



# Mr. Notorious and the Nefarious November (The Rake Review)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** He may be Mr. Notorious...

Three weeks in November. Munro Notley told himself he need only survive twenty-one days in London, then his niece would be married, and he could disappear again. He'd been wandering Europe for years now, ever since Beatrice Haddington Barnet rejected his offer of marriage and wed his best friend instead. Now Notley's brother, the viscount, has demanded his attendance at the family wedding, and Notley just wants to survive the social whirl without acknowledging her. It's a brilliant plan...until Beatrice, now widowed, is standing before him and Notley makes a drunken confession he can't take back.

But she's the one with the nefarious scheme.

Beatrice knew she made a mistake almost as soon as she said her wedding vows. Despite being in love with Munro Notley, she'd rejected his proposal because of his reputation as an irredeemable rake. It turns out her husband was the true rake. A few years after their marriage, he was shot in a duel over a courtesan. Beatrice has vowed never to so much as look at a rake again. When she reads in *The Rake Review* that Notley is back in London for her niece's wedding, she plans to stay as far from him as possible. But once she sees him, those broad shoulders and that smoldering smile stir up old feelings. He still wants her, and she can't deny she wants him too.

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# Page 1

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## Chapter One

People were staring at his trousers. Men and women alike were ogling him. Munro Notley had been on English soil approximately thirty-two hours before that blasted column had been published and since that moment, the first thing anyone did upon encountering him was stare at his cock. If he ever discovered the identity of the so-called Brazen Belle, he would unleash a torrent of words so vile, her ears would ring for a week.

He stood just outside the ballroom at Notley House, the family town house in Berkeley Square, one of the most fashionable addresses in London's Mayfair. He'd been summoned here by his eldest brother, Viscount Notley, to celebrate the impending nuptials of Arthur's first-born, Lavinia, to the Duke of Ramsbury. Munro wouldn't have heeded the summons except that his brother had threatened to call in every favor the powerful viscount possessed to ensure Munro was turned away from every inn, posting house, and hotel between London and China.

And so Munro had taken the first packet back to England, telling himself he could survive three weeks. Twenty-one days, give or take. The banns must be called three times and then his niece could marry her duke, and Munro could slink back to the Continent.

Arthur's butler announced the couple just in front of Munro, and the two swept into the ballroom, arm-in-arm. The orchestra continued to play a lively reel, and no one seemed to take notice. Munro supposed now was as good a time as any to make an entrance. If he were fortunate, the music would be too loud for anyone to hear his name.

He stepped forward, offered his card. The butler took it, stared at it for a moment, then glanced at Munro.

“Hullo, Frobisher. I believe His Lordship is expecting me.”

“Yes, sir.” The butler’s gaze dropped to Munro’s breeches.

“Not you, too, Frobisher.”

“Sir?”

“Eyes above my waist, if you please.”

“Of course.” The butler cleared his throat then shouted in a clear, loud voice, “Mr. Munro Notley.”

Clearly, Frobisher had missed his calling. He might have made a fortune treading the boards with that projection and enunciation. Every single head turned Notley’s way, even that of the members of the orchestra. One violin screeched, and the music fell silent. And then every eye dropped from his face to his breeches, and Munro could feel their gazes burning a hole through the fabric in their efforts to catch a glimpse of his cock.

He wanted to position a protective hand over his manly member. Instead, he gave the assembled company a courtly bow and forced his own gaze not to roam the faces gathered before him for her face. He had no hope of avoiding her this month. She was the viscountess’s sister—the sibling of his sister-in-law. Beatrice Haddington—no, she was Beatrice Barnet now, Solomon’s widow—would be present at every single function Munro would be forced to attend.

“Uncle Munro!”

He looked up from his bow to see a dark-haired young lady dressed in an ivory and silver gown coming toward him across the dance floor. He had a moment to wonder who this child might be, and then he recognized her, and his face broke into an enormous grin.

“Lavinia.” He caught her up and lifted her, turning her about in his arms. She was eighteen now and too big for such antics, but he couldn’t stop himself. He set her down, took her shoulders in his hands, and studied her face. “You’ve grown up,” he said.

She laughed. “Of course, I have. That’s what happens when you don’t come home for six years.”

“The last time I saw you, you were this high and wore your hair in plaits.”

“The last time you saw me, I was twelve!”

And yet, surely she was too young to marry. She still looked like a child, her expression sweet and her eyes innocent. What could his brother be thinking, allowing her to marry?

“I am so happy to see you, Uncle. I told Papa my one wish was that you would return for the wedding. You’ve always been my favorite uncle.”

Considering his brother Dudley was her only other uncle, this was no surprise. Dudley was an avid collector of antique footstools who took every opportunity to expound of the virtues of his collection.

“I would not miss your wedding for the world,” Munro said, genuinely glad he had come now that his niece was before him. She, at least, did not look at his breeches, which meant she had probably not been allowed to read *The Rake Review* .

Lavinia took his hand and pulled him into the throng of guests. The orchestra had begun to play again, and the dancers, realizing he wasn't about to drop his breeches and show them the appendage on everyone's mind, were slowly taking positions for a quadrille.

"I must introduce you to Ramsbury."

The Duke of Ramsbury was her betrothed. Munro knew of the duke, of course. He was a man nearing fifty with a daughter just a few years Lavinia's junior and no heir. Clearly, he was marrying again to secure that son and heir. Munro would have preferred the duke marry someone other than his eighteen-year-old niece. Again, what could Arthur be thinking?

But, of course, the viscount was thinking his daughter had the good fortune to attract a duke. She would be a duchess, the mother of the next Duke of Ramsbury, and her future and that of her offspring would be secure.

As Lavinia tugged him across the room, Munro couldn't quite stop himself from perusing the faces he passed for Beatrice's lovely visage. He had no idea what she looked like now. He hadn't seen her in seven years, since the night before her wedding, when she'd refused to elope with him and insisted on marrying his best friend instead. He could still remember the tears shimmering in her green eyes. He'd left saying, "Those tears are only the first you'll shed. Mark my words." Munro sincerely hoped he'd been wrong and Solomon had been a better husband to her than Munro expected.

Munro couldn't quite stop himself from seeking out Solomon Barnet's face too, even though the man had been dead almost three years. It hardly seemed possible London could exist without the tousled blond locks of Solomon. He had been every inch the rake Munro had been, but Solomon's angelic face and charming smile made everyone fall in love with him and forgive him any sin. He hadn't been given a sobriquet. But

Munro, with his ginger hair and unwittingly sardonic smile, had been christened Mr. Notorious. The name was one Munro still hadn't been able to shake, if the Brazen Belle's column was any indication.

Lavinia stopped in front of a man of medium height with graying hair and blue eyes. Munro recognized him as the duke even before Lavinia said, "Your Grace, might I introduce my uncle, Mr. Munro Notley? Mr. Notley, His Grace, the Duke of Ramsbury."

Munro bowed and the duke followed, his own bow still and formal. The man looked very much as he had the last time Munro had seen him, more than a decade before. He was in good health, but when Lavinia went to stand at his side, Munro couldn't help but think she looked more like his granddaughter than his bride-to-be.

"Congratulations on your impending nuptials," Munro said.

"I am a fortunate man indeed to have secured the affections of a lady so lovely and intelligent."

A figure appeared at Munro's elbow, and he turned to see Judith, Viscountess Notley, at his side. She gave him one of her signature glares. "The prodigal son returns. Lavinia, your wish has been granted."

"Thank you, Mama. And you, Papa."

Arthur, Viscount Notley, moved to his wife's side. "I'd heard you were back in Town, Munro," Arthur said. He raised a brow, but to his credit, he did not look at Munro's breeches. "We expected you yesterday."

"I'm staying at the Clarendon Hotel," Munro said. "I didn't want to inconvenience you."

Judith looked relieved at this revelation, but Lavinia said, “But Uncle Munro, you must stay with us at Notley House. It’s your home too.”

“Now, Bunny,” Arthur began. Bunny was the pet name he’d always used for his first-born, probably because Lavinia had a sweet little nose and, as a child, fluffy brown hair. That hair had been tamed into an elaborate style tonight and festooned with silver thread and white flowers. She looked beautiful, just like her mother.

Just like her aunt.

No. He was not supposed to be thinking about Beatrice. Lavinia did bear a resemblance to her Haddington relatives, but there were plenty of Notley traits as well.

“Munro is happy at the Clarendon. He’s a bachelor and must have his space.”

“But we never see him,” Lavinia protested. “Lydia couldn’t attend tonight. She will be heartbroken at having missed you, Uncle.”

Lydia was Lavinia’s younger sister, still too young to attend a ball. Lavinia had two younger brothers as well, but Munro assumed they were still at school and would not come to Town until closer to the day of the wedding.

“I’ll call on everyone soon,” Munro promised, not particularly concerned about Lydia’s heartbreak. He hadn’t seen her since she was a toddler. He doubted she would remember him. A footman with a tray of champagne passed by, and Munro snatched a glass. He’d had a dose of liquid courage before arriving at the ball, but he needed another if he were to survive this night.

“Lavinia, you mustn’t neglect your other guests,” her mother said. Lavinia’s mouth turned down into a pout, but Ramsbury, hearing his cue, offered his arm and escorted

his betrothed away. That left Munro with Arthur and Judith, neither of whom looked overly pleased to see him. Munro lifted his champagne to his lips, found his glass empty, and flagged a footman over, taking two glasses this time.

“I see you managed to find your way to London,” Arthur said.

“I didn’t have much choice,” Munro shot back. “Someone threatened to make me unwelcome at every inn and residence in the whole of the civilized world.”

“Had we known you would make a spectacle of yourself upon your return, we might have tried to convince Lavinia you were unreachable,” the viscountess said. Her blue-green eyes were smaller and harder than her sister’s but still lovely. Now they narrowed in accusation.

“You act as though I wrote the column,” Munro said.

Arthur crossed his arms. “Then you’ve seen it.”

“I no more stepped foot in my club than I had it thrust under my nose. Who the devil is this Brazen Belle? I’d like a word with the chit.”

“You and every other man she’s called out,” Arthur said. “Last month it was the Earl of Belmont.”

“Surely, the earl knows who she is. I’ll speak with him, expose her, and then I’ll save us all from the humiliation of my presence and hie back to Italy.” He finished his third glass of champagne and felt his anger about the column receding. One more glass and the constant stares at his cock wouldn’t even bother him.

“Oh, no you won’t,” Arthur said. “Bunny wants you at her wedding.”



“I’ll speak with her.” Where the devil was that footman?

“No, you will not,” Judith said. “She is marrying the Duke of Ramsbury at St. George’s. This is the wedding of the year, perhaps the decade. No expense has been spared, and we must have the entire family in attendance. We will do the Notley side of the union proud.”

“You have Susan, Mary, Dudley, and their assorted offspring for that. Surely you don’t want Mr. Notorious in attendance.”

“Shh!” Arthur looked over his shoulder. “Keep that name to yourself. We don’t want it resurrected.”

“It’s far too late for that—”

“Munro, this is your chance at redemption,” Judith said. “For once, show the world you are more than Mr. Notorious. You might play the part of the doting uncle and upstanding citizen.”

“It’s time you returned to England and ceased gallivanting about the Continent,” Arthur said. “I need your help here. God knows Dudley can’t be pried away from his footstools for long enough to help manage any of our estates or business affairs.”

Munro would have dropped his champagne glass if Judith hadn’t taken it from him. Arthur needed help? The heir and perfect son wanted Munro’s assistance? Had hell frozen over? Were pigs flying? He must have looked completely dumbfounded because Arthur clapped him on the shoulder. “Think about it, Munro. Now is the chance to repair your reputation. In the meantime, move your things to Notley House. Bunny wants you here.”

And then Lord and Lady Notley were gone, and Munro was standing alone, looking

for another glass of champagne.

She was here. She had to be. The more he tried to forget about her, the harder the chore. He was afraid to move about the ballroom, lest he come face-to-face with her. He worried if he stood still, he'd spot her dancing with some young, eligible bachelor. He couldn't stomach the sight of her in another man's arms. That's why he'd left England to begin with. He needed to leave Arthur's town house now, but this was Lavinia's betrothal ball, and he wanted to be here for her. He hadn't been a part of her life for years.

And every time he felt cornered or anxious, he took a sip of champagne.

Now he was foxed. More than a trifle disguised. Bosky, jug-bitten, and tap-hackled. Munro was drunk, more drunk than he'd been in years, and that was saying something. But then he should have known better than to drink those last two glasses of champagne. He'd been sober as a judge the past few years, and he'd lost the ability to hold his drink. Now, he was lurching about the ballroom, trying to avoid Dudley, who had already cornered him once to rhapsodize on his newly acquired Louis XV footstool.

Munro opened the French doors, hoping some air might sober him, but he spotted his sister Susan on the terrace lecturing her eldest son, a lad of two and twenty, and Munro turned around so quickly his head spun. Back in the ballroom, the dancing and the music caused the world to tilt on its axis, and he opened the first door he found and stepped into a quiet chamber, smelling of perfume. For a moment, he had no idea where he was, then he remembered this was one of the small parlors adjacent to the ballroom.

He turned and spotted half a dozen female eyes on him, and realized this was the room that had always been used as the ladies' retiring room during balls.

“Excuse me,” he said. The gaze of every single lady present, except one debutante who was undoubtedly too young to read *The Rake Review*, dropped to his breeches. Munro took a step back, tripped over a chaise longue, and sprawled on the cushions in what must have looked like blatant invitation.

“Mr. Notley,” purred one older woman in a low-cut crimson gown. “I was hoping I might become better acquainted with you tonight.”

“As was I,” said another woman, this one in a blue gown and with blue eyes to match.

Heaven help him. He was done for now.

“All of you, out.”

Munro couldn’t see the woman who had spoken with such authority, but he would have known that voice anywhere. He hadn’t heard it in seven years, but it didn’t matter. He was thrust right back to 1813 and the night before her wedding. She’d ordered him out of her chamber in much the same tone.

The ladies in the retiring room obviously knew what was good for them because the room emptied in a swish of skirts, leaving the scents of roses lingering. Munro thought about sitting, but he didn’t think he could manage the coordinated use of his limbs quite yet.

And then Beatrice Haddington—he did not want to think of her as Beatrice Barnet—stepped into focus. He stared at her, his bleary vision clearing.

“No,” he moaned because she was so beautiful. She was still so beautiful. He knew he was behaving badly, but he couldn’t stop his gaze from raking over her. She wore her long, dark brown hair coiled high with a few loose curls grazing her right shoulder. She’d used to wear it in a tumble of curls over both shoulders, but she was a

widow of seven and twenty now and no debutante covered in lace and bows.

Her skin was still that olive color he had always thought looked just kissed by the sun. Her forehead was smooth except for the one telltale crease between her brows that told him she was annoyed or concerned. Her dark brows were thick and winged up slightly at the temples. Her green eyes, always her best feature, peered out at him from under her dark lashes. He called her eyes green, but the color had never been so easy to categorize. They were a soft green that might be called blue in some lights. The inner part of the iris was lighter than the outer. Those eyes were so unique, so captivating, he found it difficult to look away from them.

Munro forced his gaze down her small nose to her red lips. He realized she must have painted them. Widows were entitled to do such things, but he preferred her lips their natural dark pink color. She had heart-shaped lips that begged to be kissed—except right now when she pursed them in annoyance.

He blinked at her and realized she was speaking, while he stared at her dumbly—that was probably the reason for the annoyance.

“I beg your pardon,” he said. “You’re still so beautiful.”

Her lips opened in surprise, and he decided then and there he would need to think of more things to say to surprise her as he liked the way her lips looked when she did that.

“Don’t try and flatter me,” she said, her voice low and husky. He’d always liked her voice. Even when he’d first met her as a woman little older than Lavinia was now, Beatrice had a voice that made her sound years older. “You’re drunk and have stumbled into the ladies’ retiring room. I thought better of you.”

She had? Munro perked up. Perhaps she was the lone woman over one and twenty

who hadn't read *The Rake Review* .

"Hullo to you too, Beatrice," he said. "I've missed you."

"Do not call me Beatrice. I'm Mrs. Barnet."

"Oh, no." The words were out before he could even think. He swung his legs over until they thudded on the carpet, and he sat straight on the longue. "I won't ever call you that." Now that he was sitting, his eyes were level with her bosom. It was still a very fine bosom—round and high with just a hint of cleavage at the edge of her bodice. Somehow that hint was vastly more tantalizing than the ladies who showed so much more. She wore a cream-colored gown with a gold overlay that seemed to shimmer—though that might have been the champagne playing tricks on his eyes. Though fashion dictated dress waists be placed quite high, her dress had been expertly made to hint at her small waist and generous hips. She was not a tall woman, so he did not imagine she had long legs. He did imagine they were round and soft and—

"Notley. Look at my face."

His gaze traveled slowly back up her body, and when it reached her face, she was scowling. "You're still the worst rake in London. The papers were right about you."

Though he'd consumed enough champagne to sail a schooner down the Thames, those words were a splash of cold sobriety. "Don't tell me you believe that twaddle from *The Rake Review* ."

"Everyone has read it, sir."

Munro noted she said she had read it, not that she believed it. But then, wasn't that a foregone conclusion? She'd always believed the worst about him. "And you still

believe what everyone else says about me.”

“What else am I to believe? Look at you. You are the very illustration of a debauched degenerate.”

Munro looked down at himself, noting that his cravat was loose, his waistcoat half unbuttoned, his breeches wrinkled, and he was only wearing one glove. He ripped that glove off and tossed it at her feet, raking a hand through his hair and probably making the entire situation worse.

“And now you return to England and don’t even offer me an apology for leaving without even a goodbye. Solomon was devastated you did not attend the wedding.”

Munro’s jaw dropped open. “Is that what he told you? Ha! He was thrilled to have lured you away from me.”

Apparently, that was the wrong thing to say because her eyes went flinty, and she crossed her arms over that ample bosom. “I am not a fish to be lured with shiny bait. I married Solomon because I thought I loved him, and he said he loved me.”

“I said I loved you.” Munro didn’t know why he was telling her this, bringing up the past. He couldn’t seem to stop himself, though. That was the problem with drinking four hundred and sixty-seven glasses of champagne. One lost one’s ability to moderate one’s words.

She waved a hand. “You would have said anything to convince me not to marry Solomon. I was a competition between the two of you—nothing more.”

Munro shook his head. “That might have been true for Solomon, but it was never true for me.”

Shut up, Notley , he told himself. Close your potato hole and walk away .

“When I told you I loved you, that was the first and only time I’d ever said that to any woman,” he said, his mouth ignoring his brain’s dictates.

The crease between her brows smoothed over as her eyes widened.

“I would have done anything for you. When I came to you the night before your wedding, I’d been celibate for a year because you were the only woman I wanted. And you chose Solomon who had not been faithful to you for even a sennight.”

Silence descended, and the door creaked open slightly. A young woman with blond hair peeked inside. “Might I use—”

“Get out,” Beatrice said.

The door banged shut.

“You tried to tell me about him,” she said quietly. “I didn’t believe you.” She stepped forward. “You really became celibate? For me?”

“I wanted you,” he said. “I never stopped wanting you.” Why was he still speaking? Why was he telling her this? She’d hurt him, rejected him outright. Why would he ever give her the opportunity to do it again?

“You wanted me so much that you frequented every known brothel and den of iniquity on the Continent and the Americas?”

