



The Dangerous Love of a Rogue (The Marlow Family Secrets #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: Is he playing a game with her heart?

Lord Andrew Framlington is known as a rogue of the highest order, a fortune hunter, a man without honour. He plans to marry a wealthy bride to secure his future... but beneath it all, could he be longing for something more, something real?

Miss Mary Marlow, the enchanting sister of a duke, is everything he should not want – innocent, fiercely protected by her powerful family and entirely out of reach. Yet from the moment he sets eyes on her, Drew knows she is the one. Not just for her fortune, but for the way she makes him feel.

Mary knows Drew's reputation and the danger he poses, knows surrendering to him would be reckless, yet his charm and stolen kisses leave her breathless. Torn between duty and desire, she finds herself teetering on the edge of ruin.

Can Mary trust a rogue with her heart?

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It was a renowned truth that any world-worn rogue, without a feather to fly with, must be on the hunt for a wife, or rather her dowry. As the parody of Miss Austen's verse, from her charming little novel about country life, ran through Drew's head, a sound of mocking humour rumbled through his chest and he leaned a shoulder against the false pillar in the Earl of Derwent's ballroom, watching town life.

The pillar was wooden, painted to look like marble. Like everyone in this damned room, it was a farce. A shallow image. A performance... Nothing here was what it seemed. Society lived a damned lie and he had lived it for a lifetime.

He was a bastard. Sold by his mother to her husband as worth the risk of giving her naturally born son his family's name. They had to save the reputation of the Framlington title after all.

Damn the title... Damn the bloody name... Drew had no interest in either.

He was bored of this. Bored of pretence. Bored of the games these people and he played. Bored of the face he displayed to the world.

He had a plan to escape it all. Of course plans required money. But his plan covered that. He was seeking a well-dowered young woman to take as his wife and earn himself an instant fortune. A fortune which he would use to pack up his bags and retire to a quiet life, away from town, away from all this deception... Perhaps then he would experience the kind of life Miss Austen wrote about.

'Have you seen Marlow's daughter?' Mark leaned to Drew's ear. 'She would be a prize.'

Drew looked at his friend and lifted his shoulder away from the pillar, straightening up. 'I have.'

'She looks remarkable.'

'She does indeed.' He had been watching her. She was on his list of potential wives.

'Are you intending to try for her?'

'I would be a fool if I did not. Look at her...' The she in question, Miss Mary Marlow, was as far out of reach as the sun. The half-sister of a Duke... with a bastard? It was not a match that would be desired by her mama and papa. Yet, Miss Marlow was very appealing to the eye.

Drew had been waiting for the moment to explore his opportunity with her. The time had come. He had not been standing here for his pleasure. He'd been standing here waiting for Miss Marlow to complete her dance.

'Then what are you waiting on?' Mark laughed, spotting the same opportunity.

'Not a thing.' Drew glanced over his shoulder and gave his friend a wicked smile before walking away, taking a route about the edge of the ballroom.

He positioned himself close to the set Miss Marlow was in as the dance drew to its conclusion. When it ended, she stood three feet away, with her back to him. Even though he could not see her face or her smile, he could feel her exuberance; he knew she was smiling. She'd smiled throughout every dance tonight.

Mary Marlow was in her first season, newly launched upon the marriage market, and he was here to trade. But what his friends did not know was that as much as he desired her money, he desired her innocence. His heart and mind were jaded and

bitter. The idea of marrying a pure, good woman, was refreshing, invigorating. God knew, he had never been given the blessing of innocence in his life. He was born into the world of sin. Born of sin and raised in sin.

Miss Marlow's partner lifted her hand to his lips, kissed the back of her satin glove and bowed.

Drew stepped forward. 'Miss Marlow.' He said her name as though they'd been introduced and he had a right to use it, speaking before the man had a chance to offer to lead her back to her mother. They had never been introduced.

She looked at him, her expression confused, but then she smiled, and it was as though the sun rose in the room which was already illuminated by several hundred candles in the chandeliers.

Her smile said, I am not sure I know you. Yet a young woman like her would never be rude enough to say such a thing aloud in company.

When her companion let her go, Drew captured her hand, as if he had a right to that too. He felt as though he did. She had become his favourite choice of bride the minute she'd smiled. 'May I have the next dance?' He bowed, but not wanting to push things too far, he refrained from kissing her hand. Though, his gloved fingers did reach towards the underside of her wrist and touched her skin above the hem of her glove, making the gesture appear accidental.

She lowered into a sweet, perfectly correct curtsy, looking down until the moment before she rose.

Beautiful.

Her eyes were an unusual blue, an extremely pale rim of colour surrounding the dark

pupils that looked at him questioningly. Who are you? She knew she had never met him before. But too polite for her own good, she continued to pretend they had been introduced.

If he could have picked a dance for them it would have been the waltz, but the first waltz was not until later and he had no wish to lose the chance of the distance from her family. The Pembrokes were at the far end of the ballroom, in their usual pack. Although Pembroke was not the name the family went by as a whole, the old Duke had had four girls. They had married exceptionally well, apart from Mary's mother, whose first husband, a soldier, had died. She then settled on the second son of an Earl. But the son from her first marriage had inherited the title and given Miss Marlow a very attractive dowry, and so Mary was simply a Miss and yet a powerful match as a Duke's sister, and a closely guarded and very well-bred innocent.

'I believe you should stand here, and I there,' Drew said to her look of confusion.

There was another quick smile, which was far more fleeting than the first. Perhaps she was beginning to realise she had made an error. He smiled broadly to ease her concern. 'I shall admit we have not been introduced. You must forgive me for taking the liberty of breaking the rules, Miss Marlow.' The music commenced.

He stepped forward and took her hand in the format of the dance, then completed a shoulder to shoulder turn.

'I should walk away immediately,' she said in a strong voice that he'd not expected from this young woman.

'Indeed you should. But is it a sin for a man to find you so beautiful he cannot wait even another moment, or at worse another dance, to find someone who might introduce him?'

‘That is the course of a gentleman.’

‘It is.’ He leaned in closer. ‘But there you have me; perhaps I am not a gentleman,’ he said, teasing her.

Her gaze dropped to the lopsided rogue’s smile he threw at her. She laughed. ‘You are a gentleman. You would not be here otherwise.’

So innocent... Such a novelty. What he would give to have that blind belief in the facade of London’s society and be oblivious to the truth that lay beyond it.

‘Are you enjoying your season?’

Her smile softened. ‘Yes. I had to wait because we’ve been in mourning for my grandsire. My cousins, who are older, have been full of stories and made me long for this. Now finally I have my moment to join the world.’

Yes, she did. ‘Tell me how it compares to your expectations...’

As they talked, their steps followed the intricate country dance, but the blessing of it was he had by chance chosen a country dance that did not separate them.

‘I could not have imagined how crushed these events are and how sore my feet would be from dancing until the early morning.’

‘Yet you must have imagined that the young men would make fools of themselves at these things, and the old men would be bores, while the young women would giggle at the slightest compliment’ – and older women... like his mother... he would not talk to her about their behaviour.

‘Do you think I giggle excessively?’ Annoyance had lowered her voice.

‘No.’

They made a turn, and he took the opportunity to press his palm against her side, below her breasts. Her whole body jolted. He had only touched her for an instant, as if to stop her from stumbling.

‘Forgive me.’ His apology implied it was an accident.

The dance drew them close again. He faced her, his hand holding hers between their chests. He leaned so close, her hair brushed his cheek. ‘I wish this was a waltz and I had the opportunity to hold you.’

When he stepped back, her dark pupils sparkled and her heartbeat flickered beneath the skin at the base of her neck.

‘Yet it is not a waltz, so please refrain, Mr...?’

Finally, she asked for his name.

‘Lord Framlington.’

They separated and walked around the back of another couple. Her expression told him she was searching her memory for why she knew his name. No light of recognition dawned in her eyes. It was not her half-brother, the Duke of Pembroke, who had mentioned his name to her then.

They came into the middle of a ring of six, and danced in a circle, their joined hands above their heads.

‘I like you, Miss Marlow,’ he said.

‘You do not know me.’

He smiled at her little jab. ‘Know you or not, I admire you.’ It was true, the girl intrigued him the more the dance progressed.

‘Really...’ She laughed, a light, jolly sound, not a forced jubilant creation developed to draw attention and attract a husband. Pure. Just herself. No facade.

The girl was doing something to his soul. He felt as though he were bathing in her innocence, baptised in it, his sins washed away. ‘It is no jest, and no falsity, you are charming. A man would be a fool if he did not see it, and I have been many things, but never a fool.’ He whispered the last words into her ear.

Her head pulled back.

His lips tilted into a smile.

‘My Lord, you may speak as though you know me, but you do not.’ Her voice had become firmer, her movements stiffer.

Beyond those dancing Drew saw her father deep in conversation with her brother. The Duke must have recently arrived. Damn it , there was probably only a dozen steps left of this dance.

They glanced across the room.

Drew looked at Miss Marlow, his time with the beauty was coming to an end. ‘I am the son of a Marquis...’ In theory, and yet if he was to sell himself he must sell his best side. ‘You may hear bad things of me but disregard them. Please, judge me by the man you see. Admittedly I am not like the young men I see you dancing with?—’

‘You have been watching me.’ Her annoyance turned to horror, and before the dance had even ended she took a step back.

‘As I said, I admire you. Why would I not watch you? You are a beauty.’

He would guess when she looked about this room, she saw only the shimmer of the candlelight in the glass drops of the chandeliers, the flower garlands, the beautiful clothes and people’s smiles. Like looking at that damned wooden pillar – unless you touched it to know it wasn’t cold like stone, or tapped it, you would never know the lie hidden beneath the paint.

If he married her, he might lock her up to protect her innocence, so she would never have to see the ugly truth.

