your name, Sir?”

He hadn’t expected that.

Edward cleared his throat. “It is not Sir . It is Your Grace .”

She raised her eyebrows, unimpressed. “You’re a duke, then. The Duke of where?”

“Here,” he responded shortly.

Daphne fought not to roll her eyes. “And where is here , exactly?”

He pressed his lips together. “Thornbridge.”

She flinched back a little. The name was familiar. “You are the Duke of Thornbridge?”

“I am,” he confirmed. “And this errant, little wretch is my only son, so you’ll forgive me if I let my worry for him overwhelm my manners. As I said earlier, you ought to get home and out of those wet things.”

A sudden and rather vivid image of him peeling her out of those wet things flashed through his mind, much to his horror. He gave himself a little shake—it was just because she was young and pretty, and he'd been alone for far too long—and made to move past her.

He had actually succeeded in getting past her, towing Alex along behind him, when she spoke again.

“Your Grace, wait!”