She was quoting that blasted column, and Munro fisted his hands in anger. “I sure as hell didn’t stay celibate after you leg- shackled yourself to Solomon. I did anything and everything I could to keep the image of you in his bed out of my mind, but if you

believe I visit prostitutes or the rest of that claptrap the Brazen Belle has written, you don't know me at all."

Her gaze slid down then. She hadn't looked before, but she did so now. He'd drunk far too much to be able to react—or so he thought. His cock had other ideas and began to harden at the feel of her gaze on it.

"None of it is true then?" she asked.

"There's only one way to find out," he said.

"Are you suggesting I sleep with you?"

"I didn't think we'd do much sleeping."

She huffed out a breath and turned away, disgusted.

Quite suddenly, he didn't want her to walk away. "I'd ask you to marry me," he said. "But you'd say no. Again."

She whirled back around, her green eyes wide. Devil take him, what had he done now? Why could he not shut the hell up?

And yet, a flicker of hope burned in his black heart.

And just as she had before, Beatrice Haddington blew it out. "You're right," she said. "I made the mistake of marrying one rake. I won't do it again."



## Page 2

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### Chapter Two

Beatrice loved the quiet of a Sunday morning at St. George's in Hanover Square. The church was a perfect example of neo-classical architecture with gorgeous columns and a magnificent portico facing St. George Street. The church was a hundred years old but felt older to her. She thought about all the distinguished people who had passed through its doors. The sixth son of George the III, the Duke of Sussex, had married here, as had the renowned poet Shelley. George Frederick Handel had worshipped here and played that beautiful organ.

The organ sounded now, covering the sounds of the assembled crowd in attendance to hear the banns called for Miss Lavinia Notley and His Grace, the Duke of Ramsbury. Even Munro Notley had managed to stagger through the hallowed doors this morning, looking undeniably handsome yet somewhat worse for wear after too much drink last night. He sat behind her, beside his brother Dudley and Dudley's wife and two young children. Beatrice herself sat beside her sister Judith. The viscount was on Judith's other side, and beside him were Lavinia and Ramsbury.

With considerable concentration, Beatrice stared at the colors in the Flemish glass window and resisted the urge to look over her shoulder at Munro. Had he really asked her to marry him last night? He'd asked her once before, the night before her marriage to Solomon Barnet. She'd thought he was jesting then, but now she saw the night differently. She saw everything differently. Munro hadn't been jesting. He'd been serious when he'd asked her, and he hadn't done so because he wanted a leg up on Solomon. He'd been in love with her, had given up his rakish ways for her.

Munro had told her as much that night, but she hadn't believed him. She'd agreed to

marry Solomon, and she'd been set on that course. Solomon had sworn he would always be true to her, and she'd believed him. He was such a convincing liar. She saw that now, but she hadn't seen it then. She'd thought Munro the devil and Solomon the angel; Munro the unreformable rake and Solomon the unimpeachable saint. How wrong she had been.

But what if she was wrong now, and both men were devils? She'd trusted once and been burned. She dared not trust again. Munro said everything in the Brazen Belle's column was a fabrication, but she had read other reports of him, enough of those reports over the years, to believe at least some of what was said in The Rake Report had the ring of truth. She wouldn't ever admit it, but she had looked for mentions of him over the years. On occasion, she spotted them.

She remembered the story about the fire in Munich, the riot in a Venice brothel, the fireworks mishap in Paris. He was tied to all of those stories and more. Was she to believe he didn't frequent the beds of prostitutes? And what about the rumor of the piercing? Wasn't it possible he'd drunk one too many glasses of wine one evening, been issued a dare, and woke up the next morning with a silver ring through his...she probably shouldn't think about such things in church.

She shouldn't think about him in church. Too many scandalous thoughts crossed her mind. She was no longer a virgin of twenty dreaming about smiling at her husband across the breakfast table as they listened to the patter of little feet in the nursery. Those ideas of marriage had been shattered weeks after she'd wed when her husband hadn't come home at night. When he did come home, he smelled of other women's perfume. Solomon's infidelity disgusted her, and she'd locked him out of her bedchamber. He might have easily gained access. She was his property under the law, but to add insult to injury, Solomon hadn't bothered. And so she'd spent her days and nights alone, a wife who had experienced all the pleasures of the marriage bed and then voluntarily relinquished them.

She didn't regret the decision, especially a couple years later when she saw the doctor leaving Solomon's bedchamber and confronted him. He had the pox, of course. The courtesan he'd fallen in love with three years into their marriage had gifted it to him. If Beatrice hadn't locked Solomon out, she would have acquired it as well. Perhaps the illness had made him reckless, had made him bold, because it was only a year later he'd died in a duel over that same courtesan.

And now Munro Notley sat behind her. She could all but feel those tawny eyes of his lazily roaming over her shoulders and neck. He would be an exquisite lover. She had no doubt his reputation for bed sport was well-earned. And it had been so long since a man had touched her...

Judith reached over and touched Beatrice's hand, and she realized the banns were being called. She closed her hand over Judith's, grasping her tightly. She knew her sister had agonized over the Duke of Ramsbury's offer of marriage for Lavinia. The offer had been more than generous, but, like any mother, Judith worried about her daughter's happiness, especially with such an age difference between the parties. Still, Lavinia seemed happy and to genuinely like the duke.

"If any of you know cause or just impediment why these persons should not be joined together in Holy Matrimony, ye are to declare it," the parish priest intoned. "This is the first time of asking."

The church was silent except for a bit of shuffling and coughing, and then the priest moved on. Beatrice squeezed Judith's hand and smiled at Arthur.

The service finally concluded, and it was an easy matter to find herself walking beside Munro as the parishioners exited into Hanover Square. The duke and the viscount had carriages waiting, although the walk to Berkeley Square was not long. The sun shone in the cloudless sky, and though the air was cold, the day felt pleasant.

“Mama, may His Grace and I walk back to Notley House?” Lavinia asked.

Judith glanced at Arthur, who frowned. Beatrice knew him well enough to know he didn’t like the idea of his daughter spending any time with the duke unchaperoned. Not until the vows had been exchanged and the license signed. But Lavinia deserved a chance to have some private time with her betrothed before the wedding.

“Mr. Notley and I will walk back as well,” Beatrice said.

Munro’s head jerked and he gave her a sharp look. She raised her brows, daring him to challenge her.

“Munro?” Arthur asked.

“Fine,” he said, waving a hand.

“Very well, Bunny,” Arthur told his daughter. “But straight home, yes?”

“Yes, Papa.” Lavinia smiled.

“Go on ahead,” Beatrice told her niece. “We’ll follow.”

Lavinia took the duke’s arm, and Beatrice watched the couple walk on.

“Did it occur to you that perhaps I don’t wish to walk?” Munro asked.

“Neither do I,” Beatrice said. “But it’s nice to give the couple some time alone, and I want to speak with you.” She took his arm, though he hadn’t offered it, and he began to walk.

“What would you like to discuss?”

She blew out a breath. “Please don’t pretend you have no memory of our discussion last night.”

“I admit, I over imbibed. The evening is a jumble.”

Not for her. Being this close to him, feeling his warmth and catching the scent of oranges and bergamot she’d always associated with him, made her a bit lightheaded—that and the memory of him splayed seductively on the chaise longue of the retiring room. Was it wrong that she’d wanted to straddle him right then and there?

“Allow me to remind you,” she said. “You said you wanted to marry me.”

He shook his head. “That doesn’t sound at all like something I would say.”

“I must have you confused with another red-headed rake who claims he has reformed his ways.”

“I have reformed.”

“Then prove it.”

Munro paused and turned to her. “How might I prove it? I gave you my word—”

She waved a hand. “Words mean nothing. Solomon gave me his word too, and then he proceeded to sample the charms of every actress, opera singer, and courtesan in greater London.”

She saw the spark of something in Munro’s eyes, and the yellow-brown eyes went dark. Was he angry on her behalf?

“I am not Solomon Barnet. If you were mine—” He shook his head, and she had the urge to shake him so he might complete the sentence.

“If you really mean that, then prove it by passing my tests.”

“Tests? What madness is this?”

“Sir, we must keep walking or Lavinia will be out of sight.”

He sighed and started walking again. “Tell me about your tests,” he said. The noise of the carriages on Bond Street caused him to lean close so she might hear him.

“They are not so much tests as temptations. If you agree to this...” She paused, trying to think of the appropriate word.

“Scheme?” he offered.

“Yes. If you agree to my scheme, I will present you with five temptations. You won’t know when they will occur or in what form they will take. If you pass all five, then I will consider you reformed, and we might discuss a future between us.”

For twenty or more steps, Munro said nothing. Finally, he said, “I’m willing to consider this... nefarious scheme, but I need a reward.”

“I told you—”

“A reward each time I pass a test,” he clarified.

Beatrice narrowed her eyes. “What sort of reward?”

“A prize I might claim from you,” he said.

“You call my scheme nefarious, but you’re the one making everything wicked. I can only imagine what sorts of prizes you have in mind.” And the thought made her shiver in anticipation and half hope he might pass on the temptations she laid before him. He pulled her closer as they moved through a crowd on the sidewalk.

“I’ll tell you, about my prizes” he said, nodding to a well-dressed woman passing with her maid behind her. “If I pass the first test, you will accompany me on an outing.”

“What sort of outing? It must be public.”

He shrugged. “Fine. But the second prize is a kiss, and that should be very much in private.”

She took a breath as her belly trembled at the thought of kissing him. She’d kissed him before, years ago when he had been courting her. She remembered how soft his lips were and how he’d pulled her close and made her feel like the only woman in the world.

“I doubt you will ever claim that prize. You believe you can resist two temptations?”

“I can resist three, and if I do, I want a quarter hour with you. Alone.”

Her heart thudded in her chest, and she swallowed. “To do what?”

He looked down at her, his lovely eyes full of promise. “I can’t tell you all my secrets. I can promise that I won’t force you to do anything you don’t want.”

“Fine.” Her voice sounded a little higher pitched than she would have liked. “And the fourth prize—not that I think you will ever claim it.”

He leaned down and whispered in her ear. "A night in your bed."

Her throat went dry as she imagined tousled sheets and the naked form of Munro Notley positioned above her. And under her. And behind her...

"All night," he continued, his breath tickling her ear. "To do whatever I want with you."

"And if I want you to stop?"

"You won't," he promised. "You'll beg me not to stop. You'll say please, Munro. Don't stop. "

She could well believe it, and she had to close her eyes and summon the strength to resist grabbing his lapels right then and there and shoving him against the nearest shop and kissing that wicked mouth of his.

"You'll finally know if the rumors are true," he said as they walked slowly forward. Beatrice had completely lost sight of Lavinia. She barely remembered the girl existed.

"What rumors?"

"About my cock," he said, leaning close again. "And the ornament I've supposedly added."

She glanced up at him, trying to read his expression. Was that rumor true? Had he pierced his male member? He raised a brow in challenge, and she looked away. She recognized the corner. They were almost back at Notley House.

"You said five temptations," he reminded her. "That means I have one more prize to claim."



“If you insist with this fiction, I’ll play along. Suppose you manage to resist five temptations.”

“Proving, once and for all, I’m no rake.” They strolled past the park in the center of Berkeley Square.

“Yes. If you manage such a feat—”

“When I pass your tests and put an end to this nefarious scheme, I want your hand in marriage.”

She halted and shook her head. “No. I decided I will never marry again. Think of another prize. Two nights in my bed perhaps?”

He turned to her, his tawny eyes drawing her in and making her forget for a moment the group of children and their governess playing with a ball on the grass nearby.

“I want all the nights in your bed, Beatrice. I lost you once. I don’t want to lose you again.”

She shook her head.

“If you don’t think I’ll pass your tests, then what’s the harm in agreeing?” he asked.

“I can think of quite a lot of harm. I don’t trust you.”

“That’s why you devised the temptations. You’ll trust me after I pass each.” He held up a hand. “Don’t decide now. Think about it for a day.”

She nodded and allowed him to lead her to the door of the town house. She had her own house in a less fashionable area of Town, one not quite as expensive, but Judith

had asked her to stay at Notley House for a few weeks so she might assist with all the wedding preparations. She turned to bid Munro good day as she assumed he would return to his hotel, but he ushered her into the foyer of the town house. Whereupon she was greeted with a stack of trunks and valises and several footmen trying to manage the luggage.

“What’s all this?” she asked Frobisher, who appeared to take her parasol, hat, and gloves.

“Mr. Notley’s luggage, madam.” The butler turned his attention to Munro. “Your chamber is almost ready, sir.”

Beatrice rounded on Munro. “You are moving in? You’re staying here?”

Munro gave her that slow smile that made her belly flutter.

“My chamber will be right down the hall from yours, Beatrice. Think about that when you get lonely at night.”

Beatrice sputtered some nonsense about how she didn’t feel lonely and wouldn’t think about him for even a moment, but Munro knew better. He’d seen the way her tongue had darted out to wet her lips. He’d noted how her green eyes had turned emerald and how her breasts had risen with her quick breaths, straining her prim church-going bodice.

Why hadn’t he come back from the Continent sooner? He’d left England when Beatrice and Solomon had married because the pain of losing her had been so deep and there was no way to avoid seeing or hearing about her in England. But he might have come back after Solomon’s death.

Except he still hadn’t been able to stomach the idea that he would be so near to

Beatrice and still unable to touch her, hold her, kiss her. Never, in all his imaginings, had he entertained the thought that she might want him too or ever give him a chance.

Now, he finally had that chance.

Munro led Beatrice into the dining room, where the rest of the family were already at breakfast.

“I thought you were chaperoning Lavinia,” Arthur said, his mouth turned down in a familiar frown. He cut his gaze to Lavinia and the duke, who were already seated at the table.

Munro gestured to his niece, sitting with her back straight on her father’s left. “And here she is.” He waved away a footman and pulled out a chair for Beatrice himself. She took it and eyed the one next to her with trepidation. But Munro had no intention of sitting beside her. He moved around the table and took a seat across from her.

He waited for his teacup to be filled then lifted it to his lips, pursing them slowly and blowing gently across the top. Beatrice’s cheeks went pink, and she swallowed, quickly lowering her eyes to pay far more attention than was necessary to adding lemon to her own tea.

Lavinia was speaking, telling her sister Lydia all about the ball the night before. Lydia was ten, and Munro noticed she had the same ginger hair he possessed. Dudley had told him last night, between soliloquys on footstools, that his three-year-old son was a ginger. Mary, Munro’s younger sister, had three children, the eldest of whom was nine and also a ginger. Mary had commented that Caroline and Lydia might be twins. In the meantime, the ginger hair had completely skipped all seven of Susan’s children.

Munro knew the fables surrounding gingers. Everyone said the red hair led to a quick

temper. But no one would claim Munro was quick to anger. Passion was quite another matter, however. He felt emotions very strongly—everything from lust to loss to longing.

And right now he was longing to have Beatrice Haddington in his bed. After last night, and the cake he'd made of himself by drunkenly professing his love, he'd thought she'd never speak to him again. He half-considered sending his luggage to the docks and boarding the first packet sailing away from England. But he'd run away once, and he wouldn't do it again. He'd face his idiocy this time, and the gamble had paid off. Who would have thought Beatrice could invent such a scandalous amusement as giving him five temptations so he might prove himself a faithful man?

Now he need only convince her to agree in full to his five prizes. She was teetering on the edge of that agreement. He need only extend one finger and exert the slightest pressure to push her over.

She rose and went to the sideboard to fill a plate, and he rose as well and went to stand beside her. "Shall I make a plate for you?"

"I'll just have toast, thank you. I'm not very hungry."

"Too bad," he said, taking a scone from a platter. "Arthur probably spent a fortune having this clotted cream brought from Devon." He lifted the spoon from the bowl with the cream and purposely dribbled a line of cream on her hand before bringing it to top his scone.

Beatrice made a sound of surprise, but before she could take a napkin and wipe the cream from her hand, Munro set his plate down, caught her wrist, and lifted her hand to his lips. With a quick swipe of his tongue, he caught the dribble of cream. Beatrice gasped quietly and pulled her hand away. Munro only winked at her then went to sit

down.

The family were blissfully ignorant of what had just passed, though Munro noted that at least one footman had a twinkle in his eye, indicating he had seen the exchange. Beatrice returned to the table as well, her cheeks flushed a lovely shade of dark pink. She avoided his gaze as she nibbled on her toast, but Munro knew she wouldn't be able to do so for long. That was why he'd chosen to sit directly across from her.

He ate a few bites of his own breakfast then added jam to his scone. When she glanced his way, he used his fingers to pop a corner of the scone in his mouth. He'd intentionally dripped jam on his fingers, and as she watched, he slowly licked it off one finger after another. Beatrice's green eyes burned bright, and she couldn't seem to tear her gaze from his mouth. Munro raised his brows in invitation, and Beatrice finally looked away.

"My governess won't allow me to eat with my fingers," Lydia said. She'd obviously seen him pop the piece of scone in his mouth.

Munro smiled at his niece. "Perhaps I've been out of the country too long. My manners are sorely lacking. If only I had a governess"—his gaze met Beatrice's—"to scold me and spank my bottom when I was out of line."

Beatrice's mouth dropped open, and she pushed back from the table and jumped to her feet. "Excuse me," she said. "I have—I just remembered something I must do." And she rushed from the room.

The table was quiet for a moment, then the conversation resumed. Munro allowed five minutes to pass, wherein he conversed with his niece in French about the variety of confections in a patisserie. Lydia hoped to impress her governess, who she said never spanked her bottom.

Then he too excused himself, rose, and started up the stairs to check on the progress the servants were making with unpacking his things. Munro was not at all surprised when he reached the top of the stairs and a hand reached out and yanked him into a corner hidden from view below.

“Don’t ever do that again,” Beatrice said, holding his collar in her fist.

“Very well.” He gently pried her fingers loose. “What specifically should I not do?”

“You know what you did,” she hissed.

“You are opposed to licking? I’ll make a note.”

“You are incorrigible, as ever,” she said, pushing away from him. She started down the corridor, and he leaned out from the corner where she’d left him.

“So you agree to my five prizes?”

“Yes, I agree,” she called over her shoulder.

Munro smiled.

“And, for your information,” she called back before opening the door to her chamber and disappearing inside. “I am not at all opposed to licking.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:58 pm*

### Chapter Three

Several days later, Munro leaned against a column in the opulent ballroom at Ramsbury's town house and scowled as Beatrice danced with one man after another. As if the Notley betrothal ball wasn't enough, Ramsbury had felt it necessary to hold his own celebratory ball. Munro had tried to bow out, but Lavinia had begged him to attend.

And where was the chit now? Over in another corner giggling with friends. She couldn't have cared less if Munro was present. The only person who seemed less interested in him was Beatrice. She hadn't spoken more than a few words to him these past few days, and she'd been so busy assisting Judith with the wedding preparations, he'd had no chance to see her alone.

How was she supposed to tempt him if he never spent any time with her?

"Have you ever seen a footstool made from huang-hua-li—I'm probably not pronouncing that correctly—but it's a hardwood in China."

Munro glanced at Dudley, who was about four inches shorter than he, three years older, and two stone lighter. As usual, Dudley had one thing on his mind.

"This might come as a shock, Dudley," Munro said, "but I rarely pay attention to footstools I encounter."

"You would know the one I'm speaking of. It's over two centuries old and in peak condition. The reason I mention the hardwood is because the footstool is not

upholstered. The hardwood is on display and the craftsmanship is exquisite.”