The music ceased. She lowered in a curtsy, pretending she had not backed away from him.

Half the room would be secretly laughing as they watched his game play, thinking, poor woman, God help her if Lord Framlington is chasing her . He did not wish her thought a fool. She was no fool.

As she rose, her eyes seemed to observe things about him. He was not sure what she saw, yet, he had asked her to do this, to judge him as the man she saw.

‘Thank you for your honesty.’

The words thumped him firmly in the chest. She’d taken him at his word. Not by the history that had been woven into a web that trapped him. Rogue. Rake. Bastard. Unwanted son. Unwanted entirely.

‘Good evening.’ She turned and walked away. Her absence made him feel like

something had been snatched away from him.

Drew watched her cross the floor and join her family. Her father leaned to her ear and spoke hurriedly. She glanced back. Drew smiled. She smiled too, but it quivered with uncertainty. She knew the rumours now. Her father had instructed her: do not dance with that rogue.

Damn the man and damn all these people that looked down on him.

Drew turned away, to return to his friends, to return to his life, but he had a plan, and his plan now had a definite goal. Miss Mary Marlow. Winning the girl would be a challenge, there was no denying that, but he loved a challenge.

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‘Drew.’ A hand touched his arm and stopped him. ‘Come to my room tonight.’

As he faced Lady Worton, her hand moved from his arm to his crotch and caressed him through the fabric of his pantaloons.

He had just bathed in innocence and now he was soiled with sin again.

He’d lied when he’d said he was entirely unwanted – women of his mother’s ilk desired his presence, but only in their beds.

He removed Lady Worton’s hand. ‘I am not inclined tonight, Bets. Find another toy.’

He did not wait for her reply. He was so damned bored of his life. He had been born into it like a whore into a brothel. He had not chosen this life; it had chosen him. For years he had enjoyed the sex, the money and gifts the women gave him. But now he wanted choice, and the only way to achieve it was to marry money.

‘Drew!’ Another of his friends, Peter, caught his attention, lifting a hand.

‘Peter. You’re late. Where were you?’

‘I, my friend, have been...’

Drew listened to Peter recounting the experiences of his evening, as he faced the room, looking past Peter’s shoulder. Miss Marlow was not dancing. She stood with her father, brother and a woman he did not recognise. It looked as though Mary was receiving at worst a scolding, at best a warning.

Drew looked at Peter. 'Who is that with Pembroke?'

The Pembroke women, including Miss Marlow, were all dark-haired, it was one of the strongest characteristics of their beauty; jet-black hair, pale skin and pale blue eyes, but this woman was blonde.

'Pembroke's wife.'

Good Lord. He had not expected Pembroke to marry for years. He was not like his sister, he was no more innocent than Drew and he did not need money. They had travelled in the same circles on the grand tour. Pembroke had been one of the women's toys too. He had walked away from the demimonde a while ago, though. Now he looked down on the men he used to call friends. Men like Drew, who had no choice but to live that way.

'Why?' Peter asked, his hand resting on Drew's shoulder.

'I simply wondered.'

'I thought you were interested in the sister. You will hardly have a chance there if you pitch for the man's wife.'

'I have no more interest in married women.'

Mary's mother was speaking to her now. Mary glanced across the room, and he knew, even though he had no evidence of it, that her eyes were seeking him. An odd sensation leapt in his chest. He would have said it was his heart, but like Pembroke, he did not really have one. That had been kicked far too many times in his life.

Mary's gaze had not found him. Instead, she faced her mother and said something in return, the fingers of the hand he could see forming a little fist as she expressed some

forceful point of view.

‘Stop drooling over the fair Miss Marlow, and come and play cards.’

‘I ought not, I have no money.’

‘If you need funds I’ll lend you more. Come and play. Mark and Harry are in a game so I need you for my pair.’

‘Very well.’

Drew played a few hands of cards at the tables with his friends for an hour. They did not normally attend such affairs, but Derwent’s wife was in his mother’s set, and so any young man with poor morals had been encouraged to attend. After the ball the night would end in an orgy, but by then he and his friends would be gone. He had never liked those kinds of games.

‘I am out.’ He’d played for long enough. If he wished to escape his current life, he must return to the task of fulfilling his plan.

‘Settle what you owe before you leave.’

Fortune had played against him. Drew looked at Peter who nodded as his hand moved to his pocket.

Drew rose. ‘Good evening, gentleman,’ he said, then shared a look with Peter that said, I shall see you in a while .

It was all well and good to have a generous wealthy friend, but how could a man respect himself when he lived off his friend like a leech, or from the services he rendered to flesh-hungry wives. The devil take this life. He no longer wished for it.

If he'd been born in different circumstances his father might have paid for a commission in the army or a placement in the clergy. The Marquis of Framlington had given Drew his name and begrudgingly paid for Drew's bed and board through his years of schooling, but that was all he would do to save face. Then Drew had learned a way to earn freedom from his false father's house. If only he'd known then that he was tying himself up in a new hell.

He should have saved the money the women gave him and paid for a commission himself. He'd been too young, and too greedy. He'd squandered it at card tables. His losses and debts had built up and sucked him into the power of his mother's friends. They'd been paying the duns on his behalf for years, never enough to clear the debt, just enough to make him come back.

He returned to the ballroom and looked for Miss Marlow. He spotted her instantly. Her dark curls bounced on her shoulders as she skipped through the steps of another country dance. He truly liked the girl.

But it would be safer not to put all his eggs in one basket. He scanned the other debutantes in the room. There was an auburn-haired lady he'd danced with at previous balls. She was not as pleasing on the eye as Miss Marlow but her dowry was substantial. He moved towards the set she was among, preparing to take her hand for the next dance.

A woman was spun out of the last turn of the current dance and collided with him.

It was Pembroke's newly acquired wife.

Her gaze met his, as her chest rose and fell with her quickened breaths.

She had blue eyes, but they were not pale like her sister-in-law's.

Damn it , but he was tempted to play a game. If he settled on Miss Marlow, then Pembroke would most likely fight him all the way.

She turned back to her partner.

Drew saw Pembroke speaking with Lady Elizabeth Ponsonby, Drew's eldest sister. She was older than Pembroke too, by a long way. She married young and adopted their mother's unfaithful way of life. He knew Pembroke and she had had a liaison for a while. She was the one who had pulled Pembroke into the demimonde. Pembroke had been as innocent and stupid as his little sister. Like a baby presented to the women in a linen cloth – here is another young male for you to mislead.

Drew never spoke to Elizabeth or acknowledged their connection.

Yet, if Elizabeth was interested in Pembroke again, she would not let him escape easily, which gave Drew time.

'Your Grace.' He caught the hand of the Duke of Pembroke's young bride before she could walk away. 'Would you dance with me?'

Her large blue eyes displayed her confusion, but, like her sister-in-law, she was too polite, and naïve, to deny him.

Of all the dances, it was a waltz.

He brought her close, so her breasts pressed to his chest. She stepped back, setting two inches between them.

This was going to be amusing at least.

He spun her several times, holding her securely as her hold was so light it felt as

though she were trying not to touch him at all.

‘Where did you meet the Duke of Pembroke?’ he asked.

‘At Pembroke Place, Lord Framlington. I lived near his family home.’

She did know who he was then. He had misjudged her.

‘Is your marriage as blissful as you hoped...’ He was being sarcastic.

Her mouth opened, but she said nothing, unsure how to respond. Well, there it was then, another cold, loveless, society marriage that would end in sin and shame. He did not plan that for himself. He hoped for more in the marriage he sought, but first and foremost he sought a woman who would be loyal. He may have cuckolded dozens, but he did not wish for that from his wife, and he would honour her with loyalty too.

Drew saw Pembroke conversing in whispers with Elizabeth, already perhaps agreeing to play his poor wife false. Drew felt a sudden urge to punish Pembroke; he had won this beautiful woman and even now was treating her poorly. In time she’d run out of patience and turn elsewhere too, and that is how innocents became debauched.

She looked away from him as they turned, her head turning so she could keep looking at Pembroke.

Drew had been brought up to be wicked. He leaned to the Duchess’s ear as they spun. ‘Pembroke is dull. Perhaps when you tire of him you might think of me. I would be willing to warm your bed if it is cold.’ It was a joke, a silly spur-of-the-moment move.

The woman snapped her head back, a look of horror on her face, as though he’d slapped her. ‘I will never tire of my husband.’

She had not kept her voice low, not caring if others heard, and she walked away in the middle of their dance, completely ignoring the risk of scandal.

Her outburst could have left him feeling vexed. It did not, he wished a woman would stand up for him as adamantly. She truly cared for Pembroke.

He moved back and joined those at the edge of the dancing.

Pembroke met his wife not far away. He had disposed of Elizabeth. He looked at Drew with thunderclouds in his eyes as he walked through the dancers.

Pembroke did not show emotions. Drew believed him to be as unmovable as stone. When Peter told him Pembroke had married, Drew thought he'd selected a Duchess. But the look in Pembroke's eyes, the anger, implied the man felt as much for his wife as his wife felt for him.

Drew had made a mistake.

Fortunately, before Pembroke collided with any couples the dance came to an end. The last note played as his fingers closed around Drew's throat with a force that said she is mine. Then he hissed, 'I had already made a note this evening to warn you not to dance or speak to my sister. Now I am also warning you to stay away from my wife or I will kill you.' The hand at his throat pushed Drew back a step before letting go.

Drew smiled and straightened the knot of his neckcloth. He felt like laughing.

He would not have guessed that Pembroke had a heart. Nor that he would be able to make a woman fall for him so deeply.

Drew merely nodded, then turned away. He saw Miss Marlow being returned to her

parents by her latest partner. She glanced over her shoulder, as though she felt his gaze. He raised a hand. She sent him a tentative smile.

She had not heeded her brother's and her father's warnings.