Munro spotted a footman approaching with a tray. Unfortunately, the tray held only a slip of paper, not a hole Munro could climb into. The footman paused in front of Munro. “For you, sir.”

Munro took the note and broke the seal, a seal he didn’t recognize. Dudley was still going on about Chinese hardwood, and Munro prayed the note was some sort of escape.

It was.

Meet me in the music room on the other end of the gallery. I think we could make beautiful music together.

HV

Munro knew who HV was—Hannah de Vries. She was one of the most beautiful women in London. Widowed at only twenty-four, she had since taken a slew of lovers and was known for her passion and inventiveness. Long ago, before Munro had met Beatrice and fallen in love with her, he’d shared a memorable evening with Mrs. de Vries. He wouldn’t mind repeating the experience.

Munro stuffed the note in his waistcoat and searched for Beatrice again. She was still dancing, laughing at the man partnering her. Munro felt like punching the arse right in his bulbous nose. But, considering he was the elderly uncle of the duke, Munro controlled himself. He could absolutely slip away and meet with Hannah. Beatrice would never even notice his absence. A half hour with Hannah would be vastly preferable to listening to Dudley. But how to rid himself of Dudley so he might rendezvous with the wicked widow waiting in the music room?



Munro glanced around. “Dudley, do you see that over there?” He pointed to a corner of the room where a crowd of older women, mothers of some of the debutantes, had gathered.

“See what?” Dudley asked, raising his quizzing glass.

“I thought I saw a footstool. One of the older women was seated on it. Lovely green upholstery.”

Dudley was staring hard now. “I don’t see anything.”

“I’m surely mistaken. Although, one does wonder if the duke has any pieces of note. His family is quite ancient. Surely there must be a footstool or two about.”

Dudley glanced at him, brown eyes wide. “The footmen might have brought a footstool so the lady might have a seat.”

“Precisely.”

“Green, you say?”

“I thought—”

“Excuse me, Munro. I must have a look.”

And Dudley walked away, on the search for Munro’s imaginary footstool. Now that his brother was out of the way, Munro was free to seek pleasures elsewhere, specifically the music room.

Except if he left the ball that meant leaving Beatrice, and as much as he hated watching her dance with other men, he wasn’t quite ready to distance himself from

her. He'd been away from her for long enough. Munro started across the ballroom. People still stared at his groin, but not quite as openly as before. When he reached Lavinia, the girls around her giggled and parted.

"Uncle Munro!"

He held out a hand. "May I have the next dance, Miss Notley?"

"Of course," she said. "Are you certain you want to dance with me? There are so many beautiful ladies here tonight."

"None as beautiful as you."

His niece colored and put her gloved hand in his. He led her to the center of the ballroom and spent the next twenty minutes dancing and laughing and stealing glances at Beatrice. He quite forgot about Mrs. de Vries. Lavinia asked if he would dance with one of her friends, a wallflower who was shy. Men rarely asked her to dance. Munro had never possessed the sort of gallantry that compelled him to dance with wallflowers, but now he readily agreed. He'd do anything to avoid talk of footstools, and if he was dancing, he was closer to Beatrice. Bloody hell, but the woman was turning him into a saphead.

He partnered Lavinia's friend, who was shy, but whom he managed to coax out of her shell until she exchanged a few sentences with him. Then he danced with Judith, who uttered not a word to him and was more than happy to pass him to Susan's eldest daughter, Sabrina. He danced with his niece, who was only just out and had never been to a ball in London before. Her first Season would come in the spring, and she couldn't stop talking about it. Munro found the conversation painful but preferable to footstools, and when he returned Sabrina to her father, he was rewarded by the appearance of Beatrice with two glasses of champagne. She handed one to Sabrina and one to Munro.

“I thought you might be thirsty,” she said. “You’ve been dancing the entire night.”

Munro might have said the same for her. Indeed, she looked beautifully disheveled, her dark hair coming loose from its pins and her cheeks pink from exertion.

Munro took the glass. “Have I?” He pulled out his pocket watch, which read a quarter to two. Hannah was surely not waiting for him in the music room any longer. Now that Beatrice was standing before him, he didn’t really care that he’d ignored Hannah’s invitation.

“Will you not ask me to dance, sir?”

Munro was weary and would have rather taken a seat on one of Dudley’s proverbial footstools than dance one more step, but he set the glass down, bowed, and said, “Would you do me the honor of the next dance, madam?”

Sabrina giggled at his formality, and Beatrice smiled. But she put her gloved hand in his, and he escorted her to the dance floor. A waltz had just begun, and he was thankful he wouldn’t have to make conversation with other partners as he would have been obligated to do in a quadrille or reel. He took Beatrice in his arms, keeping a respectable distance between them, because he was still Mr. Notorious and people were hoping he’d do something disreputable. He twirled Beatrice then swept her up again, moving around the floor with confidence.

“I forgot what a good dancer you are,” she said.

“It’s a pleasure to dance with someone who’s partnered more than her dancing master.”

“It was kind of you to dance with your nieces, and I daresay Lavinia’s friend Lady Eloise will not lack for partners now that Mr. Notorious has given her attention.”

He gave a mock sigh. “How the mighty have fallen. At one point I would have ruined her reputation. Now all I do is generate interest.”

“The night is still young.”

He twirled her again, admiring the way her hair shone under the candlelight. He would have liked to think more about the feel of her soft curves in his arms or the scent of apples and vanilla when he leaned close. He exerted slight pressure on her waist and pulled her closer, the space between them a little too slim to be considered proper.

She looked up at him, those green eyes so lovely and changeable, he could have stared at them all night. She opened her mouth, and Munro thought she might whisper something erotic and wicked.

“You win,” she said.

Beatrice didn’t know how Munro Notley had known of her plan. She’d orchestrated it so well and with no small effort.

Step One had been to obtain the guest list for the ball and to choose a woman whom Notley would want and who might proposition him. Hannah de Vries was perfect. Notley, having just arrived in Town, wouldn’t know that Mrs. de Vries had begun a flirtation with a baron and was quite smitten by him. The baron was not in London this week, which meant he wouldn’t be at Mrs. de Vries’s side.

Step Two had been to write a note with her left hand so Notley wouldn’t recognize the script. She’d pretend to be Mrs. de Vries and invite Mr. Notorious to a rendezvous in the music room. She’d paid a footman to deliver the note to Notley at precisely eleven-thirty.

Step Three was to pay one of Ramsbury's maids to watch the music room and report to Beatrice as soon as Munro Notley went inside. He'd find it empty, but he would almost certainly wait for a few minutes. That was when Beatrice planned to make an appearance.

Step Four was to throw open the doors to the music room and say, "A-ha! You've failed the first test and succumbed to the temptation!"

Then she'd never have to think about Munro again or imagine what he could do to her with those long fingers and that soft mouth.

Steps one and two had been perfectly executed. She'd even seen the moment when the footman had delivered the note to Notley, and Mr. Notorious had rid himself of his brother and sauntered across the ballroom. She'd watched him, fully expecting him to slip out and make his way to the music room. But the blasted man hadn't left the ballroom. He'd joined Lavinia's circle of friends, and the next thing Beatrice knew, Munro was dancing with Lavinia.

Surely, he would leave after that one dance, but hours later, he was still dancing away. She'd finally had to admit two things. One, she could not bear to dance with another man who forgot the steps and stomped on her toes. Two, she had lost this round. Somehow Munro had known the invitation from Hannah de Vries was a test. Beatrice would have to double her efforts next time.

Now she watched as Munro's golden-brown eyes went dark. "What have I won?" he asked. "And what game were we playing?"

She had to take a breath before speaking again or her voice might have shaken. The way his mouth curved when he spoke made her want to grab him and lick that wicked corner that curved just slightly upward.

“You passed my first test.” Her voice sounded breathless, but she hoped he would chalk it up to the dancing. “You resisted the temptation of Mrs. de Vries in the music room.”

For a moment, his face went blank, and then his eyes went wide. “ You sent the note?”

“You didn’t know?” she asked. “I thought you realized I was testing you.”

“I thought it was truly from her. Why would you—ah, testing to see if I would meet her. Then you would surprise us in flagrante delicto .”

“Considering she was unaware of the rendezvous, I would surprise only you. You truly didn’t suspect?”

“No.”

“Then why didn’t you meet her?”

“I...” His gaze shifted to a spot across the room as though he were trying to figure that out himself. “I planned to. I just...didn’t.”

Hmmm. So he was not a reformed rake. Mrs. de Vries simply wasn’t tempting enough. She’d correct that mistake next time.

“You know what this means, don’t you?” he asked, a smile spreading across his handsome face.

“Yes,” she sighed. “You receive a prize. I believe we agreed to an event together.”

“Be ready tomorrow at nine. I’ll be waiting for you in the foyer.”

And then he twirled her once more and escorted her to Judith and Arthur. When he bowed and excused himself, she thought he would fetch her a glass of champagne and return. She spotted her former suitor Mr. Beauclerk and his new wife, Lady Leticia Beauclerk. She paused to speak to the happy couple, who were obviously completely besotted with each other. She was pleased she'd played a very small part in bringing them together. If only she could orchestrate her own happy ending. She left the Beauclerks to their wedded bliss and searched the room for Munro. It did not take twenty minutes to fetch a glass of champagne. After another quarter hour had passed, she realized he'd left the ball...and left her wanting more time with him.

She told herself she would have more than enough time the next evening. She would keep her end of the bargain, but that didn't mean she couldn't make plans herself. Fortunately, Judith and Lavinia were exhausted from the ball the night before and stayed abed most of the day. Beatrice had been out as late as they had, but she was strangely animated. It took a good part of the day, but her plans finally came together just as her maid began to wring her hands and mutter that Beatrice would never be ready on time if they didn't begin this moment .

Jones, her maid, brought out several dresses that would be suitable for the evening, but Beatrice shook her head. "We need the leaf dress, Jones."

Her maid's eyes went wide. "Are you certain, madam?"

"Absolutely. Take it out and hang it so the wrinkles shake out while you style my hair. Heat the curling tongs because I want curls bouncing over my bare shoulder. Men like that sort of thing."

"Yes, madam."

By quarter to nine, Beatrice stood before her cheval mirror and nodded in appreciation. She and Jones had worked tirelessly, and the result was exactly what

she'd hoped. She wore a muted green silk with an oval neckline and sleeves that just skimmed the edge of her shoulders. Below the shoulders, the sleeves were voluminous, as the present fashion dictated, but that volume only served to make her exposed neck and collarbone look more delicate. She wore a simple gold chain at her throat, and gold threaded through the layers of organza that flowed down the dress, pinned strategically at her waist and hip with leaf appliques that were a darker green and ornamented with gold thread and glittering gold spangles. Several leaves seemed to fall down the back of her dress, calling attention to her derriere.

Jones had done wonders with her hair. The dark glossy locks were piled high and ornamented with small leaves that matched those on the dress. Several heavy curls fell artfully down one shoulder. She'd applied a touch of rouge to her cheeks and lips and dusted her lashes with kohl. She was seven and twenty and had danced most of the night before. She needed just a little assistance in that area.

Jones carried her green slippers to her, and Beatrice held her maid's shoulder while Jones fitted the shoes and then pinned small leaves on the top. No one would see the leaves, just as no one would see the green garters she wore with her white stockings, but Beatrice didn't do anything by halves.

She gathered her black velvet cloak and handed it to Jones, who would carry it downstairs before Beatrice made her descent. She knew how to make an entrance. Jones stepped outside, spoke to a footman, and then returned. "He's waiting, madam."

"I'm ready."

Jones carried the cloak out of the chamber, and Beatrice counted to one hundred then followed. She moved slowly and deliberately, confused as to why her hands were shaking and her heart was thumping so loudly in her ears. This was Munro Notley waiting for her. She needn't be anxious to spend time with him. He was simply



another rake trying to make a conquest. She'd distract him with her dress and her smiles and then she'd spring her trap and be done with him once and for all.

At the top of Notley House's winding marble staircase, Beatrice lifted her skirts with one hand, just enough to allow a peek at her green slippers. Then she started down, trying to look as though she hadn't spent two hours dressing. But halfway down she made the mistake of glancing at Notley, trying to determine if her efforts had paid off. She almost missed a step and had to grab hold of the polished rail.

Munro Notley looked sinfully handsome.

She didn't know how long he had taken with his toilette today, but it was well worth every minute. His fiery hair looked streaked with gold under the flickering crystal chandelier. He couldn't control that, but the artful way his locks had been tousled made her fingers itch to touch the soft waves and smooth them into some semblance of order. His face, as he looked up at her, was all tawny eyes and full lips. Somewhere he had a slash of brows, nose, and cheekbones, but how could one note any of that when his eyes were so mesmerizing? They seemed to change from brown to gold with her every step.

When she finally managed to avert her eyes from his face, they landed on the superb cut of his coat. She would have wagered a great deal that he'd bought that coat in Paris. Men with broad shoulders like he possessed often wore ill-fitting coats that were either boxy or cut too tightly across the back. His dark blue coat was snug and so well-tailored that it appeared as though it had been painted on. He wore a white linen shirt with a snowy cravat, tied simply under his square jaw. His waistcoat was a rich brown with gold thread in curlicue patterns. Rather whimsical for such a tall, imposing man.

And then, of course, her gaze fell to his breeches. They were dark blue and fitted as perfectly as his coat. The fabric molded to his thighs, showed off slim hips, and gave

a hint at that much-discussed member between his legs. Was it pierced?

She didn't want to be caught ogling his penis, so she slid her gaze lower, to his shapely calves clad in white stockings. He wore plain black pumps, and his feet were crossed at the ankles as he leaned negligently against the doorjamb of the parlor at the base of the stairs.

Well, clearly all of her efforts were for naught. He looked supremely unimpressed.

"Good evening, Mr. Notley," she said when she stood before him. The familiar weight of her cape settled on her shoulders as Jones did her work. But when the maid moved to tie the cords at the throat, Munro waved her away.

"I'll do that."

Jones cleared her throat meaningfully but stepped out of the way, and Beatrice took a breath as Munro's elegant hands took the black silk cords of her cape and tied them into a bow. She caught the scent of citrus and bergamot, the bergamot just a fleeting afterthought, and the room seemed to spin. "You look ravishing," Munro said, his voice low and seemingly just for her. "Absolutely ravishing."

Then he stepped back, lifted one hand, and slowly pulled a glove over the bare skin of her throat.

Get hold of yourself, Beatrice ordered. He is doing this on purpose! If he thought she'd swoon because he used the word ravishing and gave her a look, he would need to think again. She was no debutante. She was a widow who had been married to a rake. She knew all the rake's tricks.

"Where are you taking me tonight, sir?"

“The opera. Arthur gave me his box for the evening.”

Beatrice all but let out a sigh of relief. Viscount Notley’s box was quite public and easily observed. After all, the only reason to buy a box was to be seen. She needn’t worry that Munro would try seducing her once they were seated together in the dim theater.

But she probably should worry that she was disappointed there’d be no seduction. And when he offered his arm and she felt the heat of him under her gloves, she was even more disappointed—not only at the prospect of a chaste evening but at her own wanton thoughts.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:58 pm*

### Chapter Four

Beatrice did not disappoint, Munro thought when he saw her descend the staircase of Notley House. She'd not chosen the green dress that made her eyes look even larger and greener than usual by accident. Her olive skin was golden and lovely, and as they reached their box for the evening, his mouth went dry when she revealed that expanse of skin again after sliding her cloak off. No question that she intended to tempt him with those long curls over her shoulder. He wanted to wrap one about his finger, tug her close, and claim that plum-colored mouth of hers.

Instead, he tried to focus on what she was saying with that lovely mouth—something about the opera on the Continent. Notley made certain she was comfortable in her chair and then gave her his full attention.

“Or did you not take time from your busy schedule of debauchery to attend any operas?”

“I attended several,” he said, “though I prefer plays to the opera.”

Her brow furrowed. “We should have gone to Covent Garden or Drury Lane.”

“Why, when you prefer the opera to plays?”

She blinked. “You remember that.”

“I remember everything about you.” He'd meant the statement as a show that he cared about her, but he saw the flash of suspicion in her eyes and knew he'd sounded

too much the scoundrel in that moment. Munro wished he knew how to seem less of a rake in her eyes.

“Of course, I went to the Paris Opera,” he said, and was pleased to see she leaned forward with interest. “I had to go more than once as it was so beautiful that I could hardly take it all in. The sights, the smells, the colors—and then there was the theater itself.”

She laughed, a genuine laugh, low and throaty. “I’m sure the Parisiennes know how to make an appearance.”

“So do the English,” he said, glancing at her. “But I think my favorite opera house was Teatro La Fenice.”

“In Venice?”

“I heard the most beautiful singing there. I’m not in favor of male castration, but when you hear a castrati sing, the sound is...I don’t know how to describe it. It’s otherworldly. It’s like the sound of an angel.”

She nodded, her gaze locked with his. “Yes, that’s the perfect description. I heard the great Velluti once. The entire audience was enraptured by him. The sound was so pure and innocent and yet it possessed so much depth.” She put her hand on his arm, and Munro didn’t think she even noticed. In that moment, he hardly noticed anyone else in the theater. It felt as though the rest of the world had faded away. “Do you think the castrati sing with so much passion because they have suffered so terribly?”

“The intersection of art and pain is always part of any great performance, but particularly so with a man who has given up his life and his manhood for his art.”

“Yes. That’s it exactly.”

“Munro Notley!”

Munro was jolted back to the present by the booming voice behind them. He and Beatrice turned to see Lord Charles Cheltenham standing at the rear of the box. Munro stood and went to shake his friend’s hand. They had been at school together, first Eton then Oxford.

“I haven’t seen you for ages, old boy. Didn’t even know you were back on English soil.”

Munro ushered Lord Charles into the box. “My niece is marrying in a couple of weeks. I couldn’t miss it.”

“Best wishes to her,” Lord Charles said.

“You know Miss Had—” But of course, she was not Beatrice Haddington any longer. “Mrs. Barnet.”

Lord Charles took Beatrice’s offered hand and bowed over it. “I am sorry for your loss, madam. Barnet and I always got on.”

“Thank you.” She smiled at him, a rather tight smile, in Munro’s opinion. “And how is your wife?”

Munro wasn’t aware that Charles had married, and he was curious as to why the man’s face immediately colored. The man cleared his throat. “Lady Charles is doing quite well. The country air is good for her.” He turned back to Munro. “We must have a drink, old boy. Reminisce about our school days and all that.” He slapped Munro on the back, bowed, and made a hasty retreat.

Munro took his seat beside Beatrice. “He couldn’t leave the box fast enough.”

“I’m afraid that’s my fault. I brought up his wife.”

Munro saw the way her lips pursed and met her gaze. “Who is his wife?”

“Caroline Huxley, daughter of Mr. Reginald Huxley and Lady Elizabeth Effingham. Do you remember her? She came out a year before me, I think.”

“Granddaughter of the Marquess of Silsbury? Yes, pretty girl, though a bit too well-chaperoned for me.”

She raised her brows. “I never knew you to allow a chaperone to spoil your plans.”

“I was never a debaucher of virgins,” he said, his voice more strident than he’d intended. “You, of all people, should know that. I won’t say I never stole a kiss—”

“You did more than kiss me, Mr. Notley. Your hands wandered.”

Just remembering the incidents in question made him smile. “When a lady looks like you do, it’s hard to resist.”

She rolled her eyes. “I suppose you think you are charming.”

“It’s the truth, but”—he held up a finger—“you will admit that if you didn’t go to your marriage bed a virgin, it wasn’t me who deflowered you.”

“Fine. You are not the worst sort of rake.”

He leaned close until he could smell the cinnamon and apple scent on her skin. “What if I told you I’m not a rake at all? Not anymore.”

“I’m not sure I’d believe you.”

He was pleased that she didn't pull back from him. They were now so close they might have whispered. "Because of that ridiculous column?"

"The Brazen Belle seems very well informed. Do you dispute her facts?"

"Yes. I'd be dead of the pox if I'd really visited every brothel in half the known world. But how am I supposed to prove I didn't frequent brothels?"

"Are you claiming you were not the source of a riot that began at a Venice brothel?"

He blinked as he hadn't thought of that incident in years. "How did you—never mind. That was a misunderstanding."

"But you were at the brothel."

"I was drinking and gaming with friends. That's all."

She glanced away, seeming to consider whether she should believe him. "I suppose there are other claims the Brazen Belle made that can be verified." Her gaze drifted back to him.

He shook his head. "Beatrice, Beatrice, Beatrice. I didn't think you, of all women, would be curious about that rumor."

"Is it only a rumor?"

"Would you like to see for yourself? Mayhap we should move to a darker corner of the box, and you could investigate."

Her cheeks colored. "No, thank you. We were discussing Lady Charles."



He'd quite forgotten. "Were we?"

"Yes, your friend had her locked up in the countryside."

Munro sat back. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. A few years after he wed her, he took up with one of the demimonde, and I believe Caroline took issue with the relationship. He tired of her complaints, labeled her hysterical, citing her enjoyment of novels as proof, and had her locked away in some remote property he has in the west of England. No one has heard from her for at least two years."

Munro didn't doubt a word she said. Husbands had done much worse. "What about her grandfather? Can he not exert his influence?"

Beatrice sighed. "As though the old marquess would take the side of a female."

This too made sense. Most men only concerned themselves with their sons and heirs. Daughters and granddaughters were an afterthought, if one thought of them at all.

"And you wonder why I refuse to marry again. I'm fortunate her fate isn't mine."

The chatter in the opera house began to dim, only slightly, as the singers took their positions and the orchestra began to play. "Solomon would never have done that to you," Munro said, not certain why he was defending her late husband. In the end, the two of them had been rivals for her affections.

"You don't have any idea what Solomon would or would not have done," she said. "I don't think any of us knew what he was really like. Until it was too late."

She could see her words troubled Munro. She couldn't claim she'd spoken them by

accident. She'd wanted to hint at her late husband's cruelty and judge the reaction of his former best friend. Had Munro known that side of Solomon or had he reserved it for behind closed doors?

On stage, a woman sang an aria in Italian, her voice rising and falling in feigned sadness. The emotion in the music was what had always resonated with Beatrice. She felt it in her entire being.

Finally, after several minutes of silence, Munro leaned over to whisper in her ear. "I didn't want you to marry him because I knew he'd never be faithful. But I swear on my father's grave, I had no idea he could be cruel. Did he hurt you?"

She glanced at Munro, meeting his eyes, now quite dark with what she suspected was anger. "He's dead now. Let's not resurrect his memory."

Munro's face fell as she all but confirmed her mistreatment at Solomon Barnet's hands. But she was still surprised when she felt Munro's gloved hand take hers. No one in the theater could see their clasped hands, but Beatrice still felt a slight thrill of excitement at the thought that she was doing something even remotely inappropriate. But then Munro always brought out her reckless side.

"You remember this theater was where we shared our first kiss?" he whispered to her, his gaze on the stage and not on her.

Of course, she remembered that. She was surprised he remembered that first kiss. Surely, he'd kissed so many women he couldn't keep count. She said as much, and his lips actually formed a pout.

"You think I would forget the first time I kissed you? I remember everything about that night."

“I remember my father wouldn’t allow you to enter our box. He sent you away, but you waited to ambush me when I stepped out to go to the ladies’ retiring room.”

“I was merely enjoying the relative quiet of the corridor outside Baron Haddington’s box. Opera has never been my favorite, though I’ve grown to appreciate it more. It was mere coincidence that we met in the corridor like we did. And might I add, your maid certainly abandoned you quickly enough. I don’t recall you begging her to stay and protect your honor.”

“I was quite smitten,” she admitted. “How could I not be when you always looked so adorably disheveled? Your hair was always too long and hanging over your brow. I wanted to sweep it back and out of your eyes. That or straighten your cravat. Really, your valet should have been taken to task.”

Munro laughed. “The poor man had his hands full between Dudley, Arthur, and me. You, on the other hand, never looked anything less than perfect. You wore my favorite gown that evening, the peach silk with the white lace. You always looked so beautiful in that.”

Beatrice felt her breath catch in her throat. She tried to take another breath, but it felt as though a hand squeezed her lungs. “You remember what I wore?” The words sounded choked as she forced them through her tight throat.

“Of course. And you had those little white flowers in your hair. You know I plucked one out and kept it pressed between the pages of a book.”

She stared at him. Munro Notley was the absolute last man she would ever expect to do something so sentimental. She told herself to end the conversation there. She had a plan for the evening, and she was already regretting that she would have to leave early. She’d enjoyed Munro’s company more than she’d thought she would. Moreover, she did not want to know the answer to the question lingering in her mind.

She would not ask it. She would not bring it up.

“Do you still have it?” she asked, mentally kicking herself for asking it anyway. “The flower?”

“It’s in my copy of Byron’s *The Corsair* . Come to my chamber later, and I’ll show you.”

And there was the rake she knew. But his invitation wasn’t the splash of cold water she’d expected it to be. She was sorely tempted to accept. She liked the feel of his hand holding hers, the scent of him in this enclosed space, the warmth of his body beside hers.

She hated to leave, but it was time for another test.

Beatrice didn’t need to see a watch to know the time had come for the planned interruption. Thus, when she heard the tap and then the curtains parted to reveal a footman in the Notley livery, she only pretended to be surprised.

Munro stood immediately and went to speak to the servant, who gestured to Beatrice and spoke in hushed tones. She counted to twenty then rose and joined the two men. “What is the matter?” she asked, as though she didn’t know exactly what the footman would say.

“I’m so sorry, madam, but Lady Notley has taken ill and requests your return from the theater.”

“Of course. I’ll gather my cloak and come right away.”

“I’ll send for my coach and drive you,” Munro offered.

Beatrice pretended to look concerned. “That will take time. Perhaps I should take a hackney.”

“Absolutely not,” Munro said.

“Lady Notley sent her coach. It’s waiting just outside the door to the theater,” the footman said.

“Perfect.” She turned to Munro. “You stay and enjoy the opera, Mr. Notley. I’m so sorry to cut our evening short.”

And with that farewell, she swept out of the box and was downstairs and in the carriage before Munro could object. As the conveyance pulled away, she looked back and actually hoped Munro would resist the test she’d set for him.

Ridiculous thought. He would never be able to resist tonight’s temptation.

Munro sighed and went back to his chair. The box felt large and empty now, and though he suspected dozens in attendance had been watching him throughout the evening, he felt their opera glasses on him keenly now. He didn’t want to be here without Beatrice and a quarter hour after her abrupt departure, he strode out of the box, along the corridor where he’d first kissed her, and down the stairs to call for his coach.

By the time it arrived, twenty more minutes had passed, and Munro was in a foul mood. He could return to Notley house, but then he’d spend the rest of the night alone. He’d been spending every evening alone for the past week. Or he might go to his club. Surely there was some scandal that Society would find more interesting than the gossip in *The Rake Review*. Did he dare venture out and test the waters?

The coach arrived, and the footman opened the door. The lanterns were out, and

Munro climbed into the dim conveyance and sat back on the squabs as the coach pulled away. He rested his head on the velvet then froze as he felt a hand on his knee and long fingernails rake up his thigh.

“Munro Notley,” a feminine voice purred. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

Munro froze. For one brief moment he thought the voice might have come from Beatrice. He thought she might have been waiting for him in the coach. But that flame of hope was extinguished when the woman behind the voice moved beside him on the squabs. She smelled of roses and wine—scents he favored, but not the apples and vanilla he associated with Beatrice. She was taller than Beatrice as well, and considering the way she was pressed up against his arm, he could also determine that she was quite well-endowed. He reached past her as the carriage started away and yanked the curtain open. In the dim light from the receding theater, he stared at the beautiful woman beside him.

Her face was what one would call handsome with a strong nose, wide brown eyes, and a lush mouth. She had hair a color that rivaled his, though he did not presume hers to be the color she’d been born with. It suited her though, as did the low-cut gown she wore. The wisp of a bodice showed off her ample cleavage.

“You are Munro Notley?” Her accent told him she was from London. It wasn’t an upper-class accent, but one he’d expect to hear at his tailor’s or in the bookshop.

He cleared his throat and pulled his gaze away from her chest. “Yes. And who are you?”

“Rebecca Montcrief.”

If that was truly her name, he would eat his cravat. “Mrs. Montcrief—”

“Do call me Rebecca.”

“Rebecca, it’s a pleasure to meet you. Is there a reason you are in my coach?” Munro was well-aware now that the coach was moving through London, and not in the direction of the Notley town house.

“I thought you might like some company. Would you like some company, Mr. Notley?”

Her gaze met his, and she touched the tip of her tongue to her upper lip.

Munro swallowed then glanced, again, at her bosom. He took a shaky breath and let it out again. No doubt at all this was another test from Beatrice. Rebecca Montcrief was most likely a courtesan Beatrice had hired to wait for him and seduce him in the coach. Beatrice had probably told the footman to come and fetch her at a certain hour with the story that Judith was ill.

She was clever and resourceful, no doubt. And she’d chosen well with Rebecca Montcrief. Munro was tempted. Very tempted.

“I would like some company, Mrs. Montcrief,” Munro said.

The courtesan put a hand on his chest and began to inch toward the waistband of his trousers. Munro clenched his jaw and forced his hand to stop her progress. She looked up at him, lush mouth parted. Munro lifted her hand to his lips, so he didn’t kiss her tempting mouth. “You are lovely, madam, but not the company I was hoping for.”

“Are you certain?” she raised her brows.

No. No, he was not certain at all. “Is there somewhere I might have my coachman

drive you or”—he glanced out the window—“are we speeding that way now?”

She glanced out the window, turning away from him and giving him a moment to take a breath and fortify his resolve. “My flat is just around the corner. I planned to invite you inside.”

“I’m afraid I must decline. I hope you don’t take offense.”

She sat back, removing her hand from his. “I think my pride will survive.”

“I’m sure the blow is softened by the fact that you’ve already been paid.”

She smiled. “I didn’t say a thing about money, but someone wanted you to enjoy yourself tonight, sir. I planned to make certain you had a very enjoyable evening.”

Munro’s throat went dry. The coach slowed, and the courtesan gave him a last hopeful look. In answer, when the footman opened the door, he stepped down, offered his hand, and assisted her out. He bowed and kissed her hand again. “Good evening, Mrs. Montcrief.”

“Goodnight, Mr. Notley.”

Resolutely, he climbed back into the coach. He didn’t wait for the footman, but pulled the door closed. He sat in the darkness for a long moment then lowered the window and leaned out. “Notley House, straightaway.”

“Yes, sir.”

The coach lurched away, and Munro let out a soft groan. The woman’s perfume still lingered. At one point in his life, he would have taken what she offered without a qualm. He might have done it tonight. He could certainly pay her double whatever



Beatrice had paid to report back that nothing had happened between them.

But he didn't want Rebecca Montcrief. He had learned that he didn't want anyone save Beatrice.

And now Beatrice would pay.

## Page 5

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### Chapter Five

Beatrice sent her maid away and paced her bedchamber. She'd returned to an empty town house as Judith, Arthur, and Lavinia were out. She'd had the footman lie about Judith taking ill as a pretext for leaving the theater early so that Munro would be alone with the courtesan she'd hired. He was almost certainly with the courtesan now. She didn't think he would have stayed at the opera long without her. That meant he'd called for his carriage and been pleasantly surprised when greeted with a beautiful, willing woman inside.

Beatrice had made sure she was beautiful. She'd seen Mrs. Montcrief at the theater and an occasional ball on the arm of one lord or another. The courtesan was undeniably handsome, and Beatrice had her maid arrange a meeting at her modiste's shop. Mrs. Montcrief had seemed amused by Beatrice's offer, but she'd taken the money readily enough. No doubt she thought something wrong with Munro to have to be offered money to bed him.

She had probably been pleasantly surprised too to find he was handsome and skilled at giving a woman pleasure. The image of the two of them twined together flashed in her mind, and Beatrice turned and paced back across the room. She was dressed in a white nightgown and robe, but she opened the robe now as she'd grown warm from all this pacing. She should go to bed. Wondering and imagining was torture.

A light tap sounded on the door, and Beatrice paused. Who could possibly—? Ah, she'd told her maid to bring her news as soon as the footman keeping watch on Mrs. Montcrief's flat returned. That was her maid with word Munro was inside the woman's home now.

Beatrice blew out a breath and went to the door, pulling it open just as she realized her maid would not have knocked.

But she was too late. Munro stuck his foot in the doorway before she could slam it closed.

She was so shocked to see him that she hesitated long enough that he had time to brace the door open further with his hand. “What are you—”

He held out a slip of paper. “I imagine this was meant for you. I took it from your maid just now.” His voice sounded raspy and breathless, as though he had run all the way back from the theater.

She took the slip of paper then tried to close the door.

“Not just yet. Go on, read your message.”

She gave him another look, noting his cravat was askew and his hair tousled. Had he already bedded the courtesan and then come here? She released the door and turned her back to open the note.

He declined my company .

RM

The script was unfamiliar, but she could only assume the RM stood for Rebecca Montcrief. She stiffened as the door closed behind her, and Munro moved to stand behind her, almost touching her. “What does it say?”

She lifted the note, and he reached over her shoulder and took it. A moment later the note dropped to the floor. “I win. Again,” he murmured.

Beatrice didn't dare turn to look at him. She didn't trust herself. Already her body yearned to sway backward and lean against his. "You didn't even kiss her?" she asked.

"I kissed the back of her hand once in the coach when I had to stop it from wandering and then again when I said goodnight. It seemed only proper when she'd made such an effort."

Beatrice turned her head, glancing at him from the corner of her eye. "I suppose I chose poorly. She wasn't the sort of woman you fancy."

He put a hand on her waist, and she tensed as he turned her to face him. Her heart began skipping, beating like the wings of a butterfly in her chest as he held her at arm's length and looked down at her.

"I wanted her," he said. "I was tempted."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because I want you more, and I earned my reward."

She shook her head. "You can't mean—"

"To claim my kiss right here and right now? That's exactly what I mean to do. And believe me, that's the least of what I want to do to you. But I'll play by your rules because something occurred to me just now."

"What's that?" she asked, her voice a whisper. She couldn't seem to draw enough air into her lungs, not with him so near. Not with his hands on her waist and those impossibly beautiful eyes locked on her face.

“You want me as much as I want you, and this game isn’t just torturing me. It’s torturing both of us.”

“I’m not tortured.” She gave a false laugh. His lips turned up at the corner.

“We’ll see about that. You owe me a kiss, Beatrice.”

“Fine.” She leaned forward to peck him, but he arched back and away. Her mouth dropped open at his obvious avoidance. “I thought you wanted a kiss.”

“Don’t try me, woman. I want more than a peck. Our agreement was for more than a peck.”

“We never specified—”

“ Beatrice .”

His hands on her waist trembled slightly, and she caught her breath. He was exercising every ounce of restraint he had to hold her at arm’s length. Her gaze clashed with his again, and she saw the naked need in his eyes. He wanted her. Badly.

Heat rushed from her chest to her belly and between her legs. How could she not be aroused by the way he looked at her? She didn’t want to deny herself the pleasure of his mouth any longer. She lifted her arms from her side and slid her hands up his shoulders and behind his neck. He took a slow breath, and she felt his hands flex and release on her waist. She tugged his head down until their mouths were inches apart. She looked at him, watched as he lowered his lashes and closed his eyes, clearly wanting to savor this moment.

Why did he have to do that? Her skipping heart tightened with desire and something else. She pushed everything but the desire away and slid her lips over his, closing her

own eyes and simply feeling the softness of his mouth.

The kiss was...she wasn't certain where he ended, and she began. It started slow and tentative with Beatrice in control. But somehow once her lips touched his, she couldn't maintain that control. Her hands slid up into his hair, and he pulled her against him. Then his mouth claimed hers, hot and demanding, and she took as much as she gave. When his tongue stroked hers, she moaned and clung to him. He walked her backward until she was pressed against a wall. His hands slid into her hair, and he angled her head back to give him better access to her lips. He took full advantage of that access, kissing her until she was breathless and vibrating with need.

"Munro." She grasped his coat, yanked it down from his shoulders, slid her hands over his chest.

He pulled back, his eyes full of promise, but instead of stripping her naked and taking her there against the wall, he freed his hands from her hair and pressed them against the wall behind her. His breathing was rapid, coming in short pants. She could feel his heart racing under her hands, and she stilled when he pressed his forehead to hers.

"Thank you," he said between breaths. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight?"

He pushed away from the wall, adjusted his trousers, and turned his back to her. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Where are you going?" she demanded. If he was half as aroused as she—and given the bulge in his trousers, she believed he was—he would want to finish what he'd started.

"To bed," he said. "In my chamber. On the other side of the house."

“And if I asked you to stay?” she asked, telling herself it wasn’t because she wanted him to stay but because she was testing him again. Yes, that was it. More tests—except was he still the one being tested?

“I can’t,” he said, giving her a mournful look as he opened the door to her chamber. “I haven’t earned it yet.”

And then he was gone, leaving her to curse him and then herself. After all, she was the one who had invented the Nefarious Scheme, and now the blasted rake had turned it against her.

She was torturing him on purpose. No woman wore a gown like the one she wore now without knowing exactly the effect it would have on the men she encountered. He glanced at the other men seated at the Duke of Ramsbury’s table and clenched his jaw when he saw how many were ogling her.

Not her exactly, but her chest.

Beatrice’s mulberry gown had a waist close to her natural waist and not much material in-between. The golden swells of her breasts were on full display. He could not see the back of her gown at present, as he was seated on the other side of the table, but he’d seen a good deal of the slender line of her backbone.

He was an arrogant arse, but was it assuming too much to speculate she’d worn the dress to torment him specifically? They’d not had a chance to speak privately in the few days since the kiss they’d shared in her bedchamber, but they’d exchanged glances that proved to Munro that, like him, she hadn’t forgotten one second of that heated encounter. At night, he half-wished he might forget because memories of the scorching kiss kept him awake. He had to force himself to stay in his bed and not go to her chamber. Why had he allowed Arthur to talk him into leaving the Clarendon?

There had been no more tests, which relieved and concerned Munro. The wedding was only little more than a week away, and he'd only been tested twice. Munro was more determined than ever to prove to Beatrice that he was no longer a rake, that he could be faithful, and that he deserved her—body and soul.

The meal, which had felt interminable, was almost over. Soon the women would retire to the drawing room and the men would be left to enjoy port and cigars. Anticipating that moment, the duke rose now and lifted his wine glass. Munro smothered a groan. If he had to listen to one more speech about love, he'd retch.