He returned to the fake marble pillar and watched.

Several of the men in the knot of the Pembroke family group rested their hands at their wives' waists, and the couples stood close, barely inches between them. Some of them had been married for years...

The Earl of Barrington turned and said something to his wife, then kissed her lips. Barrington was Mary's uncle on her father's side, and Drew had heard he'd been a rake, as wicked as they came, until he married. Now he was never in town unless he was with his wife.

Wiltshire, another Duke, The Duke of Arundel, who was as hard-nosed as Pembroke, laughed about something. Then mid-conversation he turned, looked at his wife, lifted her fingers to his lips and kissed them. He continued the conversation with others as if it were nothing odd.

Drew saw Mary's father lean and say something in his wife's ear. She smiled at him, shook her head, then kissed his cheek.

They were all affectionate. Every couple. He was looking at his idea of utopia. Of course it could be false. But if it were real...

If it were true then there was no doubt about his choice. If Miss Marlow was as capable of constancy as the other women in her family, why would he choose another? She was his plan.

After tonight, they would wrap her up and keep her away from him. But never mind, he could take his time, his need for her dowry was not desperate, he had a little more credit he could call on, and he wanted what the Pembrokes had. Commitment. Constancy. Even affection. Perhaps, he would have all of that with Mary.

‘Are you ready to retire?’ Peter’s hand settled on Drew’s shoulder.

He also had a friend with generous pockets.

‘Yes.’ Drew looked at his friends, Peter, Harry and Mark, his brothers... His family. ‘Did you fare better than I?’

‘The richest of us did,’ Mark quipped. ‘The man who does not need it.’

‘I won back your losses and more,’ Peter clarified. ‘So, I say that earns us a drink and a pretty bird of paradise each.’

‘I’ll take the drink, but I shall pass on the whore.’ The thought of lying with any woman other than the one he’d chosen to be his wife was abhorrent.

‘Then I shall have yours as well as mine,’ Harry joked.

As they walked out of the ballroom, Drew asked Peter, ‘What do you know of the Pembroke sisters and their daughters...?’

* * *

Mary was sitting on her bed, with her knees bent up and hugged in her arms. Her bare toes peeped from beneath her nightgown. Her mother had dismissed the maid and helped Mary undress.

‘Mama, why did you choose to marry Papa?’

She was placing Mary’s earbobs into their box. She turned. ‘Why do you ask?’

Because a particular gentleman’s hazel eyes hovered in her mind, along with the lilt of his smile.

There you have me. Perhaps I am not a gentleman...

That, her brother John had told her father, and her father had told her. Lord Framlington is a fortune hunter. A rake. Avoid him.

Judge me by the man you see... he had said.

‘When I met your father...’ her mother sat on the bed, ‘our eyes met across a table and I just knew he was right for me.’ Her skin had pinked with a blush.

‘Do you think I will know?’

‘I hope you will. I hope you find a man who will love you with all his heart.’

Lord Framlington’s eyes, his face, returned to her mind. There was something fascinating about him. He was different to any other man who had spoken to her.

‘You have been quiet tonight; did you not enjoy the evening?’

Mary smiled. ‘I enjoyed myself.’

‘Come along then, jump into bed and let me tuck you in.’

‘I am too old to be tucked into bed.’

‘You will never be too old,’ her mother teased.

After she got into bed, her mother kissed her cheek, then tucked the sheet tightly beneath the mattress. ‘Sleep well. I love you, Mary.’ Her cold fingertips touched Mary’s cheek.

‘I love you too, Mama.’

Her mother extinguished the candles in the candelabrum, collected a single candle burning in a holder and walked to the door. ‘Goodnight.’

‘Goodnight.’

She left the room, the light disappearing with her.

Mary saw Lord Framlington in the darkness. He’d stood against a pillar watching her for most of the evening. He had looked... lonely, sad. She ought to feel nothing for him. She ought to never think of him again. He had been courting her dowry, nothing more.

Yet there was something about him, she had continually wanted to look at him.

I like and admire you... he had said.

Her thoughts drifted into dreams and he joined her there...

THE FOLLOWING YEAR...

Miss Mary Rose Marlow's whole body jolted with surprise. 'Oh!' she exclaimed, nearly falling down the short flight of garden steps she had just climbed. A broad masculine chest faced her.

Lord Framlington caught hold of her elbow, saving her, only to pull her towards the chest which had caused her exclamation.

He'd appeared from behind the hedge and blocked her path.

Her fingers pressed against the front of his morning coat, discovering solid muscle beneath. Unladylike longings besieged her. She had never forgotten him, and she was ashamed to admit she had often thought about kissing him. Angered by the desire she should not feel, Mary planted her palms on his chest and pushed, denying the attraction that pulled at her.

She looked up and met his gaze. She hoped her anger burned a visible flame in her eyes.

If he saw her ire, the dark amber brown of his eyes absorbed it with cool, quelling disengagement.

Her stomach wobbled like aspic with an unwilling hunger for the reprobate.

‘Miss Marlow.’ He raised his hat a little. ‘It is my good fortune to collide with you.’

Mary stepped back, careful to avoid the steps, her hands falling to her sides as she bobbed a hardly recognisable curtsy. The garden path, lined by tall yew hedges, was barely wide enough for one. She could not pass him without further contact unless he moved aside.

‘Lord Framlington.’ Her voice rang sharp with irritation. ‘If you will excuse me, I really ought to be getting back.’ She moved to pass him.

He stepped to the side and blocked her. ‘No haste, Miss Marlow, the garden party is still in full swing, no one will notice our absence. Everyone is busy playing Lady Jersey’s outdoor games. Have you tried your hand at the archery butts? You could aim an arrow at my heart if you wish, I would not complain, you might snare me if it came from Cupid’s bow.’

‘Do not be absurd!’ The words flew out of her mouth. His comment was too close to her secret wish. ‘You know my brother advises against you.’

‘The Duke of Pembroke...’ Condescension sharpened his words, and a roguish smile tilted his lips. Oh, she remembered that smile, it had plagued her dreams since last summer... ‘What do I care for his opinion, and what do you? I think he did me a favour, warning you off. You have been enamoured ever since.’

He knew! ‘I have not.’ Mary’s hands balled to fists. This was infuriating. Why did she find him so interesting? Because on one evening, nearly a year ago, he had danced with her and talked as no other man had.

He grinned. ‘Careful, or I shall think you protest too much. Besides, I know because I see you watching me. Whenever I turn, there is Miss Mary Marlow staring across the room.’

He leaned forward, his face inches from hers. 'Your looks call to me, Mary. You whisper to me, come, come, Framlington, closer.' His husky pitch made her skin tingle with awareness, and possibilities coursed through her blood. His lips were so close.

He lifted his hand and his gloved fingers gently braced her chin. 'Well, here I am. Come to you. What will you do with me?'

Run away.

She lifted her chin away and took another step back. 'Let me pass. I should not be speaking with you.'

'But you are.' He stepped forward.

When she'd danced with him last season his glittering light brown eyes had melted her bones. She'd fallen irrevocably in love with him during that dance. But afterwards John had advised her that Lord Framlington was a beast. A fortune hunter, chasing dowries. Worse, he was a rake, a philanderer, a seducer, not to be trusted in the least.

It is folly talking to him.

'Then let me rectify that.' She moved to pass him.

His hand wrapped about her upper arm, stopping her and turning with her, so they stood side on, facing one another in the narrow gap between the dense greenery of the yew hedges.

'Stop running and pretending you do not like me. I am not blind. Besides, run, and my predatory instincts say, chase.' On the last word he leaned forward, pulled her

closer and pressed his lips against hers. His other hand came to her nape, urging her not to turn away. His lips brushed across hers.

Mary's mind screamed, run , but her body had longed for this kiss. This was her first kiss.

Her hands lifted to his shoulders and she clung to him, opening her mouth at his urging, and when his tongue invaded her lips a rush of twisting need slid through her stomach reaching to the central point of femininity between her legs. This was what she'd imagined and longed for.

He moved closer. The thin neatly clipped branches of the yew trees pricked her back, as the intensity of his kiss increased, growing in determination, the connection intoxicating. His palm rested over her breast and squeezed it through the thin muslin of her gown.

A sweet sharp pain travelled from her nipple, catching her breath. It was delicious, but still it was pain and it was enough to rip her focus from his kiss to rational thought.

What am I doing? What am I letting him do?

She ended their kiss so abruptly, it caught him off guard. He stumbled back and gave her the chance to escape.

She fled, not daring to look back for fear he'd follow.

'Miss Marlow!' he called after her, a note of humour in his voice. 'I know you feel the same for me as I feel for you! Stop running and come back to me!' When she did not stop, or look back, he called again. 'Well then, if not now, whenever you wish! Simply give me a sign and I shall find a way we can meet!'

She lifted the skirt of her dress and ran along the path, her breathing heavy and her lips burning.

Only when she reached the end of the path did she slow to a walk and let her dress fall.

The lawn was crowded with elite society.

Her fingers pressed against her breastbone. She must be blushing. She had let a man her father and brother had explicitly warned her against kiss her.

‘Mary, there you are.’ She turned as her brother’s voice cut the air. ‘We were coming to find you. Katherine was concerned.’

Mary looked at Kate, who held her brother’s arm. Her sister-in-law was kindness incarnate, but Kate was Mary’s chaperone today.

‘I walked down to the Jerseys’ shell grotto. I wished to see it and I did not like to interrupt your conversation.’

John’s eyebrows rose, saying, you should not have gone alone . She knew that now.

But the kiss had been more beautiful than she’d imagined. She had never thought it would cause her body to ache so warmly... and ache in unspeakable places.

Behind John, Lord Framlington walked out from the end of the path. The rogue smiled at her, then walked on across the lawn, implying, without a word, that something had happened between them.