The duke cleared his throat. "Shakespeare once wrote, Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments . I have been fortunate in that there have been no obstacles to the union of Miss Notley and myself, but that does not mean I do not anticipate such an easy course always. After all, the poet goes on, love is an ever-fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken ." He lifted his glass higher, and the assembled company followed. "May we never be shaken by the tempests, dear Lavinia."

"Hear, hear!"

Munro echoed the approval and sipped from his glass, meeting Beatrice's gaze as he did so. Was it coincidence that the poet had chosen the word tempests , which meant storms but was also perilously close in spelling to temptation ? Munro thought not.

As predicted, the ladies rose to adjourn to the drawing room to take tea. Munro joined the other men, standing as the ladies exited, and Arthur, who had more than his share of wine tonight, said loudly, "Soon you will be the only bachelor among us, Munro."

Munro saw Beatrice's head turn slightly and knew she was listening. She was at the back of the procession of ladies and still very much in the room.



“It does seem to be my lot in life,” Munro said, which was his rote response whenever someone made an idiotic comment about his unmarried state. He used to remark that he was sorry not to suffer from wedded bliss , but that was before Solomon had married Beatrice. Because after that, Munro had very much wanted to suffer all the wedded bliss imaginable if it meant having Beatrice by his side and in his bed.

“You don’t plan to ever marry?” the duke asked. “Surely you can’t think to wander about the Continent the rest of your life.”

That was precisely what Munro had thought he would do before he’d returned to England for the wedding.

Before he’d regained a flicker of hope that Beatrice might one day be his. He couldn’t imagine ever committing himself to any other woman. And he’d tried to imagine it many times. He’d tried to want a life with other women. But he’d come to realize that he loved Beatrice, and for some men, there was only ever one great love.

“I’m not at all opposed to matrimony,” Munro said. “If it’s with the right woman.”

Arthur’s brows rose so high they all but disappeared into his hairline. “The right woman! And have you met this woman?”

“I have,” he said. “But it remains to be seen whether she deems me worthy.”

Beatrice cast one last look at him as she moved through the door. He was an expert at reading her expressions, but even someone who didn’t know her at all would have recognized the look of skepticism in her eyes just then.

“That’s good news then,” Arthur said, clapping Munro on the shoulder. “Perhaps we shall soon have another engagement and wedding to celebrate.”

“With any luck,” Munro said. The men drank their port and lit cigars. Munro disliked port almost as much as cigars, so he only made a show of doing both. Finally, the men joined the ladies in the drawing room. Munro didn’t hesitate to make his way to Beatrice’s side. She was seated on a couch on the far side of the room, alone. He took the cushion beside her. “Why are you all the way over here on your own?”

She set her teacup aside. “I couldn’t stand to listen to any more discussion of the wedding,” she admitted. “I suppose that makes me a terrible aunt.”

“It makes you human. I barely leave my room at Notley House for fear I will be pulled into some argument over floral arrangements or lace.”

She smiled. He loved her smiles, the way they crinkled her eyes and lit up her face.

“But I thought you enjoyed discussing weddings. Wasn’t that the topic you men embarked on as the ladies departed?”

“It wasn’t the topic for long, I assure you.” He looked about to ensure no one was approaching. They had a few more moments before they would certainly be interrupted. “I could reopen it, if you wish.”

“And say what?” she asked. “Surely you don’t expect me to believe you want to marry.”

Munro scowled at her. “Considering I once asked you to marry me, that is exactly what I want you to believe.”

“That was a long time ago. I admit, I didn’t realize how serious you were then. I am sorry for misjudging you.”

“You needn’t apologize now. You might simply stop misjudging me.”

“Because you want me to believe you wish to marry me.”

“Yes.”

“And you plan to be faithful.”

“As I have proven thus far.”

“Tell me truthfully then.”

Munro leaned closer.

“Have you booked return passage to the Continent already?”

Munro opened his mouth and thought of the ticket he possessed for a voyage to Italy just a day after Lavinia’s wedding.

“That’s what I thought,” she said, seeing the answer on his face. “You shall return to your life of debauchery.”

“I can tear up that ticket,” he said. “If I have a reason.”

“Don’t—” But she cut off her next words when Lavinia moved toward them.

“Uncle Munro, Aunt Bea, what are you two whispering about?”

“We’re discussing your wedding gift,” Beatrice said smiling. “Your uncle needed some suggestions. Excuse me, dear.” Beatrice rose, and Munro watched as she slipped out the rear door. Where the devil was she off to?

“You needn’t give me a gift,” Lavinia said. “Just having you here is gift enough for

me, Uncle Munro. Tell me truthfully, what do you think of John—the duke, I mean?”

Munro returned his attention to Lavinia, then took her hands. “I’ll admit I was skeptical of the union at first. He’s quite a bit older than you.”

Lavinia nodded, surely having heard this criticism before.

“But I’m warming to him. He seems to care about you a great deal. Quoting Shakespeare is a sure sign he’s besotted.”

Lavinia grinned. “Wasn’t it romantic? He has entire sonnets memorized.”

“Lavinia,” her mother called. “Come here a moment. I just had an idea for the wedding breakfast, and your Aunt Susan agrees.”

“Duty calls,” Lavinia said and rose. Munro watched her approach her mother then took the opportunity to follow Beatrice. The door she’d passed through led to a small parlor such as a lady might use for correspondence, as it possessed a desk near the window. The chamber was dark, but Munro ascertained quickly it was empty. Another door at the other end was ajar, and he moved through it, emerging into a large room this time. The scents of ink and old paper immediately told him this was the library.

“Beatrice?” he said, looking about the room. “Are you here?”

The door he’d come through closed, and he turned to see a maid standing before it. “Might I help you, sir?” she asked.

“Have you seen Mrs. Barnet?”

“No.” She moved toward him, her hips swaying in a motion he wasn’t used to seeing

in a maid. “But we don’t need her, do we?”

The maid began to pluck at the pins holding her bodice, and before Munro could think to object, the material fell open. She wore nothing underneath.

He considered himself a reformed rake, but he still had a pulse and eyes. He was far from immune to the charms of a lovely woman. And she had quite a pair of charms. She moved toward him, reached for his hands, and began to draw them to her chest. Munro shook his head and pulled back. This woman was another of Beatrice’s temptations. Beatrice had apparently decided he no longer deserved any quarter or semblance of mercy. He was alone with a half-naked, willing woman. “Touch me,” she said.

“I think I’d better return to the drawing room.” Even to his own ears, he didn’t sound convincing. He didn’t move either.

“Don’t you want to see what I’m wearing under my skirts. Or rather—not wearing. Let me show you.” She reached for the ties of her skirt, and Munro shut his eyes. He took several deep breaths and thought of anything and everything he hated—rats swimming in the canals in Venice, the lice he’d acquired from a poorly chosen inn in Albania, the smell of the Paris sewers, and the way his testicles contracted when he jumped into a cold lake in Switzerland.

The reminder of the cold water and his freshly shorn head to rid it of the lice was enough to cool his ardor. He opened his eyes again, keeping them above the woman’s head, and bowed. “Excuse me, madam.”

And he walked out of the library and back into the small adjoining parlor. Not yet trusting himself, he continued walking right back into the drawing room. He looked right and then left, searching for Beatrice. He had a few words to say to her. More than that he wanted to grab her hand, drag her out of there, and kiss her senseless. He

was on fire now. He needed that release.

“Uncle Munro, are you ill?” Lavinia approached him, her brow wrinkled in concern.

“I—” He cleared his throat, which was dry and tight. “I’m fine.”

“You look a bit flushed. Aunt Beatrice said she felt overheated and left a few moments ago. I do hope her illness isn’t catching.”

That little coward. She hadn’t even stayed to see the results of her machinations. If she’d truly just left, he might still be able to catch her.

“I just need some fresh air,” he told Lavinia, running for the drawing room doors. “I’m fine,” he called over his shoulder as he burst through the doors and ran down the steps.

Ramsbury’s butler had just closed the front door and turned sharply as Munro skidded across the parquet floor of the foyer. “Where is she?” he gasped.

“Mrs. Barnet?”

“Yes! Where is she?”

“I just put her in her coach, sir. Might I—”

Munro pushed past him and flung the door open just as the coach was turning out of the drive and onto the main thoroughfare in front of the town house. “Oh, no you don’t,” he muttered and began to run. He caught up with the coach a moment later, and still running, banged on the window. Beatrice opened the curtains and blinked at him. A moment later, the coach slowed, and she lowered the window.

“What are you doing?”

“Open the door,” he said, jerking his head at the coach.

“But—”

“Open it, Beatrice.”

She raised the window, and Munro half-feared she’d knock on the roof and the coach would start away again. He could keep chasing it, but he was panting and wasn’t sure how long he might keep that up. But the door to the coach opened, and he caught it, climbed in, and slammed it again. Then he reached up and banged on the roof.

The coach lurched and moved away.

Across from him, in the golden light of the lanterns, Beatrice blinked at him. “I suppose this means you weren’t tempted.”

“Oh, I was tempted, but not so tempted that I forgot one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I only want you.”

He saw her throat work as she swallowed, quite obviously more affected by his words than she let on. “You can’t have me. You should have taken advantage of what was offered to slake your lust.”

“I think you’re forgetting something,” he said, tone ominous. He’d just remembered it himself.

“What’s that?”

“I win a prize.”



## Page 6

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### Chapter Six

Beatrice hadn't forgotten his reward if he resisted this temptation. In fact, she'd prayed he would resist because she wanted him more now than she ever had. All through dinner she'd felt his gaze on her. When she glanced at him, and their eyes met, her belly went liquid, and her heart sped up. The duke's dining room had been cavernous and drafty, but she'd felt too warm. At one point, a bead of perspiration had trickled down her spine, teasing her as she imagined it was Munro's finger.

"A quarter hour," she whispered, looking at him now.

"That's right. A quarter hour to do whatever I like with you."

"As long as I consent." Who was she fooling? She would consent to anything with him right now. She wanted him so badly she had her hands clenched on the squabs to keep from reaching for him.

"Oh, I want your full and unmistakable consent, Beatrice." He moved across the coach to sit beside her.

"What, here? Now?"

"Good idea." He opened the coach window and gave the coachman directions to take the long way back to Notley House. Then he closed the window and turned to her. "One drawback to your little scheme that you might not have considered is that you are left with an aroused male in the aftermath of these tests."

“Is that supposed to frighten me?”

“Quite the opposite.” He reached for the ties of her cloak. “Let’s take this off, shall we?”

“I can do it.” But he already had the ties loose and was pushing the cloak off her shoulders, revealing her low-cut gown.

“There it is,” he breathed. “The instrument of my torture all night.” His gaze was on the tops of her breasts, very much on display in the low bodice. She had indeed worn the mulberry gown to torment him, but it had been her own undoing as well. Her nipples had hardened every time she felt him glance at her. They were hard now and aching from the constant friction with her chemise.

“May I touch you?” he asked, his voice seduction wrapped in velvet. She had to inure herself to him or she’d give in completely. She’d call off this ridiculous scheme and tell him she loved him.

She’d made that mistake with Solomon. She couldn’t afford to allow herself to be vulnerable again.

“Go ahead.” Her voice sounded perfectly neutral, as though she wasn’t panting for his hands on her.

He lifted one finger and slid it slowly across the swells of her breasts, making the flesh pebble, and her nipples harden into painful points. Then he leaned forward and breathed on her sensitive flesh. He looked up, his eyes dark. “May I kiss you?”

“Fine.” Her voice trembled slightly, but she hoped he didn’t notice.

He pressed his lips against the swell of one breast then the other. As his lips brushed

her flesh, his fingers plucked at the pins holding her bodice, and the material floated down, revealing her chemise and stays. She heard his inhale of breath and felt his hands settle on her waist. She closed her eyes and willed herself not to think about what he was doing. She did not want his hands on her. She did not need his touch.

His hands glided upward, skating across the undersides of her breasts and then over her breast. She couldn't stop a quiet moan when his hands rubbed across her nipples. Even over the chemise and stays, the pressure felt delicious.

"You like that," he said.

She pressed her lips together, refusing to answer. How long would this go on? He must have spent three minutes already. Twelve left. She could endure.

"I can feel how hard you are even through this fabric," he whispered. "Your body wants mine. Shall I kiss you?" He circled one nipple with a finger. "Here?"

Her moan was less restrained this time. She gasped and clamped her mouth shut.

"I'll take that as a yes."

He tugged at her chemise and stays, and her breasts were freed. The instant relief she felt turned into a fire of need as he pressed his mouth to one aching nipple and took the other between two fingers. "Ripe as cherries," he said before sucking with enough pressure to send a jolt of heat between her legs.

"Oh, yes," she cried, burying her hands in his hair. Heat and need pooled at her center as he licked and sucked and tugged with those skilled fingers and that persuasive tongue. She began to fear she might orgasm from this alone, and she squirmed to move closer to him. Finally, she dropped one hand from his hair and pressed it between her legs.

He caught it and pulled his mouth from her throbbing breast to look at her. “Allow me.”

She wanted to shake her head, to tell him no and that this had already gone too far, but he slid off the squabs and knelt between her legs. He took the hem of her skirts and slid them upward, his fingers brushing her calves, then her outer thighs until her skirts were bunched at her waist. She gathered them in her hands and looked down at him. He was settled between her legs and seemed perfectly at home. He reached up, grasped her drawers, and pulled them down, his gaze never leaving her eyes.

He tossed the drawers aside and then his attention slid to her neck, her bared breasts, and then to her thighs. Somehow she knew the moment his eyes found her sex. She clenched and felt a rush of heat. His hands were warm on her inner thighs as he eased them further open and leaned in to kiss her just above the knee. He continued kissing upward, the shadow from his beard scratching her lightly.

“Tell me to stop, Beatrice,” he said. “If you don’t want my mouth on you, tell me to cease.”

She opened her mouth, but she couldn’t make the words come out. She could feel her body pulsing, her sex throbbing with anticipation. His lips slid higher, and then she felt his warm breath on her center.

He nuzzled her, his hands stroking her thighs as her need grew. Finally, she couldn’t take it any longer. “Munro, please,” she murmured.

He grinned up at her and leaned down and she felt the long, slow lick of his tongue.

She jerked violently at the rush of pleasure. But he didn’t stop. He held her still as he continued the sweet torment. His licks turned to flicks and taps, and just as she felt she might come apart, he was inside her—first his tongue then his fingers. Her legs

were wide, her body straining for release, and she'd forgotten they were in a coach and they had only a quarter of an hour. Her hand went to her breast, taking one hard nipple between her fingers and rubbing it as he teased the sensitive nub between her legs. She knew how to touch herself and bring pleasure, of course, but nothing could compare to this—to what he was doing with his lips and his mouth.

That mouth . He knew exactly how much pressure to apply to drive her to madness and the peak of pleasure before pulling back and making her whimper with need.

Finally, when she was shaking with arousal and all but crying with desire, he brought her to slow, blinding orgasm. Her entire body clenched, and she heard someone crying out in fractured screams. She was crying God and yes and don't stop .

And then she was crashing down, but even the aftermath was sweet as pleasant shocks vibrated through her.

Munro emerged from under her skirts, which had fallen to her thighs as she'd writhed under his ministrations. "I daresay that is a quarter of an hour," he said, composed as could be. His gaze raked over her, and in that moment, she saw herself as he must have—bared breasts, legs open, cheeks and lips flushed. Good God, they hadn't even kissed on the lips.

He took a breath. "You look delicious," he said. "If I had more time...but we'll save that, yes?"

She could only try and force breath into her lungs. She didn't want to save anything. She wanted to release the fall of his trousers and take him inside her. But she had to remember who he was and what he was. She had to resist him. Yes, he'd survived three temptations. Yes, he'd given her pleasure just now and taken none for himself. But wasn't that the way of the rake? To seduce a woman using any means necessary?

"What are you thinking?" he asked, eyes narrowing.

She could barely form any sort of coherent thought. But she had to say something. "We didn't even kiss," she said, feeling immediately stupid as soon as she'd said the words.

"I can rectify that." He rose on his knees, cupped her face with infinite delicacy, and kissed her gently. The gentleness contrasted sharply with the strident passion she had felt just moments before, and she was lost again. This man continued to surprise her.

But when she would have deepened the kiss, he pulled back. "You still don't trust me, do you?"

"I want to trust you."

He pushed back and seated himself across from her. Beatrice fumbled with her undergarments and skirts, trying to put her clothing to some semblance of rights.

"I've passed three of your tests," he said, his gaze on the flickering lantern. "And yet, it's not enough." He met her gaze. "I begin to wonder if five will be enough. If I pass five tests, will something suddenly shift?" He snapped his fingers.

"I need proof—"

"I don't think it works that way, Beatrice. I think you either trust me or you don't."

"It's not that easy for me."

"And you think it's easy for me? I've stood before you, heart in hands, and you gave me tests to rival those of Hercules."

Beatrice hardly thought a half-naked woman equal to one of the Labors of Hercules. But Munro had a point. He had exposed his feelings to her, and for any man, much less a rake, wasn't that almost as terrifying as the Lernaean Hydra?

"You're wary because of Solomon. I understand, but I am not Solomon Barnet. He would never have been faithful to you—not because you are not worth fidelity, but because he didn't love you. You were a prize to him, nothing more."

"You told me at the time," she said, sounding tired. "I just didn't believe you."

"I can hardly blame you for that. I know in your mind, and the opinion of the rest of the ton, I was an irredeemable rake. Solomon was much better at hiding his misdeeds. All of that is in the past. I was a rake then, but I have reformed. If you won't ever trust me, if you don't love me, then tell me now. I can't keep wanting you if there's no hope."

Beatrice took a breath. Her heart thudded in her chest as fear threatened to overwhelm her. She didn't trust him, not yet. But more truthfully, she didn't trust herself. She blamed herself for her poor decision to marry Solomon more than she'd ever blamed him.

But if she didn't say something to Munro now, she'd lose him. Again. Loath as she was to admit it, she did love him. A part of her had always loved him.

The carriage began to slow, and she parted the curtains and saw they had arrived at Notley House. Before the coach could slow, and they were ushered out and into the arms of their body servants, she grabbed his hand. "I do love you," she said. "Don't give up on me yet."

Then she released him, pulled her cloak over her rumpled clothing, and took the footman's hand as soon as the door opened and the steps were let down. She fled into

the night, leaving Munro alone in the coach.

Munro dared not move. Had he heard her correctly? Beatrice loved him?

Beatrice loved him!

He wanted to open the window and shout the news to the rest of Mayfair. He wanted to race into the house, take the steps two at a time, burst into her bedchamber, and kiss her senseless.

But he had two more tests.

He could face two tests—he could face a dozen—if he'd have her at the conclusion.

He heard the crunch of gravel under wheels and finally roused himself and stepped out of the coach. He and Beatrice had driven about London so long, Lavinia and her parents were home.

He waited for them on the walk in front of the house, watching as Lavinia exited first. She had a dreamy look every bride should possess, and Munro vowed to strangle Ramsbury if the man ever took that look away from her.

Next came her parents, Judith stiffening visibly when she saw Munro. Arthur put his arm on his brother's shoulder. "Care for a drink before going up to bed?" Arthur asked.

"I could use one," Munro admitted.

"I'll see you both in the morning," his sister-in-law said as she started up the stairs.

"Actually," Munro said, "I wanted to speak with you, my lady. Would you join us?"



She turned sharply and narrowed her eyes at him. “What can you possibly have to say to me?”

Munro gestured toward the stairs to the drawing room, and she gave a small nod.

A few minutes later, Arthur had poured Judith a glass of wine and handed Munro a snifter of brandy. He sat on the couch beside his wife and drank from his own brandy. “What’s this about, Munro?”

Munro’s gaze met Judith’s and lingered. She shook her head and pointed at him with her wineglass. “Don’t try and use those eyes on me, Munro Notley. I’m immune to your charms.”

“I’ve never once tried to charm you, my lady. I’ve never treated you with anything other than the respect owed to my brother’s wife and a viscountess. Do you not agree?”

She sipped her wine again. “Yes.”

“Then why don’t you like me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve never said I didn’t like you.”

“When you stare daggers at me, you don’t really need words.”

“I don’t—”

“Judith,” Arthur interrupted. “You don’t like him. You’ve made no secret of that fact to me. You might as well tell him why.”

She turned her head to give her husband a look that Munro was glad had not been

directed at him. He suspected Arthur would be sleeping alone tonight as punishment for siding with Munro.

Judith set her glass on the table and stood. Munro made to stand as well, but she motioned for him to stay where he was. “You are correct, sir, that I do not like you. You wouldn’t be here if Lavinia didn’t beg and plead. I would have been happy never to see you again. And for my sister never to see you again.”

“Beatrice? What does this have to do with her?”

“Everything,” Judith said, sweeping one of her arms in an arc to encompass the room, and seemingly, the world.

Munro looked at his brother, hoping for clarification, but Arthur merely massaged the bridge of his nose, looking tired and as though he’d heard all this before.

“Do you know how much she agonized over you all those years ago?”

Munro stared at her. “Agonized over me? Hardly. I asked her to marry me, and she barely had time to consider my proposal before she rejected me. And before you accuse me of ruining her or some such nonsense, I never did anything but kiss her...well, not much more than kiss her,” he admitted. “I was almost a complete gentleman.”

“I heard it all from her,” Judith said, “and I do not want to hear it from you. I know you didn’t take advantage of her, but you did make her fall in love with you.”

Now Munro jumped to his feet. “If she loved me so much, then why did she reject me and marry my best friend? She’s not the only one who was in love, Judith. I loved her more than life itself. Why do you think I left for the Continent? I couldn’t stand to be here in London and watch her paraded about on the arm of another man.”

Judith pointed at him. “Ah, yes. You ran away and buried your sorrows and your manhood in drink and women while she stayed home and regretted her decision every day of her marriage and every day since.”

Munro stared at her.

“That’s right, sir. She never loved Barnet, but she married him because she was too afraid to marry you. She didn’t think she’d survive it if you weren’t faithful to her, if you lied about loving her. She knew she could survive it if Barnet was unfaithful. She cared for him, but she never loved him like she loved you. And then he was so awfully convincing, telling her he worshipped her and would do anything for her. And then when, not even a year later, he paraded his other women about in Society, you were off doing the same in Italy or Brussels!”

“I was a free man, and nothing I did was to hurt Beatrice. I was hurting too, Judith.”

“And you will return to Europe and continue your debauchery, I’m sure. I will be left here to pick up the pieces when you break Beatrice’s heart. Yes, she was the architect of her own sorrow before, but don’t think I can’t see what’s happening since you arrived in London. Leave her alone, Munro. She’s been hurt enough.”

Arthur stood. “I think what Judith is saying, Munro, is that we all saw how much Beatrice suffered, and we don’t want her to be hurt again.”

“And you think I will hurt her?”

“Won’t you? I read *The Rake Review* . Everyone knows once you get what you want, you’re on to the next conquest.”

“I know that’s what most of Society believes, but that’s what you believe as well?” He looked at Judith then Arthur. “You think all she is to me is another notch in my

proverbial bedpost.”

“Is she more than that?” Arthur asked.

“I asked her to marry me,” Munro said. “The night of Lavinia’s betrothal ball.”

“You did what ?” Judith whispered.

“What did she say?” Arthur asked.

“I’m still waiting for her answer. She doesn’t trust me. Apparently, no one does.”

And with that, he strode out of the drawing room.

Munro supposed he might have spent the next day feeling sorry for himself. After all, not even his own brother believed he had an ounce of honor in him. His own family believed some anonymous author of salacious gossip over their blood kin.

But Munro couldn’t feel sorry for himself for long—not when he could close his eyes and remember the look of ecstasy on Beatrice’s face as he’d pleased her. Not when he could still smell her on his hands and in his hair. He didn’t even care that he hadn’t found any release. Watching her climax had been more satisfying than he could have imagined. He wanted to touch her again, kiss her again, hear her moaning as he caressed her velvet skin.

And if his thoughts continued along that road, he would walk about with an erection the rest of the day. He splashed cold water on his face, and when he lifted his head from the basin, he caught the blue of the sky outside his window. November was usually gray and dreary. He should take advantage of the rare sunny skies. Calling for his valet, he dressed and went out for a walk through Mayfair, braving the stares of the people who passed him, ogling his trousers.

Munro realized he hadn't eaten any breakfast—he hadn't wanted to see Judith this morning—and started for Gunter's. The establishment wouldn't be serving ices this late in the year, but they would have coffee and light refreshments. As soon as he stepped into the shop with its large windows and assorted round tables, his nose was assaulted with the sweet scents of tea and sugar. Munro was immediately transported back to his childhood. He could remember running here with his brothers and sisters and buying ices on hot summer days.

When he'd been a bit older, he had escorted young ladies here and sat near the windows to watch the people strolling or picnicking in the park at Berkeley Square. The park was empty now, except for a couple of lads trying to fly a kite among the orange and yellow leaves littering the ground. Gunter's was almost as empty. A few ladies sat near the windows, their bonnets close together as they shared stories.

One lone woman sipped from a cup in the back, and of course, that woman had to be Beatrice. She raised her brows as he spotted her, and he bowed and approached her table. She looked lovely in the late morning light, her dark hair in a shining bun at the nape of her neck. She wore a high-necked rust-colored gown that complemented her coloring perfectly. Her green eyes followed him, dancing with amusement.

"I suppose you came here to avoid breakfasting with me."

"Not at all," he said. "I wanted to avoid your sister." Then something occurred to him. "Did you come to avoid breakfasting with me?"

"I thought it might be easier to drink my tea alone than blush for an hour seated across from you."

"I didn't know widows blushed," he said.

She laughed. "Oh, I doubt that. You could make anyone blush. Join me?" she asked.

“Must I promise not to make you blush?”

“No. I feel much stronger than I did. I can resist your double entendre and innuendo.”

He bowed and took a seat, ordering coffee and a scone when asked. Finally, he turned back to Beatrice. “Wordplay was never my forte, especially not in the morning. You are safe for the moment.”

“I imagine you never needed to say anything. You could merely look at a woman with those eyes, and she’d fall at your feet.”

He thought about what Judith had said the night before—that Beatrice had been in love with him. “You didn’t fall at my feet,” he said.

“Of course, I did. The first time you smiled at me, I felt so lightheaded I feared I would faint.”

He accepted the coffee and set it on the table. “I suppose I always assumed that since you rejected my proposal, you didn’t feel about me as I felt about you.”

She looked down. “Then we were both at cross purposes. I didn’t believe you when you said you loved me. Your reputation was too egregious.”

He leaned back. “Only half of what was said about me was true. The other half could be attributed to Solomon, but his parents were always threatening to cut off his allowance, so I often took the blame for his misdeeds and mine.”

“He told me that after we wed,” she said. “And, once again, I know I should have listened to you when you said he was a rake.”

“We can’t go back,” he said.

“I wish we could. We used to have so much fun together. We were always laughing. You’d recite silly poems and would attempt anything if I dared you.”

Munro closed his eyes and grimaced. “I was an idiot. I almost fell off that bridge when you dared me to walk on the edge.”

“I didn’t think you’d do it!”

He laughed. “Of course I did it. If a pretty girl asked me to lay down in the middle of the street in Piccadilly Circus, I would have done it. Especially if that girl had green eyes and a mouth that gave me too many ideas.”

She raised her brows. “What sorts of ideas?”

“The sort that would have shocked you back then and might make you blush now.”

She leaned close enough that he caught the scent of apples. “Too bad fellatio was not on your list of rewards.”

He was definitely regretting that now.

“But tell me this,” she murmured, “if I did put my mouth on you, would I need to concern myself with a silver ornament?”

Munro sat back. “You can’t quite stop thinking about that, can you?”

“It’s all anyone is talking about.”

“I’ve never had so many people staring at my trousers before.” He leaned forward. “Do you want to know if the rumor is true?”

“Yes.”

“Then give me another test, and you may explore all you want after I pass it.”

She made a face and sat back. Munro narrowed his eyes. “Don’t tell me you haven’t any more tests in mind.”

“Honestly, I didn’t think you’d get this far.”

“I should encourage you to forfeit.”

“Would I still owe you the prizes?”

“Of course. I want you in my bed, Beatrice. And I want you as my wife.”

She bit her lip, and he pointed at her. “There it is. You still don’t trust me, which is why you can’t forfeit. You need me to pass the next two tests if you’re ever to trust me.”

“And what if I simply never present you any more tests?”

“Then I suppose I use my ticket back to Italy, and you stay here. I can’t wait around hoping one day you’ll trust me, trying to prove myself to you just to have you tell me I’m still not quite good enough.”

“I’ve never thought that—”

“Beatrice, you rejected me once. I’ve put my pride aside and made my feelings plain. If you don’t want me by the time Lavinia weds, then I’ll gather up that pride and never bother you again.”



She stared at him, and he saw the turmoil in her eyes. She was torn. Munro half-wished he could shake her until she realized he loved her. But trust was something that must be freely given. As much as he wanted her, if she couldn't give him that, he'd walk away.

### Chapter Seven

Beatrice was still smiling when she stepped into the foyer of Notley House. For the third day in a row, the weather had been mild and sunny, and Munro had escorted her all about London. They'd gone to the museum, shopping on Bond Street, and for a picnic in Hyde Park. She'd given him silly dares, just like she'd done years ago. He'd almost fallen in the Serpentine when she'd dared him to walk the edge of the bridge. But when she'd dared him to swim it, he'd refused. Clearly, he was no longer the foolish youth he'd once been.

He told her all about the museums and monuments he'd visited on the Continent. If she was surprised he had done more than visit brothels, she made certain not to show it. He asked about all the plays she'd seen in London and what his nieces and nephews had been like as they were growing up. He seemed to regret not having been present for most of their childhoods.

She might have reminded him that he still had young nieces and nephews, and he could be present for them. But that would lead them back to the conversation about trust and tests and the Nefarious Scheme she'd concocted and now didn't know whether she should continue or not.

She didn't want to tempt him further, didn't want to think of another woman seducing him—even if that woman failed. She wanted him to want her not because some other woman had aroused him, but because he couldn't stand not to have Beatrice. She'd thought about asking him if they could simply become lovers. She was a widow. Most of Society would look the other way if she took a lover. Unfortunately, Mr. Notorious had the sort of reputation that meant they couldn't hope to keep an affair

quiet. She either married him or sullied her own reputation. The last thing her poor sister and the rest of the Notley family needed was more scandal.

Even if she was willing to endure the scandal, she knew Munro well enough to know that he wouldn't accept any alternative to marriage. He'd been a rake and seemed to want no part in that lifestyle any longer. He wanted her love, wanted her to be his wife. He'd asked her twice now—once seven years ago and now again. He would not ask again, and a man had his pride. He'd leave again if she refused, and then she'd never see him again.

Unless he returned with a French or Italian or...Hungarian wife on his arm

As much as that thought frightened her, she was equally terrified to tie herself to another man who might break her heart or make a fool of her.

"Is that you, Beatrice?" Judith called from the parlor just off the foyer.

"Yes."

The door opened, and Judith peeked out. "Where have you been? I need your help. Lavinia and I are trying to make place cards, and neither of us has the beautiful hand you do. Will you help us?"

"Of course." Beatrice handed her coat and hat to the butler and stepped into the parlor. The entire room looked as though it had been overrun with fabric samples, flowers, and boxes of wedding presents. Lavinia sat at a table that had been cleared so the ladies might write the place cards for the wedding breakfast, and she looked as though she might cry any moment.

"Help me," she mouthed to Beatrice.

Beatrice nodded. “Judith, why don’t you and I handle the place cards? Lavinia needs her rest. The wedding is tomorrow. She should be enjoying her last days at home.”

Lavinia jumped up. “That’s a wonderful idea. I’ll just retire to my room.”

When she was gone, Beatrice took her place and Judith joined her. “I’m rather glad we have a moment to speak privately. I’ve been worried about you, Bea.”

“Still playing the role of big sister, even when I’m seven and twenty?”

“I can’t help it, especially when you’ve been spending so much time with Munro.”

Beatrice sighed. She had known this conversation loomed. “Judith, I know Mama died when I was young, and you really were more of a mother to me than a sister. I’ve always valued your advice, but I don’t need it when it comes to Munro.”

“You blame me, don’t you? You still blame me.”

“I don’t blame you, and I never did. I made my own decision. I chose Solomon.”

“After I pushed you to choose him. How was I to know he was as bad as Munro—worse, even?”

“No one knew. Munro tried to tell me, and I wish I had believed him.”

“I convinced you he was lying, that he’d say anything to have you. Beatrice, I haven’t changed my mind about that or about him.”

“I know.” She put her hand over Judith’s. “And I know you want what’s best for me, but I do think Munro has changed. And I do think if I’d married him, he would have been faithful.”

“Then you believe he left for the Continent because he was mourning the loss of you? Everyone else says he bedded every woman from Calais to Calcutta.”

“I know what he tells me, and I know I have no reason not to trust him. I also know...” She swallowed because she hadn’t told Judith this. “He still wants to marry me.”

Judith’s hand tightened on hers. “Beatrice, no! Don’t even consider it.”

“He asked me the first night he saw me. He was drunk, of course, but the proposal was sincere. He has since reiterated it. He says...he says he never stopped wanting to marry me.”

“I cannot condone a union with him. I saw how much Solomon hurt you. I don’t want that to happen again. And it would be worse this time because you’ve always cared so much more for Munro than you ever did for Solomon.”

“And that’s the hardest part about all of it. I have to trust him or lose him forever, and both options seem impossible at the moment.”

The morning of Lavinia’s wedding dawned gray and wet. Munro parted the curtains in his chamber and stared out at the steady fall of rain. Lavinia would be disappointed, and Judith would be frantic at the idea that her daughter’s dress might become wet in transit to the church. He decided then it would be a good idea to avoid all the ladies in the household and stay in his chamber until it was time to depart.

At half past seven, he stepped into a coach that already held Dudley and his wife, Louisa, as well as Lavinia’s siblings Aylmer, Guy, and Lydia. “Where are your children?” he asked Dudley.

“Too young to attend,” Munro’s sister-in-law informed him. “Caroline is six and

might have behaved, but little Dudley is a terror on a good day. One can't expect him to sit still five minutes, much less forty."

"I remember when you married, Aunt Louisa," Lydia said. "I was barely six and so excited to attend."

"Yes, and you were an absolute angel," Louisa said. Munro thought Louisa was probably the real angel as she had to live with Dudley and about eighty-three footstools.

"I remember when your parents married," Munro told Aylmer, Guy, and Lydia. Guy, who was twelve, didn't look away from the window but Aylmer and Lydia turned to him.

"You do?" Lydia said.

"I was fifteen, the same age as Aylmer and only a few years younger than your mother. I remember thinking she was beautiful."

"Was Aunt Beatrice there?" Lydia asked.

"I'm sure she was." She would have been no more than eight then and Munro didn't remember her at all. It wasn't until he saw her again, about ten years later, that Beatrice had made an impression on him.

"Did Papa have all of his hair then?" Aylmer asked.

"Well, he didn't have any children to antagonize him back then, so yes."

"Do you think you will ever marry?" Guy asked, finally looking away from the window.

Ah, exactly the question Munro wanted to avoid. “I don’t know.” He needed to say something to lighten the mood and change the subject. “I definitely don’t want children.” He patted his head. “My hair is too luxurious to pull out.”

The children laughed, and Dudley, whose hair was beginning to thin, patted his own head.

The coach finally arrived at the church, and Munro made sure Lavinia’s brothers and sister were seated beside their mother in the front pew. He took his seat behind them with his own siblings and forced himself not to look around in hopes of spotting Beatrice. The Duke of Ramsbury made his way to the front of the church and exchanged a few words with the bishop. Ramsbury looked nervous and shifted from foot to foot.

The church was full of candlelight. The rain outside had dimmed the interior of the building, so it seemed closer to eight at night than eight in the morning. A hand touched his shoulder, and he looked up to see Beatrice standing beside the pew. She looked stunning in a champagne-colored gown that was simple and understated. Somehow the plainness of the gown made her raw beauty stand out more. Her complexion looked almost golden in the flickering candlelight. Her dark hair caught that same light and seemed to shimmer. His eyes met hers, and for a long moment, he was caught by her lovely green gaze. He had never known another person with eyes that color green, and he didn’t think he ever would.

Munro stumbled to his feet, his legs unsteady. He’d wanted to see her, but now that he did, his heart sped up and he felt unaccountably warm. His entire body seemed to feel the need to remind him he was in love with her every single time he saw her.

Munro grasped the back of the pew before him to steady himself, then stepped aside when Beatrice made a shooing motion with her hand. The other residents of his pew shifted, but there was not much room left on their row. When everyone had adjusted,

Munro and Beatrice sat. His leg fit snugly against hers. Normally, Munro wouldn't have minded the close quarters, but the feel of her leg against his just reminded him that this was their last day together. She hadn't sent him any more tests and didn't seem inclined to. Clearly, she had decided not to accept his proposal.

The bishop said something, and everyone rose and turned to the back of the church where Arthur stood with his daughter on his arm. Lavinia's face was brighter than any of the candles, and her father looked as though he might fall over.

"What's wrong with Arthur?" Munro whispered to Beatrice, who had been in the carriage with Judith, Lavinia, and Arthur on the way over.

"He's just realized he's not ready for his little girl to become a wife. He'll be fine."

Munro glanced at his brother again. Arthur looked waxy and stiff as he started toward the altar, Lavinia on his arm.

Beatrice glanced back at Munro. "Just in case, be ready to give Lavinia away."

Munro wanted to ask in case of what, but he caught Lavinia's eye and smiled at her. She beamed back, looking radiant as any bride should on her wedding day. Munro would strangle Ramsbury if he ever did anything to take that joy from Munro's niece.

He wondered what Beatrice would have looked like if she'd been able to give Munro her heart, if she'd been able to trust him. She'd probably look terrified as she stood at the altar with him. She knew weddings didn't always end in bliss. And Munro knew love didn't always conquer all. He'd loved Beatrice for years now, had never stopped loving her, but it seemed his love wasn't enough. She couldn't trust him enough to marry him.

As much as he wanted her, he wouldn't beg. He wouldn't linger in London and hope



she'd change her mind one day. He couldn't even stay in London. It would be too painful to see her, want her, and know he couldn't have her.

Arthur managed to reach the steps to the altar. He looked up at the bishop who asked, "Who gives this woman to this man in marriage?"

"I am her father," Arthur said, "I do." He bent and kissed Lavinia's cheek then took her hand and placed it in Ramsbury's. Munro watched his brother stumble back to his seat, and once the families were allowed to sit again, he put his hand on Arthur's shoulder to comfort him.