Warmth rose under her skin. She must be as red as a strawberry.

‘What happened?’ John whispered, in a harsh, condemning tone.

Mary looked into chilling blue eyes. When he was angry his eyes were like ice.

She tipped up her chin, defending herself against her domineering half-brother. ‘I bumped into him. Literally. It was an accident.’

John’s eyebrows drew together as he frowned. ‘I doubt it was an accident. Do not speak to him, Mary, and certainly, never in private. If you are compromised, you will be tied to him. That is probably what he wishes. Have more care. No wandering pathways alone. You’re lucky he did not ravish you and wait for someone to happen along and see the two of you. His desire for money is more desperate than last year. He cannot curb his spending. There is not a prudent bone in his body. His debt is spiralling.’

Mary’s gaze fell to the twinkling diamond in John’s cravat pin. She did not argue. Lord Framlington had proved John right. Every word John spoke was true, but something within her still burned for Lord Framlington. He had lit a flame in her a year ago and it refused to be snuffed. Her heart had longed for Lord Framlington for nearly a year, and now it screamed... He had kissed her and fulfilled every expectation fostered in her dreams.

She shut her eyes for a second to escape a giddy sensation. Denying her inner clamour. When she opened her eyes, John was looking at her far too intently. ‘I know, it was a mistake,’ she told him. ‘I will not do it again.’

‘Do not fret. No one saw.’ Kate linked her arm with Mary’s, and turned her towards the crowd, though she did not lead Mary towards them but into a walk about the edge of them. ‘Did Lord Framlington do or say something to upset you?’

‘No.’ There was no need for her family to know he had kissed her. She did not wish

John, her father, or her uncles, challenging him to a duel. It was only a kiss. Except, if she had stayed, she did not think it would have ended there. John was right: Lord Framlington was trouble. He had intended to ravish her.

Why did her silly heart have to make her stomach flutter at the thought?

‘Did he touch you?’ John’s fingers brushed her elbow as he walked at her other side, his voice filled with concern.

‘No.’ Guilt thrust a knife into her breast. She had never lied before, and she was lying for his sake. ‘He merely frightened me.’

‘Well, if he’s scared you, you will hopefully never make such an error again.’

She would not, she had learned her lesson. This could have ended with awful consequences. But she felt torn in two, her heart pulling one way, towards danger, while her head pulled another. She must listen to her head and heed common sense. If she had been seen with him...

The blood drained from Mary’s head. ‘May we go home?’

‘If you wish.’ John’s gaze was deep with concern. ‘I’ll send for the carriage.’ He left them immediately.

‘We will say our goodbyes. We should not just disappear.’ Through the pressure of their joined arms Kate drew Mary closer to her side and led her across the lawn towards where Lady Jersey stood among her friends.

‘I know he did something,’ Kate whispered. ‘You would not be this discomposed over nothing. You do not have to tell me, but mind what John says and do not allow yourself to be taken in by Lord Framlington’s charm.’

They were so familiar, Mary thought of Kate as a full sister. 'It was nothing. Really. Just nonsense.' Mary was lucky, her family may caution, but they would always support her. Kate smiled, her eyebrows lifting.

'Nonsense to a woman, Mary, is manoeuvring to a man. Beware, males are predatory and determined when they choose to be, and Lord Framlington is of that ilk. Avoid him.'

'I was... I am... It is just... I never thought he would follow.'

'Doing the things we never expect is what they do,' Kate advised conspiratorially. 'But I will convince John not to tell your father and mother of this. There is no need for you to listen to this lecture twice.'

Mary's smile lifted. 'Thank you.'

'Now let us get our goodbyes over with. Then I propose we stop at Gunter's for an ice on the way home. The day is so hot I am melting.'

As they approached Lady Jersey, Kate's free hand flicked open her fan and wafted the warm early summer air over them both, cooling Mary's blush.

When the niceties were completed, as she walked towards the house to leave, Mary's gaze subtly scanned the crowd for a gentleman with dark brown hair, a head above the rest. She was so used to searching him out she spotted him in a second.

Lord Framlington stood on the edge of a group of men.

His head turned and his gaze reached across the open space and found her. He smiled a self-congratulating smile. Declined his head in a brief bow. Then looked away.

Against her better judgement her mind recalled the feeling of their kiss, and the pulse of her heart was whipped into a race.

Lord Andrew Framlington, fourth son of the Marquis of Framlington, in name only, hooked one arm over the back of the spindle chair and raised an ankle to settle on the opposite knee, modelling the pose of a dissipated rake. That was what he had been for most of his life. ‘The game is on with Pembroke’s little sister. I have settled on her. She is my choice,’ he told his friends.

‘Marlow’s ice maiden? Are you serious, Drew? The girl who freezes out all of dubious character?’ His friend Harry Webster’s speech slurred.

‘The same.’ Drew’s gaze passed around his small group of loyal friends.

Harry sat forward in his chair. ‘Have you spoken to her?’

‘Yes, and as you know I have been improving my character.’ He smiled. They knew he had abstained from whores for nearly a year – the women to be paid. They did not know he had also kept away from whoring himself to the women who did the paying. ‘You will see. She shall be mine in a month, three at the most. I shall charm her into submission until she will be begging me to wed her.’

‘Knowing how women fall for you, she will be yours within a week,’ Mark Harper commented, as he tossed a four of spades onto the table, progressing their game of cards.

Drew looked at his cards. No spades. He would trump them all with a heart.

‘Didn’t Pembroke warn his little sister off you?’ Harry persisted.

‘He has warned her off every man with a speck of dust in his closet.’ Peter Brooke, Drew’s closest friend, smiled.

‘As if Pembroke can judge,’ Harry pressed. ‘That man is no saint, he is not spotless himself.’

‘But reformed,’ Drew answered. He un-looped his arm from the chair, leaned forward and set his card on the table, then looked at his friends, a wry smile twisting his lips. ‘Maybe the woman has a little contrary in her soul, though. Ever since he warned her off she has been watching me. Perhaps she just has a taste for risk or badness hidden beneath her cold denials. Or likes being naughty. Any of which appeal, they are all to my advantage.’

The group laughed.

Peter leaned forward and lay down his card. ‘Well, I would not cross Pembroke, or any of her family for that matter, they are too influential. Her father may be a second son but she calls a quarter of the House of Lords Uncle.’

Drew did not need reminding. Yet he intended winning her. He had waited a year, and given himself the time to be sure. He was sure. She had come back to town this season and her eyes had still searched for him across the ballrooms, and the first time he’d seen her again he’d felt slain. The girl was beautiful, rich, innocent and his best hope of constancy – and ever since the night he had danced with her, his thoughts were drawn to her. It was a physical feeling too, not simply a mental choice. She had lived with him for a year, in his waking and sleeping dreams.

But as certain as he was of his choice he was equally certain her family would not allow it. They would say no if he asked for her. His contrary streak itched. He did not

like being told no. No was temptation. Like the girl running, it only made him want to chase. But he did not think she would run, not now – unless it was towards him. He smiled at his silent humour.

‘You are going to marry her then?’ Mark clarified.

‘I’ve no choice. The duns are on my tail. I need to marry money. She’s interested, available, and she has a fortune. Plus, she is remarkably pleasant to the eye.’

‘Pleasant...’ A sarcastic smile twisted Harry’s lips. ‘That is lacklustre. The girl’s the darling of society. Stunning. I would have a go at her if I thought I stood a chance, but she’ll not look twice at me. You, however...’

‘You have the looks and the knack, Drew,’ Peter expounded. ‘While we are left to petty jealousy.’

Drew laughed. ‘I have not won her yet, and you are as capable.’

‘We all know you will win her. I would not even waste a wager on it,’ Mark said.

‘The question is, what will you do with her when you have her?’ Harry grinned. ‘What on earth will you do with a wife?’

Drew looked past his friends at his small living quarters.

His rooms in the Albany were a decent enough bachelor’s residence, but he would need something more once he’d wed. He longed for a property of his own outside of London. It would need to be a place large enough to lose a woman in. In the last year, when he’d thought of marrying Miss Marlow he had never considered the detail beyond the wedding night and receiving the cheque. Nevertheless, once he’d wed, he’d have her dowry and he could buy whatever property he wanted, perhaps

something with land, to make a profit from. She would understand that life and fill her time without his assistance.

His debts had swelled in the last year. Barely anyone allowed him credit now, and so he'd become increasingly reliant on Peter's kindness. It unmanned him. But he refused to return to earning his living through sex.

But how the hell would he support a wife? The dowry would not last, and he had not one daisy petal of an idea how to manage land.

All the couples he knew spent their time cuckolding each other.

But that was why he had settled on Mary; he thought she was different from those women. He was also different from those men. He'd watched her family for a year. They were all in what society deemed love matches. Love! In his experience that word was false. A non-entity. People did not love. They used the word to wound and hurt.

His mother declared she loved the Marquis but cuckolded him constantly with younger men. While on the occasions the Marquis came to town he spent his hours with courtesans.

He had learned about their behaviour at fifteen, when one of his mother's friends had initiated him into their world of fornication. Ten years on and society had not changed. But he had changed.

'Drew, I am sure you'll be well entertained in your bed, but you will not be saying goodbye to her come morning. I said, what will you do with her once you're wed?'

He had no idea. Lock her away so she will not see other men. Or could he truly trust her. She was his best hope of fidelity. Though, theirs would not be a love match... He

did not know how to love, he did not believe in it.

If this failed, perhaps he would follow his false father's path and leave her to get on with it, find a country sanctuary for himself and rooms in town for her. At least he would have no debts.

Whisperings in his head said she would not be false. He hoped so hard for this... But that desire he was keeping secret from his friends. They thought him a pleasure-loving rogue with no deeper emotions.

God, how they'd laugh if they knew a man with his reputation idolised the Pembroke women for their lack of promiscuity.

He met Harry's gaze, a self-deprecating smile twisting his lips. 'The devil knows.'

'Pass her on to me!' Mark laughed. 'I will entertain her when you are bored.'

Drew's jaw stiffened, his hand itching to throw a punch. He shook his head in an adamant no, as he tossed down a card, another heart, the knave, and claimed the trick. He forced his shoulders to relax as he leaned forward and slid all the cards towards him.

'Why not share, you're hardly the monogamous type,' Harry said with a smirk.

Drew tidied the cards into a pile, then looked at Harry and Mark. 'I may not be. However, I require that quality in a wife, and if any of you lay a hand on her...' his gaze fell on Peter too, 'I shall call you out.'

They burst out laughing.

Drew did not. It was not a jest.

‘My God, Drew, have you fallen for her?’ Peter charged. He knew Drew too well. They’d known each other since they were six.

Drew pulled a face at him, calling him ridiculous. ‘No. That is hardly my style. I merely do not fancy being done to?—’

‘As you have done to others... Chickens coming home to roost, Fram?’ Harry threw Drew a broad smile.

‘I will not be made a fool.’ He admitted that much.

Let them know he would insist on a faithful wife. He just did not wish them to know how important it was, because that would make him appear weak and vulnerable.

* * *

A week had passed since the Jerseys’ garden party, a week to contemplate her foolishness. Yet no matter how stupid Mary knew it was, she had not ceased looking for Lord Framlington at every event. Her traitorous body refused to heed the frequent warnings of her conscience and her common sense.

As she walked into the crush of another ballroom, on her father’s arm, her eyes immediately identified her heart’s quarry.

He stood in the far corner, with his elbow on a marble bust, leaning forward and speaking with a beautiful blonde woman, the Marquis of Kilbride’s wife. Mary’s heart sank and she looked away before Lord Framlington felt her observation as he always did.

John is right. She had told herself so a thousand times in the last few days, and yet even as she said it her mischievous mind recalled the press of his lips and the feel of

his hand cradling her breast.

Heat spread across her skin and awareness prickled along her nerves.

Why am I so attracted to him? This emotion never clawed at her when she looked at other men, and she had danced with dozens. It was just Lord Framlington her heart and body craved.

Ninny! her common sense screamed. But her senses still whispered Lord Framlington's nearness.

He walked past without looking at her, barely feet away, as if he knew his proximity made her senses sing.

Mary held her father's arm more firmly. I will overcome this attraction. There must be some man she could feel as much for. A man who did not have a wicked streak. Who she could trust not to treat her badly.

'Miss Marlow, I would be extremely honoured if you will allow me this dance.'

Mary turned and faced Mr Gerard Heathcote, one of her devoted admirers. He bowed deeply. He was a wealthy merchant's son who had courted her last season. Her family liked him. He was charming, in a genteel way.

He made her an offer last season. She had refused, saying it was too soon to settle on a husband. But that had been kindness. He was good-natured, blonde-haired and blue-eyed. But her heart craved dark brown locks and laughing brown eyes with a wicked glint.

However, Gerard was a good dancer and he'd become a friend, as had many of her beaux. But none of them were anything more. She felt nothing beyond like.

Mary swallowed back her growing impatience, letting go of her father's arm. She offered her hand and Gerard drew her away. Usually she enjoyed dancing, but tonight it was one endless boring whirl.

When did I become jaded?

Since the rogue kissed me , she answered her thought.

From this moment on, unless Lord Framlington kissed her again her life would be dull.

* * *

Arms folded across his chest, with one hand loose, the stem of his wine glass dangling between his fingers, Drew watched the dance floor.

She was dancing again. Her hand held that of the young heir to the Earl of Warminster as she skipped along an avenue made by their set. It was a boisterous country dance. The boy was smiling as was Miss Marlow, brightly, giving her suitor her full attention and Drew none of it.

He was beginning to wonder if instead of increasing her interest he had jumped his fences with that kiss and made his horse bolt. He had not once caught her looking at him tonight. She was instead doing everything she could to avoid looking at him.

She spent the night amid a group of young people – a mix of her female friends and their beaux.

The boy she danced with laughed at every word she said. Drew suspected he would laugh no matter what she said, and undoubtedly Miss Marlow was bored. But even so, her eyes focused intently on her idiotic companion.

Irritation burned in Drew's veins.

He expected Miss Marlow to at least come closer. He had even given her a clue earlier, by walking past her, suggesting a silent game they could play, passing close without touching, in secret acknowledgement. She had not picked up his gauntlet. She left it where it lay, kiss and all, and instead blatantly ignored him.

He leaned his shoulder against the wall, silently seething. He had thought this the victory leg, but despite her youth and innocence Miss Mary Marlow was not going to be easily caught.

A challenge. He sighed, suddenly, letting the tension in his muscles ease with his outward breath. A challenge was like a chase, it whispered to his instincts. He liked to be challenged. What fun would there be in life if everything came easily?

Raising his glass of wine to his lips, as the dance ended, he watched young Warminster let go of her hand.

Immediately, her next partner came forward. She took her place in the line of the new set. Then her head turned and her gaze reached across the room. It was a scarce glance, only an instant, but in that instant their gazes collided. She had looked for him. She knew he was watching and she had known exactly where he stood.

The music began. She clapped to the rhythm, watching another couple skip along the middle between the line of women and men.

You will be my wife, Mary Marlow. You will. And you will beg me to make a marriage offer for you.

He was going to have to change his tactics, though. Perhaps she needed less subtlety and a little more urging.

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The skin on the back of Mary's neck prickled. Trying her best to ignore it, she looked very deliberately at the line of dancers. The sensations were caused by Lord Framlington's stare. He had been staring at her for an hour, as though he expected her to respond. Perhaps he thought she would seek an assignation. She could hear him in her head, meet with me, Mary.

It was nonsense of course, she was not psychic. It was her urge. Yet he would applaud her weak conscience if he heard the words, and say, do what you want to do, not what you should .

I know you feel the same for me as I feel for you! His shout had echoed ever since.

How could he know? And how had he managed to invade her thoughts so completely after one kiss? But it had not just been since his kiss; ever since she'd danced with him, he had taken up lodgings in her head.

She felt the moment he looked away, she had no idea how, but it was like a physical touch sliding off her skin. She glanced across the room as she skipped in a round with other dancers. He set a half-empty glass on the tray of a passing footman and left the ballroom, and she presumed the ball.

A sense of desertion tugged low in her stomach and an ache settled like a cloak about her heart.

Was it over? Had she spurned him successfully? That had been her intention, to cut

him dead. Perhaps he'd tired of playing with her. There were a dozen other heiresses on the market. She was not his only choice.

But you were his choice. Her traitorous heart thought it a compliment that a man of Framlington's looks and reputation wanted her as his wife.

'Idiot,' Mary said aloud as the dance ended.

'What have I done to deserve that charge?' Derek, her good-natured partner had heard the exclamation that was aimed at herself. 'Did I step on your toes?' He offered his arm to walk her to her parents.

She shook her head, forming the false smile she'd relied on tonight. 'I was speaking to myself. I have agreed to dance with two partners for the supper set, I must apologise to someone.'

He accepted the excuse. Why would he not? Mary was not in the habit of lying. She had told her first lie the day of the Jerseys' garden party. Now she had lied twice. On both occasions, Lord Framlington was the cause.

When she reached her parents, Derek gave her knuckles a chaste kiss and bowed. The kiss did nothing to her innards. Unlike the kiss on her lips that had twisted her stomach in knots. Physical memories clawed. Mary longed for home. The burden of pretence was too tiring.

'Is something wrong?'

Her gaze turned to her father.

'I have a headache.' If sulking made her pathetic, she did not care. 'May we go home?'

‘They have not served supper yet.’

‘I know, Papa, but my head hurts.’ Her fingers pressed to her temple. It throbbed with the pain of bottled-up tears. She wished to cry over her insanity.

His brow furrowed and his fingers stroked her upper arm. ‘We will get you home.’

‘I need to use the retiring room first.’

‘Very well, you go up. I shall have the carriage called for and tell your mother. We will wait in the hall.’

Mary left him. Her head was pounding; that was not a lie. She felt sick as she climbed the stairs. The retiring room was quiet. Her mother’s maid was not there; she must have been told they were leaving. Mary used the chamber pot behind a screen and left the room quickly.

The landing was silent. Her thoughts screamed.

‘Miss Marlow.’ Her arm was gripped firmly and she was pulled into an alcove, pressed back against the wall and Lord Framlington’s mouth came down on hers.

Instinctively she kissed him back with a longing that raged through her and took away the pain in her head. Then, almost as quickly, common sense prevailed; she held his shoulders and pushed him away. ‘What do you think you are doing?’

‘You have been playing a good game of ignoring me, but we both know you cannot. As I cannot ignore you.’ The scents of wine and tobacco were on the breath that brushed over her lips.

She moved to turn and leave him, but he caught her wrist and held her still.

‘Miss Marlow. Mary. Darling. Do not deny this. I know what you feel, because I feel it too.’

‘I feel nothing.’

‘And that is why you kissed me a moment ago, and at that garden party. You feel this too. But I cannot come to you in a place like this, so, if you want what I can give you, you must come to me.’

‘What can you give m?—’

‘Kisses, darling. Happiness. A life filled with moments like this. I am looking for a wife.’

‘Gentlemen do not look for a wife in the shadows of a hallway or on a narrow garden path.’

‘I am not seeking any wife, though, I want you, and your family will not let me court you openly. If you wish to explore what we might be, you must come to me.’

‘No.’ She pulled her wrist free, turned away and, her heart pounding, walked quickly to the stairs. Her parents would be waiting below.

‘You may run now, but I know you will come back.’ His voice was low, but she heard him.