The rest of the ceremony was brief. Beatrice sniffled, and Munro gave her his handkerchief. He tried not to think about how warm she felt beside him or allow himself to turn his head to catch her scent. He need only survive the wedding breakfast, and then he could pack his things and say his good-byes. He'd leave at dawn tomorrow morning and not look back.

Beatrice had hardly a moment to think until the wedding breakfast was underway and all the food laid out and the guests making toasts and offering felicitations. She'd been awake since long before dawn to help Judith with all the last-minute preparations, including dressing Lavinia for the ceremony. Now it was over, and Lavinia was the Duchess of Ramsbury. She looked happy, turning her head to smile at her new husband every few moments. He smiled back at her, pressing her hand with his.

Unexpectedly, Beatrice felt her heart clench. She wanted a man to look at her that way. Not just any man, but Munro. She looked about the dining room but didn't see him. Then she remembered Judith had said he'd taken the children to the drawing room and out of the way. Beatrice reached into her bodice and withdrew the handkerchief he'd given her. It smelled faintly of citrus and bergamot, scents she always associated with him.

She made her way out of the dining room and up the stairs to the drawing room. Outside the door, she peeked in and smiled at the chaos inside. Munro was trying to manage at least nine of his nieces and nephews. He held Mary's youngest, who was two and wailing, in his arms. The older boys were pushing and shoving in a corner, and one of the little girls was crying over a doll who seemed to have lost an arm.

He needed saving.

"What's all this?" Beatrice said as she swept into the room. Immediately, the boys stopped pushing each other and Lizzie, Mary's toddler, reached her arms out. Beatrice swept by Munro, took the child, and then bent to see what she could do about the broken doll.

"Thank God you are here," Munro said. "A riot was about to break out."

"I can sew her arm back on, Georgiana," Beatrice said. "Do stop crying." She looked about and spotted Lydia. "Lydia, begin a game of charades for the older children, please."

"Yes, Aunt Beatrice."

"Munro, help me put the blocks out for the little ones. They are in the cabinet. Yes, that one there. Where are the nannies?"

"I sent them away," he said, giving her a sheepish look. "I thought they might want a small respite. I didn't think everything would go wrong so quickly." He set the blocks out and took Lizzie from her arms, setting the child on the carpet before the blocks. Then he knelt beside her and began stacking blocks that she handed him.

Beatrice's mouth went dry. She had always loved children and enjoyed being part of the lives of Judith's children. Clearly, Munro enjoyed children as well. He listened to

Lizzie babble on and made agreeable comments as though she were really conversing with him. It was too precious, and she had a momentary flash of Munro holding their child and playing with their toddler.

But that was not to be.

“I’ll get the other little ones,” she managed to say around the lump in her throat.

When everyone was either engaged in charades or toppling blocks, she sat on the couch and Munro rose from the floor and joined her. “Why aren’t you enjoying the breakfast?” he asked.

She couldn’t exactly tell him that she’d wondered where he was or that she missed him. She looked down at her hands, trying to think of some excuse, and spotted his handkerchief. “I wanted to give this back to you.”

He took the handkerchief from her. “Thank you.” His eyes met hers, and she could see the longing in the golden-brown gaze. He wanted her as much as she wanted him.

She opened her mouth to speak, hesitated, and he looked away.

“I think I’ll stay here with the children a little longer,” he said. “I don’t know when I’ll see them again.”

This was her chance. This was her last opportunity to tell him she would marry him. All the tests and temptations be damned. She wanted him.

But she couldn’t seem to say it, and then Guy was begging Uncle Munro to play at charades. “You know that I have never played charades,” Munro said. “I’ve seen others play, but I never have.”

“We’ll show you how,” Lydia offered. “Please!”

Munro glanced at Beatrice. She smiled. “I’ll watch the little ones. Go ahead.”

“Very well.” He stood. “I’ll try anything once.”

And he would. He was not afraid to risk his heart, to risk everything. One of the nannies returned, and Beatrice gave the smaller children over to her care. She had to get back to the breakfast.

And she had to decide, for once and for all, if she would finally risk it all too.

### Chapter Eight

Munro caught only glimpses of Beatrice the rest of the day. The last time was when Lavinia and Ramsbury waved good-bye from the ducal coach. He bid his siblings and their families good-bye then followed Arthur and Dudley inside.

“Judith and Beatrice disappeared upstairs,” Arthur said. “I imagine Judith will have a tray sent up for dinner. She won’t feel like seeing anyone.”

“Why not?” asked Dudley, who had sent his wife and children home in his coach.

Munro clapped his brother on the shoulder. “She’s sad, Dudley. I imagine it’s difficult to see your child leave home.” He glanced at Arthur, who ran a hand over his haggard face.

“Brandy?” the viscount asked.

“Please.” Munro followed his brothers into the library and took a snifter from Arthur, who raised it.

“I can’t think of another trite phrase or hearty toast,” he said.

“To family,” Munro said.

“To family,” his brothers echoed and drank.

“Speaking of family.” Dudley took a seat on one of Arthur’s chairs, leaning forward

to run his hand over the upholstery of the nearby footstool. “What are your plans, Munro?”

“I’ll be returning to the Continent. I have tickets on a packet to France tomorrow. From there, I travel back to Italy.”

“Why Italy?” Dudley asked.

“It’s beautiful, and it has the best food.”

“I imagine he also has a woman waiting for him there,” Arthur said, taking a seat across from Dudley while Munro stood near the fireplace. “Or are all those stories about brothels true?”

“I don’t have a woman waiting, and the only reason I ever go into a brothel is because they have the best wine. I have no wish to die of the pox.”

“If there’s no woman and Italian whores aren’t a temptation, why not stay in England?”

Munro shook his head.

“Your family is here, and I told you before that I could use your assistance with some of the assets tied to the title. I don’t know how Papa kept up with all his investments.”

“I’m here and could help,” Dudley said.

Arthur took another drink and looked at Munro. “As I said, I could use your help.”

“I wish I could stay, Arthur.”

“If this is about what Judith said the other day, I can speak with her.”

“It’s about Beatrice,” Munro said.

“Mrs. Barnet?” Dudley asked.

“Yes,” Munro said. “She’s refused my proposal, and I’d rather not have to stay here and watch as she accepts that of another man.”

Arthur shook his head. “You could go to the country. You wouldn’t have to see her.”

“She’s as much a part of this family as I am. I would have to see her, and I don’t want to make things awkward. I can start over in Italy. I can make a life for myself there.”

“I could come and visit,” Dudley said. “I have seen several remarkable footstools on auction that originated in Italy.”

“I could come and visit as well. In a few years the boys will be old enough for a Grand Tour.” He looked at Dudley. “That’s a tour of the sights and landmarks, not the footstools.”

“I know what a Grand Tour is,” Dudley said.

Munro and Arthur exchanged dubious glances. For a moment, Munro felt like he was home. How many hours had he and his brothers spent with their father in this library, talking and teasing and boasting about their futures? He would miss it.

“Thank you for ordering me back for Lavinia’s wedding,” he told Arthur. “I’m glad I came.”

“I’m glad I ordered. I hope you don’t wait until Lydia marries to return. You’re

always welcome.”

“Thank you.” Munro set his glass down. “I’ll say my farewells now. I’ll be gone by the time you wake in the morning.”

He embraced Arthur then Dudley. “Give my regards to Susan and Mary,” he said, recalling he hadn’t formally taken his leave of his sisters. “I’ll write to them.”

And then he strolled out of the library and started up the stairs. The sconces in the corridor flickered, and with the clouds and the rain, it felt more like the middle of the night than late afternoon. With a sigh, he opened the door to his chamber. The room was cold, and he saw the cause immediately—the fire had been banked. The drapes had been pulled closed, and he would have to stumble about in the dark to locate the bell pull and call for a servant to stoke the fire. He moved forward, and as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he froze.

Someone else was in the room. He’d heard a sound—a creak or a rustle of sheets.

His gaze went to the bed, and he saw her. It was definitely a woman—a naked woman if the glow of the fire didn’t deceive him. She wore a mask typically suited for a masquerade ball and nothing else. She lounged on his pillows, extended a hand, and beckoned him to come to her.

Munro’s feet moved before he could think. He started forward, thinking more with his cock than his head. He had no idea who this woman was, but she was exquisite. Even in the dim light, he could see she had generous breasts, rounded hips, and long legs. He could crawl into bed with her and forget...

Beatrice.

Munro stopped his advance just short of the bed. Even now, even in the heat of this



moment, he couldn't forget her. If he touched this woman, he'd be imagining touching Beatrice. The pain of losing her lanced through him, and he took a step back.

"How did you get into my chamber?" he asked.

She shrugged and beckoned him forward again. But Munro took another step back. "You should go."

For a moment, he wondered what the devil had gotten into him. He would never have sent a naked, willing woman from his chamber. But he didn't want her. He wanted Beatrice, and if he couldn't have her, he wouldn't pretend someone else was her just to stave off the pain. He'd force himself to feel it this time. It was the only way to ever really move past his loss of her. If he could move past that loss.

The woman rose on her knees and gave him a pout then beckoned him forward again. Munro's breath caught in his throat, and his heart began to thud in his chest. A small flicker of hope flared. He'd asked how this woman came to be in his chamber, but he didn't have to think very hard.

Beatrice had let her in. Beatrice had given him another test.

And that meant she still wanted him. If she was still giving him tests, then she still hoped he might pass them and claim his prizes. And the prize for passing this test was a night with her.

"I said, get out." Munro pointed to the door. "Where are your clothes? You may dress and then you need to go."

She sank back on her heels and then climbed off the bed. Munro glanced about for her clothing but couldn't see the garments in the dim light. When he looked back at

the woman, she had reached up to untie her mask. Slowly, she removed it and tossed it aside.

“Beatrice?” Munro gaped as an ember from the fire sparked brightly and illuminated her face.

“Once again, you foiled my plans,” she said, aware her voice was raspy and low. “I really did not think you could resist a willing, naked woman in your bed.”

“I—you—I need to sit down.”

She moved aside. “The bed is right here.”

“You need to put something on. I can’t concentrate with you standing there like that. I’m torn between covering my eyes and reaching for the tinder box so I might light a lamp.”

“Light the lamp if you want. I’m yours for the rest of the night.”

He groped for the bed and sat down hard. “I’m sorry. I thought you said you were mine for the night.”

“That was the agreement, wasn’t it? If you passed the fourth test, you could take me to bed.”

He still didn’t move, so she moved to the low fire and took up the poker, stirring the fire to life. Then she extracted a spill from the holder and lit the stick. Behind her, she heard Munro groan.

“That’s better,” she said as she moved back to the lamp, one hand protecting the flame. “I was cold.”

“Then you could put clothing on.”

She lit the lamp. “You don’t really want me to do that, do you?”

“No. But I don’t trust myself with you walking around like...that.”

“You don’t have to trust yourself. I’m trying to tempt you.” She carried the lamp to the bedside table and set it down, then stood before Munro. “I want you to take me to your bed.”

He stared at her, still uncomprehending. Poor man. All the blood had probably rushed to his...lower regions. His gaze was on her eyes, but she saw the struggle it took for him to keep it there. “You can look down,” she said. “At my body.”

“Is this part of the test?”

She laughed. “No. You passed the test. Truth be told, I wouldn’t have minded all that much if you hadn’t because we’d be tangled up together on the bed right now. You see, either way this temptation progressed, I couldn’t lose.”

“And now we both win,” he said. His gaze dipped, and she felt the rush of heat she was accustomed to feeling every time he looked at her. But now there was no cloth between them—well, except for his clothing. She was completely revealed.

She put a hand on his knees, slid them open, and stepped between them. Then she rested her hands on his shoulders. “Any ideas as to how we should fill the rest of the hours in the day...and night?”

His large, warm hand came to rest on her hip, and she took a shaky breath.

“I have a few,” he said. “I still can’t quite believe you’re here.”

“Shall I pinch you?”

“I can think of a better idea.” He tugged her close and wrapped a hand about her neck, pulling her down for a kiss. She expected the kiss to be wild and unfettered, but it was gentle and sweet. A lump formed in her throat, and she had to blink back tears. Why had she thought lying with him wouldn’t mean anything? Why had she thought it would be fast and frantic, and then she could forget all about it?

“You don’t have to hold back,” she whispered, knowing her words were for naught, knowing she was completely undone already by a simple kiss.

“I’m in no hurry,” he murmured, the hand on her hip sliding down to cup her bottom. “I plan to savor every inch of you.”

That was exactly what she’d been afraid of. She could still walk away. He wouldn’t hold her to their agreement if she said she’d changed her mind. As though he sensed the direction of her thoughts, he pulled back. “Are you certain you want this? If you’ve reconsidered—”

She put a finger over his lips. Sweet, sweet man. This was why she’d fallen in love with him. This was the side of him no one else saw. He needed to feel wanted, needed to feel loved. And for so long he’d loved her without anything in return.

“I want this,” she said, kissing him softly. “I want you , Munro Notley.”

In the next instant, she was on her back, the mattress under her and Munro looking down at her. “You are so beautiful. Your eyes...” He kissed each eyelid when she closed them. “Your nose.”

“My nose?”

He ignored her and kissed the tip. “Your cheeks.” He brushed his lips over her cheeks softly. She looked up at him. He kissed her forehead.

“You’re forgetting something.”

“What’s that?”

“My mouth.”

“I’d never forget your mouth. I dream about your mouth.”

“Then kiss me.”

He cupped her face in his hands and pressed his lips to hers. The kiss felt almost reverent at first. She could imagine herself a new bride, and he a bridegroom who didn’t want to frighten her. His hands slid slowly down her body, his touch lighting little fires wherever his fingertips strayed. Gradually, he deepened the kiss, and his touch became more insistent. She gasped at the gentle squeeze of his hand at her breast and shivered as he slid down her body to cup her between her legs.

“You’re ready for me,” he whispered.

“I was ready as soon as you stepped into the room. Why are you still dressed?”

“Patience, sweetheart.” His mouth traced her jaw and dipped down to her neck while his fingers stroked her. She arched for him, biting her lip as he slid over the sensitive nub between her legs. His mouth slid lower, and he nuzzled the hollow at the base of her throat as one finger entered her. She clenched around him, and he chuckled. His breath tickled her skin, making her breath come even shorter. Then another finger slid inside her, and she moaned as he used his thumb against that place that throbbed and ached for his touch.

The bed chamber slid away, and her focus narrowed. In those moments, there was only him and only her. His touch existed and nothing else. His mouth on her caused her heart to beat. His hands made her blood race. She panted, trying to catch her breath as his lips found her nipple and tugged lightly. Between her legs, his thumb made lazy circles that drove her mad.

“Munro, yes.”

“I love when you say my name.”

She opened her eyes and found him looking down at her. “You’re ravishing, Beatrice. You take my breath away.”

“Please,” she begged, and he gave her a knowing smile. He was the beautiful one. He was the one no woman could resist. And when he looked at her like that, she fell completely under his spell. He adjusted his touch and the pressure, his thumb moving in quick circles on her aching flesh. Her breath hitched and caught.

“That’s it, sweetheart.”

Her gaze found his right as the climax poured through her. She felt as though she’d been an empty vessel who was being filled with pleasure. She groaned as the sensations flowed through her body, out into her limbs, all the way to the tips of her toes. She had clenched tightly around his fingers, squeezing every inch of sensation out of the orgasm, but it still wasn’t enough. She wanted him inside her.

Finally, she lay sated and spent. His hand was warm on her belly as he lay on his side and studied her face.

“That was exquisite,” she finally managed. “Again.”

“I have much more in mind.”

“Good.” She closed her eyes and saw the image of him above her, the love in his eyes as he looked down at her, pleased her. Somehow, despite what she had put him through, he still loved her. And somehow it didn’t matter so much anymore that he had the reputation of a rake or had once been a rake. Her fears had never been about that. She’d been so afraid of loving another man who only wanted the challenge of winning her and would toss her aside once the chase was over.

But she’d been wrong, so very wrong, to see Munro that way. He’d proved, time and again, that he loved her. He’d pleased her twice and asked nothing in return, seemingly content to enjoy her fulfillment.

He said he had more in mind, and so did she. She wanted to show him just how much he meant to her as well.

She sat, turned to him, and pushed him down. “What’s this?” he asked.

“My turn.”

### Chapter Nine

The look in Beatrice's eyes made Munro's heart gallop and his cock pulse painfully. He wanted her so badly, and the fact that she was here with him now was like a dream. Every time he blinked, he was half-afraid that she'd disappear.

The more he touched her, though, the more real she became. He could have never imagined the silkiness of her skin or the lushness of her body under his hands. Nor could he have guessed at the erotic sounds she made as she climaxed or the way her ripe mouth opened to form an O at the moment of ecstasy.

She'd come hard and long. She'd clenched his fingers in a painful vise inside her, and he wanted to feel it all again. More than anything, he wanted to be inside her. She couldn't have any idea the willpower it took to hold himself back from ravishing her when she was naked and writhing beneath him. He had never wanted any woman this much. He had never exercised this much restraint, and he knew he would wait as long as she needed before making her his—in body or name.

He'd been such a fool to think he could ever leave her and sail away back for Italy. He was her slave, more than ever now that she held his wrists pinned on the bed, her breasts just above his mouth. He extended his tongue and licked one of her dusky nipples, making it harden. She inhaled sharply. "I told you, it's my turn."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Torturing you." She kissed him, sliding over him as she did so. Why the devil was he wearing so many clothes? "Like you tortured me." Her mouth brushed over his



cheeks, his jaw, slid behind his ear. Her teeth caught his earlobe, and he clenched his hands together. She still held him on the bed, but he could have easily lifted her off him and reversed their positions.

Her hands slid over his chest, down the lawn of his shirt, and stopped at the waistband of his trousers. His cock was practically twitching. He hoped to God he didn't embarrass himself if she touched him there.

Then her hand slid lower, moving with agonizing slowness, until she brushed over him and took hold, sliding down the length of him through the material of his trousers. "I feel how much you want me," she murmured in his ear, making him shiver.

"More than anything," he said.

She squeezed him, and he groaned. Slowly, she slid off him. "Take off your clothes, and we'll see what happens next."

He was off the bed in an instant, yanking at his coat. He got it off, tossed it on the floor and started on his waistcoat. Then he made the mistake of glancing at Beatrice. She'd arranged herself on the bed, lying on one side with her head propped on a bent hand. The curve of her hip and the dip of her waist were endlessly alluring. His hands ached to cup her full breasts, and he wanted to nestle in that triangle of dark curls between her thighs.

He threw the waistcoat on the floor then tore at his neckcloth, ripped several buttons off his shirt then yanked it over his head.

She made a sound of approval when she saw his chest, and her desire for him only increased his need for her. He sat on the bed to remove his shoes, and she rose on her knees behind him, kissing the back of his neck and running her hands over his

shoulders. “You’re the one who is beautiful,” she murmured, pressing her soft breasts against his back. She nipped at his shoulder, and his hands shook as he pulled off his stockings. Finally, he stood and unfastened his breeches. His back was still to her, and he let them fall, giving her a view of his backside. He’d heard that was one of his best features.

Her reaction didn’t disappoint. She let out an appreciative sigh, and he felt her fingers skim over his buttocks. “Now turn around,” she said.

He stepped out of his trousers then hesitated. He was actually worried she might be disappointed. Damn the Brazen Belle and her Rake Review . He took a breath and turned, and her gaze slid from his eyes to his chest to his cock, standing at attention.