* * *

Drew watched her hurry away. He knew she was scared but interested despite her better judgement. She had kissed him back. Her denial was pretence. He’d felt her attraction in her body, her breasts had pressed to his chest, as her slender arms had

clung about his neck in the moment before she'd pushed him back.

A sigh escaped his lips. The force of her emotion had caught him off guard. At the garden party she had answered his kiss hesitantly. Tonight, in the first instant when shock had silenced her fears, it was as if she had longed to kiss him again.

He smiled and his palm rested at the back of his neck for a moment, then fell. What if he had been the first man to kiss her? God, that thought pierced his chest like a spear surging through him. The first to press his tongue into her mouth. She had kissed him naively on both occasions.

Lord... The smile lifted his lips higher, as the novelty of it bloomed, uncurling in him like a shoot from a seed, it grew. Hope.

He walked along the hall.

She had already reached the stairs and disappeared.

She was becoming more essential to his future by the day. No other woman would do. He would not be deterred. She simply needed time to fall for him. There was only one way he knew how to woo women, and that was with his body. He could teach her things she could never have imagined. She would fall. He would give her the gift of sensual discovery, and he would have her then.

But if she was running from kisses, he needed to be patient. Let her feign disinterest, he could feign it too, and he would see who gave in first. He would give his little fish more line. Let her have some time to contemplate her choices. He doubted any of her young beaux made her heart race. He had a strong feeling she had never kissed any of them.

He would reel her in in a week or two when she'd had a chance to realise his kisses

were better than a hundred dances with those childish fools.

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The coach swayed as it raced across the uneven cobbles of London's streets, bowling towards her brother's town mansion. Its motion churned Mary's stomach that was in turmoil.

'It is unlike you to suffer with headaches, Mary, has something happened?' her mother asked. Her parents were sitting on the opposite seat, observing her.

Mary shook her head, which only made the pain hammer against her skull.

'You look pale,' her father stated. 'Is something wrong?'

'Just my head. I will be well after I have slept.'

Leaning forward, her mother gently placed a hand on Mary's knee. 'We will be home soon. Would you like me to sit with you while you sleep?'

'No, thank you, Mama.' Sometimes their kindness was cloying, and tonight she did not deserve it. She was a rotten daughter, or rather, she wanted to be. She wanted to be bad. Everything Lord Framlington had said was true. She wanted to meet him and kiss him. He tempted her. Her body throbbed from the memory of their sudden encounter in the dark.

When they reached home, Mr Finch, her brother's butler, opened the door. John and Kate were at a private dinner. Her younger brothers and sisters were all in bed. Her mother climbed the stairs beside Mary, helped her undress, then walked to the bed

and lifted the sheet while Mary slipped her nightgown over her head.

‘I will tuck you in.’

‘I am not a child, Mama.’

Her mother sighed. ‘I know you are nineteen but you will always be my daughter. May I fetch you something for the headache?’

‘No, thank you, I just need to sleep,’ she answered as she laid down.

‘Goodnight, sweetheart.’ Her mother pressed a kiss on Mary’s forehead, smothered the candle and left her.

Mary rolled to her side, her head throbbing with guilt, and wept.

She had done nothing wrong, not really, not yet, it had only been kisses that she had allowed. But she had a dreadful feeling she would do more. She could not quell her longing for this man she should not want to go anywhere near.

* * *

For the third night, Mary looked for him with no success. Her heart ached to see the rogue send her one of his knowing nods, or a charming smile.

He had asked her to seek him out then disappeared and made that impossible.

His kisses haunted her... She wished for wickedness. She wished for more kisses.

‘Miss Marlow. Damn it, you stood on my foot.’ Mr Makepeace was a wealthy landowner, double her age and as dull as a rainy day. He was also rude. She may have

missed a step because she had been daydreaming but it was ungentlemanly to curse her for it.

‘Forgive me.’ A blush heated her cheeks as others looked at them.

She had been thinking about a dance she had shared with a man a year ago. She had barely heard the music then, her thoughts focused on the colour of his eyes. They were hazel; a light shade of cluttered brown. When candlelight caught his eyes, the colour turned to honey, a soft amber, or molten gold.

Most men she danced with were young and silly compared to Lord Framlington, or too old, or dull, or so busy portraying a fashionable ennui they had no personality at all.

The dance came to its conclusion.

Sweat glistening on his brow, his chest heaving with the depths of his noisy breaths, Mr Makepeace walked her back to her parents. She thanked him politely. He bowed and turned away.

Good riddance.

She looked for Lord Framlington. He was not here. Why? Where was he? She huffed out an unladylike breath. ‘Mama, I wish to go to the retiring room.’

‘I will come with you.’

‘That is not necessary. The hall is busy; I will not be alone.’

‘Very well.’

Mary forced a path through the crush of people, remembering the night he had stopped her. The rogue... I cannot come to you in a place like this, so, if you want what I can give you, you must come to me... But how could she go to him if he was nowhere to be found!

‘Miss Marlow,’ her mother’s maid acknowledged as Mary entered the withdrawing room that had been allocated for the women’s use. She ensured Mary did not soil her dress, then Mary sat while the maid reset a couple of the curls on her forehead.

She hated him. He was playing with her. Yet, no one she spoke to or danced with compared to him. He was handsome, clever, charming – and poor. A fortune hunter and a rake.

Her heart thumped as she walked back into the ballroom, looking for him. He was not there. She did not return to her mother, she sought her friends. Someone to talk to. Though, she had not spoken to them of Lord Framlington, they would think her mad. Anyone would think her mad. She could not even explain to herself why she liked him.

‘Mary!’ Miss Smithfield, one of Mary’s less confident friends, raised a hand and beckoned.

‘Emily.’ Mary had befriended her one evening when Emily had been sitting out a dance against the wall.

‘You poor soul.’ Lady Bethany Pope took hold of Mary’s hand and pulled her close. ‘I saw you dancing with Mr Makepeace.’ She kissed the air beside Mary’s cheek.

Mary lifted her fingers to her open mouth, mimicking making herself sick. Emily and Bethany laughed.

‘He has asked you to dance every night this week,’ Emily stated.

‘Yes, but hopefully never again. I stood on his foot.’

‘Deliberately?’

‘Perhaps.’ They laughed again.

Mary did not laugh. This life, dancing and presenting her best side to everyone who spoke to her, whether they were likeable or not, was driving her slowly insane. Her life was dull. She missed the sense of danger hovering across the ballroom when Lord Framlington watched her. He intrigued her. She was the only woman he watched and he never danced.

Though, he had talked to Lady Kilbride several times.

She sighed.

Had she lost him, by not conceding? Had he given up on her?

‘Miss Marlow.’ Mr Gerard Heathcote bowed before her. ‘May I have the honour of this dance?’

She wished to scream, no! She had danced with him ten dozen times, he was nice, polite – and so boring. And she was becoming wicked, cruel and horrible. She dropped a shallow curtsy then gave Gerard her hand. ‘Of course.’

As they joined a set, she glanced through the French doors, looking into the garden. It was dark and raindrops ran down the glass. Perhaps she should take a walk outside. A thorough soaking might bring her to her senses.

Nine nights later, after twelve nights of looking for an absent Lord Framlington, when she returned home with her parents, she stopped her mother from entering her bedchamber. 'Please, Mama, a maid can help me undress. You cannot treat me as a child forever.'

'But—'

'Please, I wish to retire alone.'

As soon as she shut the door, the tears came. They had been hovering all night. She had looked for Lord Framlington almost constantly. When she had waltzed, her gaze had spun about the room searching every corner. Her dance partners must have thought her rude.

She had concluded that his interest had waned. He must have accepted her denials and given up on her. Common sense said she ought not care. She should be pleased.

A light knock tapped the door. A maid. She looked at Mary then looked away. 'Mrs Marlow said you need help to undress.'

'Yes, please.' The pathways of tears were still damp stains on her cheeks.

The maid released the buttons at the back of Mary's bodice, in silence. Normally Mary would have talked. She unlaced Mary's short stays. Once the laces were loose and she could disrobe, Mary said, 'That will be all, thank you.'

'Are you certain, miss?'

'Yes, absolutely.'

The maid curtsied.

‘Please tell no one I have been upset,’ Mary added.

The woman, Tilly, nodded. ‘I shan’t say a word, miss.’

When she had gone, Mary did not bother to strip off her clothes or blow out the candles. She tumbled on to the bed and cried. Because she may not see him ever again... and because she was a ninny for even wanting to see him.

‘Idiot!’ she shouted into her pillow.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:25 am

6

Pride in his self-discipline swelled in Drew's chest as he strolled into the Wiltshires' ballroom. He'd avoided Miss Marlow for two weeks. Now was the moment to return.

Lord Wiltshire, The Duke of Arundel, was one of her uncles. Her family would slacken their vigil here and he hoped it would be easier for her to find a moment to escape.

Looking down from the top of the entrance stairs, at one end of the Wiltshires' ornate ballroom, he scanned the crowd, the ton, England's elite, in all their shining glory.

If her aunt and uncle knew Drew's intent, he would not have been sent an invitation, but he'd kept away from her in public since last year, so, to her family, he was simply another name on a list, and every society hostess desired a crush.

He saw her. She was stood close to the foot of the stairs.

'Lord Andrew Framlington.' The footman shouted his name, announcing his arrival.

She looked up.

Women always looked when he entered a room, he did not normally care, but this was her. He looked at her. Her eyes... Her expression... Anger. She had missed him. He smiled for her alone. It surprised him when she gave him a self-conscious smile in return.

He let her gaze go and smiled at the room in general to avoid her family noticing the exchange. If they whisked her away to the country to avoid him, his game would be off entirely for this year.

Drew wasted his first hour in the card room. This early in the evening she would be too much in demand to risk slipping away.

The supper bell rang and the music died, then guests surged into the room set aside for refreshments. Drew sauntered in at the back of the crowd, beside a gentleman acquaintance with whom he'd been playing cards; a friend he had picked out for the sole purpose of gaining entry into Miss Marlow's family group.

If he was going to tempt her, he needed to throw her a little more bait. His companion was an old friend of Drew's and Pembroke's, from their days in Paris, during their dissipated grand tour. Days Pembroke preferred to forget. Like Pembroke, Roger Harris had turned prude, and therefore Harris was the perfect camouflage. He would be welcome even if Drew was not.

On cue, Roger called, 'Pembroke!'

The family were sitting about several tables. Drew ought to be daunted, but daunted was not within him; what he felt was a swell of anticipation, exhilaration. This was a bold move. He was walking a thin line, willing Miss Marlow to notice him while wishing her relatives not to notice anything out of the ordinary.

His quarry sat at a table with her brother, amid some of her uncles and aunts.

'Roger! I did not know you were in town.' Pembroke rose and they joined him. 'Is your wife with you?'

As Pembroke and Roger spoke, Drew looked past them and met Mary's gaze. For an

instant his heart forgot to beat as her pale blue eyes looked directly at him.

He guessed from her expression that she was wondering what to do. Perhaps wondering how she could speak to him.

‘Miriam is in her last month and not faring well...’ Harris babbled on about his family.

Drew nodded at Miss Marlow. A blush stained her pale skin pink.

He swallowed against a dry throat. ‘I shall leave you to talk,’ he said to Roger, then he walked away. His hand lifted, as if in parting. He hoped she was watching; it was a signal.

Drew helped himself to a couple of canapés but did not pick up a plate. He did not intend to spend the supper hour eating. He acknowledged a few acquaintances, avoided several ex-lovers then walked out of the room, glancing at Miss Marlow as he passed.

She was watching. Would she follow?

He strode on across the empty room, only looking back once. Her gaze followed him. He turned, took one step back, smiling and nodding, throwing her a calling card. This is your chance, Mary, darling. He faced away, and walked towards the French doors, deliberately keeping within her view.

There, he opened the door and stepped out into the tepid night air. The terrace, as he’d hoped, was deserted, like the ballroom.

He left the door on its latch, walked to the end of the stone terrace and leaned his buttocks against the top of the balustrade. He could not walk further; she would not

find him.

Come on, little beauty, follow.

The dark walls of the house framed the windows and the view into the illuminated ballroom and beyond that to the dining room. From this angle he could see all the way to the table where she was sitting.

He withdrew a slim cigar and a match from the pocket of his evening coat, lifted the cigar to his lips and struck the match on the stone beside his hip, then held the flame to the tip of the cigar and sucked until the cigar caught alight.

At least he had an excuse to be out here if he smoked.

He let the smoke slide out of his mouth.

Miss Marlow smiled at her sister-in-law, the Duchess of Pembroke, nodding at something the other woman said. Then her face turned to someone else across the table, a gentleman, one of her uncles. She laughed. Pembroke spoke to her. She replied. He smiled. Her father approached, stopped, pressed a hand on her shoulder, leaned down and kissed her temple.

Drew took another long draw on the cigar he held between his fingers.

It was as unreal as watching a play at the theatre. Drew did not understand a family like that. They moved in a pack, a pride, like lions, closing in to defend and protect one another whenever the need arose, all the men prowling about their lionesses.

I really ought to be daunted. He was not. Very little dented either his ennui or his ego.

Mary did, though. Which was good. He did not want a wife who would bore him.

He sucked on the cigar again, relishing the flavour of tobacco in his mouth. He knew how to enjoy things. He'd learned to make the most of every little gift life gave him when he was young. He would enjoy making her his.

She stood, smiling at her brother then her father and walked away from the table, weaving a path through the other guests, stopping occasionally to speak.

Drew smiled, sensations dancing a bloody jig in his chest. Had his little fish taken the bait?

Drew's heart beat a steady elated rhythm. He felt as though he had been dealt the most superb hand of cards, but there was still a risk that if he laid them wrong he'd waste their benefit. There was still a requirement for skill and caution. He must be careful.

When she reached the ballroom, instead of turning towards the open French doors, though, she disappeared through a door at the side of the room near the entrance stairs.

Drew urged her with all his will... Come to me!

But damn it , if she did not, he was not giving up; he would try again.

Drew lifted the cigar to his lips and sucked in the smoke, then looked up to the stars and blew out a circle.

The night was clear, a blanket of very dark blue with thousands of sparkling pinpricks of light. He loved the night. He loved storms. His soul had always turned to the dark and wild. As a lad he'd liked swimming in the dark. Afterwards, he'd lain on the ground, sometimes for hours, looking up at the endless black. Another world.

A small dark shadow flew like a dart in the air over his head. A bat. Now he had spotted one, he saw more. They were after the moths which had been drawn to the light spilling from the windows.

‘What are you doing?’

Her voice captured his senses. He straightened up to standing. His own moth had come to the flame. Her wings would be burned, but, God , he could not believe the exhilaration that coursed through his blood.

Her voice had come from the foot of the steps which descended from the terrace to his right.

He threw the cigar across the balustrade into the flower border below then walked towards her. ‘I am waiting for you.’ He descended the steps, feeling the tug of her presence pull at him as he caught sight of her pale lemon dress a few feet away.

She was six years his junior, but he’d never seen her behave in a girlish way. She had a serene grace, and she was kind, sensible and confident.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness.

‘Tell me where you have been. I have not seen you for days.’ Her eyes sparkled diamond bright as they caught a shaft of moonlight. They challenged him. His game of patience had been a brilliant hand.

‘I have been giving you time to make your choice. Does this mean you have made it?’

A few of her ebony curls had fallen from their pins to lick her jaw and throat. He’d like to place his lips there.

‘What do you mean by this ?’

He’d confused her. Hell, he was confused himself. His mind had become a clutter.

Her hands folded together before her waist.

She was anxious. She should be. He was too. The emotions inside him were an eclectic surprise. Hope. Desire. Need. Admiration. Desperation. Respect. Pride. Until today, he had never admired, respected or felt proud of a woman he intended to share a bed with.

‘This. I mean, you being here. Is this your answer?’ He stepped from the bottom step and stood in front of her, aware his voice sounded too stiff. But it was due to the bewildering turmoil of emotions. He was on unfamiliar ground; he did not know how to speak with a respectable, innocent woman.

‘I do not really know why I am here,’ she said.

Damn it , he needed to forget his anxiety, forget his own fears. He did know how to woo women.

‘Because you want to be with me.’ He stepped closer.

‘I missed you,’ she admitted.

When he lifted a hand, though, she instinctively stepped back.

He smiled. His fingertips brushed her cheek, moving an unruly curl away from her jaw. ‘Do you want a kiss?’ He needed to persuade her to stay and not run again, he needed to persuade her to stay forever and become his wife. The only way he knew how was through sex. He needed her to let him come close.

* * *

Yes, she had come for a kiss. She had been pulled to him, like a compass needle to true north. He might as well have an invisible thread wrapped about her.

Her heart had leapt with excitement when she'd seen him at the top of the stairs. Then he'd signalled to her during supper, and a desperate quivery feeling had tumbled through her stomach. Yes, I long to be kissed.

Lord Framlington pulled that invisible thread as his fingers trailed across her jaw. Then his thumb brushed over her lips and she looked into his eyes, though she could barely see him in the darkness beyond a silhouette. The smell of tobacco carried on his breath.

This is madness. Why did I come? 'Not here,' she said as his lips neared hers. 'Someone might see us.'

She could not see his lips curve into a smile and yet she sensed they did. His fingers opened, and cradled the side of her face as his other hand held her waist. He stepped forward so she had to step back. In a trance she let him back her into the darkness, into the corner where the wall of the house turned. They were deep in the shadows, she could not see him at all, but she could feel his tall frame against her, his strong hand at her waist as his other slid to her nape and drew her mouth to his.

Oh, heavens. Her innards rolled topsy-turvy.

His lips pressed firmly, then touched softly, coaxing her to kiss him back with similar variation. Her arms lifted and settled on his shoulders as she gave herself up to kissing him back. The sensations inside spiralled, swirling down to the point between her legs. It was delicious and wicked, and utterly stupid. But she didn't care, she didn't want to be sensible any more. A growling sound escaped from his throat and

entered her mouth as his hand slid to her lower back and pulled her firmly against his body. She fitted perfectly, her hip bones pressing to his, her breasts crushed against his chest.

His tongue slid through her parted lips, tentatively, then deeply, then it withdrew again. The tip of her tongue reached to touch his.

She wanted this with a bone-deep longing. His kiss dissolved her. She lifted her hand and ran her fingers through his hair. He pressed her further back, the wall grazed her right shoulder. She hoped it had not torn her dress.

His palms cupped her bottom and pulled her hips more snugly against his. A hard ridge in his trousers pressed against her abdomen. It ought to scare her; it did not. His embrace stayed tender and gentle.

‘God, Mary, you are beautiful,’ he whispered into her mouth. ‘More than I imagined.’

His hand ran over her hip, her waist, up to her ribs where his thumb brushed the lower curve of her bosom.

‘Mary,’ he said her name with a dizzying awe. Then his lips left her mouth. He kissed her jaw and her neck, while his palm settled over her breast, kneading her flesh through her gown.

His teeth nipped her neck. His hand left her breast, slid down and touched between her legs. He stroked inwards over the material of her gown, pressing the warm, moist flesh at the juncture of her thighs, where she craved him. She knew men and women joined there.

She should tell him to stop, but wrapped in the darkness, hidden from view, the danger had become exhilarating.

The strokes were tender, careful, like the touch of his teeth and lips on her neck.