“Thank God,” she said.

He arched a brow. “That’s a reaction I haven’t had before. I take it you weren’t looking forward to trying intercourse with a pierced cock.”

“I’m sure it’s enjoyable. I just wouldn’t know what to do with it.” She reached for his hips and pulled him closer. “And do you know what I’m thinking now?”

He hoped whatever it was involved her full lips around his decidedly jewelry-free manhood. “What’s that?” he said, voice raspy at his own fantasies.

“If the Brazen Belle was wrong about that fact, what else was she wrong about?”

“Almost all of it,” he said. “But she was right about one thing.”

She looked up at him.

“My exit from Society was due to your marriage. I couldn’t stay here and watch you

with another man.”

“I’m all yours now.” She slid her hands to his erection and closed around it, gliding up and down the length of him. Then she bent and took the tip of him in her mouth, and he found he had to grasp her shoulders to keep upright. His knees buckled at the warm, wet suck of her lips. If he allowed this to continue, the night would be over much sooner than he wanted. And yet, he couldn’t quite summon the strength to push her away. He relished the feel of her mouth as she took more of him. Finally, he moved away.

She looked up at him, the expression on her face that of a child whose favorite toy has been taken away. “I wasn’t done.”

“Later,” he said. “Lie down.”

She raised a brow, and he thought she might refuse him just to be contrary. Instead, she slowly slid back to her knees then onto her back. He was about to tell her to spread her legs, but she did it without asking, revealing the glistening dark pink of her sex.

He knelt on the bed, between her legs, and kissed his way up her inner thighs until he reached the heat of her. He licked her glistening sheath, and she moaned and spread her legs wider. Then her hand cupped his cheek, and she said, “Later.”

He chuckled at having his own words thrust back at him, but he explored his way up her body, hands and lips taking in her every soft, vulnerable place until they were both shaking with need.

“Munro, please,” she whispered, closing her legs on him. He kissed her then guided his cock into her warm sex. He moved slowly, taking his time, and listening to the way her breath caught in her throat at the first nudge of his member inside her. He

took her hands, linked her fingers with his, then slid deeper. She arched and clenched her hands. He bit his lip as he sheathed himself fully. “Oh, yes,” she moaned.

He would have moaned too if he’d had the ability, but he couldn’t manage a thing except to feel the way she tightened around him as he moved inside her. His gaze locked with hers, and he adjusted his angle and rhythm to match her reaction. The blood rushed in his head like a storm as he fought to hold off his own release. He could see in the way her mouth opened and her ragged breaths became quicker that she was close. Her hands clenched his so tightly, it was almost painful.

And then finally—God, yes—finally, she tumbled over, and he allowed himself to follow, thrusting deep and crying out. Her lips were moving, and she was saying something. It wasn’t until his head was on her shoulder and his breath slowed, that he realized what she’d been saying, over and over and over again.

“I love you, too,” he whispered.

Beatrice didn’t know how she could be feeling so many different things all at once. Her body sang with pleasure, while her emotions felt raw and used. A tear ran down her cheek, even as she wanted to laugh for joy.

Munro lifted his head, saw her tears, and gave her a sympathetic look. “That bad, eh?”

She gave him a playful shove. “You know it wasn’t bad.” She swiped at her tears. “I don’t know why I’m crying.”

“Perhaps it’s from joy?”

“Perhaps it’s from mortification. Might we pretend I didn’t say...what I said?”

“Which part? When you said, Munro yes, yes, yes? ”

“Not that part.”

“Oh, when you said, Oh god oh god oh god ?”

“Munro...” She flashed him a look of warning and pushed so that he landed on his back beside her. He immediately turned to face her.

“Ah, then it must be when you said you lo—”

“That one. Let’s forget that, shall we?” She started to rise, wanting, for the first time, to cover herself with a sheet or blanket or some item of clothing. She found his shirt, let it drop over her head, and immediately regretted the decision. The material smelled of bergamot and citrus, and she felt as though she were once again enveloped by him. The sensation was not at all unpleasant.

“I understand,” he said, looking down at the bedclothes and tracing a wrinkle in the material. “People often say things they don’t mean in the heat of the moment.”

Beatrice froze, remembering he’d said he loved her too. Of course, he hadn’t been saying it because he was in the throes of passion. He’d said it before. She glanced at his face, which was turned down. Clearly, he didn’t want to look at her, didn’t want her to see the pain she caused him.

What was wrong with her? How long had he wanted to hear her say she loved him, and now she was trying to deny it because she felt scared and vulnerable? When would she trust him?

“Munro,” she said with a sigh.

He waved a hand. "It's already forgotten. In fact, I don't even recall what we were discussing. The weather?" He looked up at her, his face schooled into a mask of amusement. If she didn't know him so well, she might have believed it.

She sat on the bed and put a hand on his leg. Good Lord, but the man had nice legs. His calves were firm and round, his thighs tightly muscled. She'd better not look higher than that else she'd forget what she wanted to say. "I told you I love you," she said.

He raised a brow. "You are making it difficult to forget."

"I don't want you to forget."

"I see. Actually, I don't see, but I'm certain that's because I'm a man and your superior feminine logic has once again outpaced me."

"No wonder you were such a renowned rake. Women must love when you say things like that. The truth is, I'm not being logical at all."

"Really?"

She smacked his leg.

"Ow."

"I do..." She swallowed. "I love you, but I don't like how it feels having you know that."

"Rather like taking your heart out of your chest and offering it up on a platter?"

Her gaze met his. "Exactly."

“I know the feeling.”

She thought about all the times he’d admitted his feelings to her, risked being hurt or rejected. “I know you do. And the truth is, I always loved you. I was afraid you’d hurt me, so I went with the safer choice years ago and tried to hold you off now. But you passed all the tests.”

“I still have one more to pass.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to give you any more tests. I don’t want you to leave for Italy at sunrise. I don’t want us to be apart. Ever again.”

“An army of dragoons couldn’t have forced me on that ship in the morning. Not after seeing you naked on my bed. You need time to learn to trust me. I can give you that. I’ll wait forever if you give me some encouragement, once in a while.”

“That’s hardly fair to you.”

“That’s love, Beatrice. Now that I know you love me, I can wait forever.”

She stood. “Well, I cannot. As you know, I abhor a rake. But there is one thing to be said for them.”

“We’re charming?”

“No. Rakes are extremely skilled in bed sport.”

“Ah, yes.” He laid back on the bed and put his hands behind his head, looking rather pleased with himself but also incredibly delectable. How could she not want to climb up that body and lick every inch of him?

“And now that I’ve had a taste of your expertise, how am I to resist you?”

“You won’t have to. Another thing we rakes are good at is sneaking into bedchambers and stealing kisses in secluded alcoves.”

She shook her head. “Not good enough. I don’t want stolen kisses or furtive meetings. I want everyone to know you are mine.”

“I’ve always been yours, since I first saw you at the ball my brother hosted for your debut.”

“You remember that?”

“Every moment.” He closed his eyes. “When you walked into the ballroom you took my breath away. You wore a white silk gown with gold thread woven through, and you seemed to shimmer. Your hair was in those long curls that always made my fingers itch to wind around them, and you had gold in your hair as well. Pins with little gold stars on them.”

Beatrice put a hand to her heart. “You remember all that? I didn’t even remember those pins until you mentioned them just now.”

He opened his eyes and smiled at her. “I remember the first time you looked at me. Your eyes were so green, and when your gaze met mine, I felt as though I’d been punched in the breadbasket.”

“Well, that’s romantic.”

“I wasn’t looking for romance. I wasn’t looking to fall in love. In fact, I was actively avoiding it. But I was infatuated with you from the first look. And then I danced with you, and despite the glare your sister gave me throughout the entire reel, I fell in love



with you.”

“I was in love with you years before that. You know the only reason you were allowed to dance with me is because I begged Judith.”

“Years before?”

“I remember seeing you at Judith and Arthur’s wedding. You probably didn’t notice me. I was just a child, and you were almost a man at fifteen. You were already so handsome. You knew it too. You were terribly arrogant and had a cocky smile that made my childish heart pitter pat. My heart still trips every time I see you. That’s why I need to see you all the time. When I wake up. When I go to sleep. Across the breakfast table.”

He unclasped his hands from behind his head. “Are you—”

“Asking you to marry me? Yes. You asked me the first time. I thought I should ask this time.”

He jerked and sat straight up. “And you really don’t need any more tests? You trust me?”

“It was never you I didn’t trust. It was myself. I was so afraid if I married you and you left me I’d never recover from the heartbreak. I made what I thought was the safe choice with Solomon and regretted it from the start. And then when I saw you at Lavinia’s ball and you drunkenly declared your feelings for me—”

“Ah, yes. Another example of my romantic side.”

“—I was afraid I would make another mistake. I’d never stopped loving you, but I didn’t trust myself.”

“So of course, you devised a number of tests for me to prove my love, when that wouldn’t have changed anything at all.”

She shook her head. “I had to trust myself.”

“And do you?”

She straightened. “I do. I’m an intelligent woman.”

“Clearly.”

“And one bad decision doesn’t define me.”

“I hope not. I’ve made more than one bad decision.”

“Then shall we both make a good one. Will you marry me, Munro Notley?”

He sat and took her hands. “I will.”

Fear and pleasure burst within her, and then he pulled her forward, and she forgot all about the fear. Munro was kissing her, and this time it wasn’t a gentle, teasing kiss but a deep possessive kiss that took her breath away.

His hands skated under the hem of his shirt, and he rucked it up and over her head. And then his mouth was on her neck, her breasts, her belly. But he was hers now, and she wanted to stake her claim as well. She pushed him back and threw a leg over him, straddling him. His tawny eyes gazed up at her in appreciation. She bent and kissed him, loving the way his hands stroked over her then slid into her hair and twisted it around one fist. She slid her own hand down and found him hard and hot. She edged back, taking him inside her inch by inch.

Munro released her hair and grasped her hips, groaning as she lowered herself onto him. And then when she'd filled herself to the hilt, she began to rock.

"Oh, God. Yes," he moaned. She was moaning too now as she'd found the pace and the position that gave her the most pleasure. She moved slowly, loving him, pleasing him and herself. Then her body demanded she move faster, and they were running together, he holding onto her, following her lead, weathering the storm as she climaxed in a whirlwind of sensation. She felt his release too, heard his guttural cry, and looked up to see his face as he climaxed. He was beautiful—his hair a ring of fire, his eyes almost golden. And when those eyes finally cleared and met hers, all she saw was love.

And that was all she needed.

### Chapter Ten

Munro woke alone, his body pleasantly sore and muscles he'd forgotten he possessed aching with overuse.

He opened one eye and surveyed his chamber. A chair had been overturned, his clothes scattered about, the bedclothes on the rug near the fire. He lay naked in a pile of feathers from a pillow that had not been able to withstand what he and Beatrice had required of it.

Munro sat, confirming what he already knew: Beatrice was not here. At some point before dawn, she'd left him. Perhaps she hoped to avoid the notice of the charwoman who crept in while the house was still asleep to light the fire. What must that servant have thought of the state of the room?

Munro didn't care, but Beatrice probably didn't want to be caught in his bed and embroiled in rumors circulating below stairs.

Either that or she'd changed her mind.

Munro shook his head.

Ridiculous. She'd asked him to marry her. She'd told him she loved him. She wouldn't change her mind.

But if she still wanted him, why had she left without even a good-bye?

Bloody hell. He felt a pang of sympathy for all the women he had left sleeping and without a good-bye. What an arse he'd been. He'd do it all differently if he could, but he couldn't change the past. And he just hoped Beatrice would give him a chance to show her how happy he could make her today and always.

He crawled out of bed and rang for hot water. He wanted to face her cleanly shaven and well-dressed. A half an hour later, he made his way downstairs. The door to the dining room was ajar, and he could hear laughter mingled with the clink of cups on saucers. Judith's light voice floated up to him followed by Lydia's tinkle of a laugh and her older brothers' chortles. Then Arthur said something, and everyone laughed. A pang of longing cut through Munro's midsection, and he had to pause to catch his breath. Munro had never envied Arthur the title or the town house or any of the wealth he'd inherited. He'd never before envied Arthur anything, but now he coveted this family Arthur's union with Judith had produced.

Surely, everyone was feeling the absence of Lavinia this morning, but they had each other. Munro had been without family and relying on the companionship of acquaintances for years. It had been his own choosing, but he didn't choose that life any longer.

He took a breath, rushed down the stairs and into the dining room. As soon as he opened the door, everyone looked up from their plates.

"Munro," Arthur said, setting his fork down. "I thought you'd left."

"Change of plans," Munro said, searching for Beatrice. She stood at the sideboard, plate in hand, her eyes locked on him. As soon as their gazes met, her cheeks turned pink. She should have looked exhausted. They'd barely slept all night. But she looked beautiful with her hair in a simple tail down her back and wearing a plain cream muslin gown.

"You're certainly welcome to stay as long as you like," Arthur said.

“Yes, stay, Uncle Munro!” Lydia said. Aylmer and Guy echoed their sister’s sentiment. Munro’s gaze moved to Judith, who gave him a suspicious lift of one brow. No invitation would be forthcoming from that quarter. He turned his attention back to Beatrice, who had set her empty plate back on the sideboard.

“I do plan to stay,” he told his nephews and niece. “On one condition.”

“What’s that?” Guy asked.

Munro crossed the room to stand before Beatrice. Reaching for her hand, he lowered to one knee.

“Munro, stand up,” she said, glancing at the rest of the family. “There’s no need for this.”

“I want to do this right. You deserve it.” He reached up and took her hand.

“What is happening right now?” Judith asked, her voice rising.

Munro ignored her. “Beatrice Haddington Barnet, I have been in love with you for years. I lost you once and I almost lost myself. Now that I’ve found you again, I’ve found the other half of myself.”

Her mouth parted in surprise.

“I know I haven’t been a perfect man, but you’ve made me want to be a better man. Because of you, I am a better man, and I will keep striving for perfection so I might be the best husband possible for you. Beatrice, will you do me the enormous honor of becoming my wife?”

She nodded her head as tears spilled from her eyes. “Yes, Munro. Yes.”

He rose, picked her up, and spun her around. And then, although he knew it was inappropriate, he kissed her. He'd behave tomorrow.

The boys groaned and made retching sounds. Beatrice laughed, and Munro pulled her close. He whispered in her ear, "Just one thing left to do." Setting Beatrice down, Munro turned toward the table and approached Judith.

"Well, this is a revelation," Arthur was saying. "It looks as though we have another wedding to plan."

Judith's lips were pressed tight, and then her eyes widened as she realized Munro was coming toward her. She pushed back her chair, but Munro knelt before her before she could rise. "Lady Notley, you have every reason to doubt my character and to want to protect your sister. But I beg you not to doubt my love for her or my sincerity when I tell you that all I want is to be the model of the perfect husband." He glanced at his brother. "Much like your own."

Arthur made a sound of surprise. "Well, I don't know about that—"

"Your parents have passed away, and you've been like a mother to Beatrice," Munro continued. "It seems only fitting that I should ask for your blessing."

Judith's mouth opened and then closed again. Her gaze lifted and met her sister's. Behind him, Beatrice stepped forward and put a hand on Munro's shoulder.

Judith cleared her throat. "You don't need my blessing. You're both of age."

"But I want it," Munro said. "And Beatrice needs it." He didn't look away from Judith, and finally her gaze met his. Her eyes appeared more blue than the green of her sister's, and she could look steely at times. But now he saw her expression soften.

"You will be faithful to her?"

“In body and mind.”

“You will honor her? Cherish her?”

“I will honor, cherish, and love her. I do love her, Judith. You know that I do.”

“Is this what you want?” Judith looked at her sister.

“With all my heart.”

His sister-in-law sighed. “Then you have my blessing.”

Beatrice let out a cry of happiness, and Munro grabbed Judith in an embrace. She stiffened. “Let’s not get carried away.”

He released her and turned to Beatrice, who fell into his arms. He might have kissed her again, but Judith said, “No more of that in front of the children.”

Munro lifted Beatrice’s hand and kissed it instead, mouthing Later to her.

Arthur was on his feet, and he held out a hand to Munro. Munro released Beatrice, took his brother’s hand and pulled him in for an embrace. “You’ll be seeing a lot more of me, Arthur.”

“I’m happy to hear it.”

“So am I!” Lydia said, jumping up and down beside him. Munro lifted her and twirled her around then hugged Aylmer and Guy who had come to congratulate him.

“When is the wedding?” Lydia asked.

Munro looked at Beatrice. “You’ll have to ask your aunt. I’d marry her today, but I



imagine she'll want time to prepare."

"Oh, let's have a big wedding like Lavinia's!" Lydia cried.

"We'll save the next big wedding for you or your brothers," Beatrice said.

"Ew!" Aylmer said.

"A small ceremony suits us better, don't you agree?"

Munro nodded. He didn't care, as long as she was his wife at the end of it.

"Well, we'll still have to put an announcement in the papers," Judith said. "And call the banns. I suppose we should have the modiste start on a gown right away, nothing too extravagant, but something special."

"Now, you've done it," Arthur said.

And Munro was happy to agree that yes, now he had done it.

Two weeks later

Beatrice entered the dining room a good quarter hour after Munro. Even though they took care to go to bed at different times, return to their own chambers before dawn, and come down to breakfast separately, Beatrice doubted any of the adults in the house were under the illusion that she and Munro spent their nights apart. They would be married in a fortnight, and then they'd move into their own town house and wouldn't ever have to sneak around again.

Too bad, as she rather liked being naughty.

As soon as she stepped into the room, the conversation died. Munro and Arthur had

leaned together, looking at the paper, but now Arthur set it down and put his elbow over it. Beatrice was immediately suspicious. “What’s this? Something in the papers about us?”

“No,” Munro said. “Nothing about either of us.”

“Then why are you acting so strangely?” She glanced at Judith, who was reading a letter and sipping her tea. Judith set the letter down.

“The Brazen Belle has published another edition of The Rake Review ,” Judith said. “They are trying to determine who the rake in question might be.”

“Don’t tell me the two of you believe that gossip. Much of what she wrote about you was incorrect,” she told Munro.

“Which parts were correct?” Arthur asked. Munro shoved him.

“You’re exactly right, sweetheart,” Munro said. “We shouldn’t be reading this gossip.”

“Hand it over then.” She held out a hand, and Judith took the paper. She glanced down at the column then leaned closer. “Judith, did you—”

“Yes. I already read it. It’s about time she raked that man over the coals.”

“Then you know who it is?” Munro asked.

Beatrice tossed the paper down. “Every woman in London knows who it is. But I can honestly say that the only rake I care about is right here.” She reached out, and he took her hand and kissed it.

“ Reformed rake, sweetheart.”

Judith cleared her throat and lifted her letter again. Arthur reached for The Rake Review and perused the column again. Munro stood and pulled out a chair for Beatrice who took it. Before he sat beside her, he leaned down and whispered in her ear, “When we marry, I propose we have breakfast in bed.”

“That sounds messy,” she whispered back.

He winked. “Exactly.”

“What happened to being reformed?”

“That’s only in public. In private, with you, I’m still Mr. Notorious.”

“Will that make me Mrs. Notorious?”

He kissed her neck—scandalous man! “I love you, Mrs. Notorious.”

And she loved him too, now and forever.

Keep reading for a special preview of Book Twelve in The Rake Review series, Tall, Dark and December by Tracy Sumner!