The desire inside her climbed, as if her body were racing towards a peak. Her breath quickened and a sob escaped from her lips. Delicious sensations wove a spell in her blood, then... she flew on a firecracker.

Her fingers clawed on his shoulder and in his hair, clinging, as a whimpering sound left her lips. He silenced her with a kiss. She could not kiss him back, she had no strength. She had exploded and fallen from the sky.

A sound of amusement, half laugh, came from his throat, slipping into her mouth as he drew away.

The sound of the orchestra warming up their instruments broke them apart. The supper hour was over.

The French doors opened, and voices drifted outside. People must be crowding into the ballroom to dance. Some walked out on to the terrace for fresh air.

Her heart pounded. The confusion of fear and bewilderment mingled. She had no idea what had just happened.

The orchestra struck up a melody.

She could not see his face or his eyes but his fingers touched her cheek and his thumb stroked back and forth across her chin.

‘I could make a sound and have someone find us like this,’ he whispered.

‘Is that what you want to do?’ she asked.

She breathed heavily, still disorientated.

He was breathing heavily too.

His thumb touched her lips. She was not afraid, even though she did not really know him.

‘I want you,’ he answered, in a hushed voice. ‘I want you as my wife.’

‘You want my dowry.’

‘I want you and your dowry. I know your brother hates the idea of a man in need of a fortune, but he has one. It is hardly a crime to need to marry wealth, just circumstance. But any of three dozen heiresses could bring me money. I want you, Mary.’

She smiled, knowing the darkness hid it, but his thumb was still on her lips. ‘You could choose a military career and work for your living.’

‘I have no money to buy a commission. But if you would follow the drum, I might sign up.’

‘The clergy then...’

‘Me, a vicar. Are you mad? That would never work.’ A scoffing rumble of amusement growled in his throat.

She chuckled. ‘I must be, I am here with you.’

His thumb and forefinger tilted her chin up. ‘Will you agree to marry me?’

‘I barely know you, and you have an awful reputation.’

This time his amusement erupted as a proper laugh which someone might hear. ‘Guilty as charged, I will not deny it, but those days are in the past. Get to know me, and know one thing for certain, I will marry you.’

‘For money...’

‘Money, yes. I need it. I am not lying to you. But as I said, not only for your fortune.’ His lips brushed hers, weaving enchantment, fogging her mind.

She forced herself to turn her head. ‘And if I had no fortune...’

He did not answer, but he had said he would not lie, and that was the way of life for her class. There were three dozen men in her uncle’s ballroom without expectation of inheritance or the desire to shoot other men on a battlefield, or the inclination to preach. All those men needed to marry for money.

She pushed him away. ‘I must go. I will be missed.’

‘When can I meet you again? Where? Do you ride in the mornings, in Hyde Park? What if I were there at nine, would you come?’

Male voices, engaged in conversation, came out from the ballroom on to the terrace.

‘I don’t know. I must go.’ She left him and ran across the grass to the courtyard entrance she’d come from. She returned via the servants’ door and went to the retiring room to ask the maid to pin up the strands of hair she had pulled loose to be able to excuse herself.

When she returned to the ballroom, he was nowhere to be seen.

Mary found her father, who teased her about the length of time the maid took to fix her hair. She had lied, again. Deceived and disobeyed him. Insanity had claimed her. What had she done?

‘Miss Marlow, will you dance?’

She turned to face Lloyd Montague, one of her usual suitors. She liked him, she liked many of the men, but they had no intrigue. The only man she wanted to dance with was no longer here.

She accepted Lloyd’s arm and let him lead her into a waltz, her heart racing, her blood running thick with the memory of Lord Framlington’s intimate caress.

Would she go tomorrow? She could, if she took a groom.

But it would not be wise. It could only lead to disgrace.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:25 am

7

Drew sat astride his horse, waiting by the gates of Hyde Park. Miss Marlow was thirty minutes late. She was making a fool of him.

Impatience bit hard. His hands on the pommel of his saddle, he shifted his weight, and as he did so, he thought of her in his arms last night. Desire clasped low in his belly, a feeling that was much more than lust. She had melted him. Entirely. He had been ice and now he was water. He'd never experienced an encounter with a woman which was so... beautiful... so... real.

His heart had thundered as hard as hers at the end, and he'd wanted to yell out with jubilation. She would have thought him mad, and, of course, it would have meant they may have been caught.

His friends would think him insane if they knew how he felt.

He'd smiled for the rest of the night, like a damned green youth who'd just discovered the sport, and he'd still been smiling this morning.

She had been all that he'd hoped of an innocent woman.

He, Drew Framlington, had been the first to show the beautiful Miss Marlow what true pleasure could be.

Yet she had not come this morning. He was not smiling any more. Waiting on a woman was not his forte. He'd rather walk away than wait. But he craved her too

deeply now, he could never choose another woman. Yet, if he did not marry soon, the duns would have him in jail for his debts.

Devil take it. Where was she? She'd shattered in his arms last night, he thought she would be desperate to see him...

He had not thought she would allow him so near so soon, but she had been willing him on, kissing him back with an un-virginal hunger. He wanted this courtship over and Miss Marlow in his bed, just as much as he wanted her damned money. After the climax he'd given her last night, and it had undoubtedly been her first as she had been shocked by it, he thought she would beg him to marry her. Instead, she had run back to her family with no promise made.

He lifted his watch from the pocket of his morning coat. Five more minutes had passed.

She had stood him up.

He would never live this down after he'd bragged to his friends that they could begin their celebrations.

All women were fickle.

Then, he saw her. Surprise and relief took bites out of his heart. Then came the flood of hope on a storm of emotions deeper than he had ever experienced.

She was riding along the street outside the park, the eye of a peacock feather bouncing above her head, protruding from her hat which was the same colour as her sapphire blue habit. The colour a sharp contrast to her pale skin.

Her seat on the jet-black stallion impressed him; her spine held straight and her grip

on the reins firm. She looked magnificent on the obviously expensive animal, with its sleek muscular shape and glossy well-groomed coat.

A groom rode beside her, keeping guard over Lord Marlow's precious package.

Drew smiled, turned his mare, Athena, away from the gate and tapped his heels, commanding the animal to walk across the lawn. Their meeting must appear accidental. His heart raced as though he were galloping not walking the horse.

The sky was a glorious clear blue from one horizon to the other, but the day had not warmed yet, and the grass was damp with dew.

Drew kicked his heels and stirred his horse into a canter, giving her time to enter the park and his heartbeat a chance to recover from the sight of her.

The lawns and paths were not busy but there were others about.

Once he'd ridden a few hundred yards he swung back, turning on to the outer path. She was a couple of hundred yards into the park, rising and falling in a trot, with the groom riding beside her.

She was not looking in his direction, but he somehow knew from her stance that she'd seen him.

He rode towards her, slowing from a canter to a trot, lifting his hand as though he'd just noticed her. 'Miss Marlow! Well met!' He rode the last few yards with his hand raised. Then he lifted his hat and bowed his head in greeting, ignoring the glaring groom.

'Lord Framlington.' Her voice rang with a bright false pitch of surprise, but there was a more hesitant note too.

She was worried.

A surge of something he was not used to feeling for anyone other than his sister, Caro, surged through his blood – a need to reassure and protect.

‘You are out riding early, Miss Marlow?’

‘I had a restless night.’

‘May I ride beside you?’

‘If you must.’

Drew smiled and turned Athena to walk beside her stallion.

She smiled at the groom and lifted a hand that said, stay back .

As they continued, Drew felt the man’s glare boring into his back.

‘You are late,’ he said quietly.

‘Well, that is a woman’s right.’

‘Is it...?’ he said, through a wry smile. He was falling into the enchantment of her guileless ways – fast and hard. He no longer cared that she’d kept him waiting.

The fabric of her habit hugged the curve beneath her breasts, the arch of her lower back and her slender arms. His hunger was intense. She had an aura which pulled him close and wound around him.

It was probably just her beauty affecting him... All men must be dazzled by her. She

was exceptionally pretty.

‘Let us race,’ she said, tapping her short whip on the horse’s flank, informing the animal of her command, not waiting for his agreement. It was off, tossing up divots of grass at him.

He kicked his heels and followed, rising from his saddle, balancing on the stirrups with his body low over Athena’s neck.

The rhythm of the horses’ hooves pounded on the earth. Her laughter trailed on the air.

He gained ground and then led. She did not concede but tore on towards the Serpentine.

When they neared the lake, he pulled up, a full half-leg in front. She stopped too, her horse turning circles. Her groom had been left a quarter mile back, but he could see them.

‘What was that?’ he asked.

‘Fun!’ she answered, laughter dancing in her eyes. ‘I was not going to come, you know.’

‘Then why are you here?’

‘I always behave. I always do as I should. I wished to kick up my heels.’

‘Then this is not to be taken as any indication you will marry me?’

‘Definitely not. If my family knew I was with you, they would?—’

‘Slaughter me. I know.’

‘If you know they would not agree to a match, why are you courting me?’

‘Because I would be mad not to.’ He held her gaze. ‘And you would be mad not to accept me. I gave you a glimpse last night of how good life with me could be. If you want me, you will find a way to convince your family.’

She smiled, her eyes catching the sunshine. ‘You mean, our marriage would be good in your bed. That says nothing of how we would get along. Marriage is more than that. Much more. And my family will never agree. They neither like nor trust you.’

‘No... So, why did you come then?’ His words were spoken from petulance. He did not intend to seek consent. He knew he would never be approved. The only one he sought to convince was her.

Her horse pranced. She tightened her rein and held the animal still as her gaze locked with his.

Those eyes. Who was seducing who?

‘I have no idea. I think I am insane.’

A soft ache hovered in his middle. The girl was a breath of fresh air, a light summer breeze. Sunshine.

‘Did you not sleep because you were thinking of me?’ Hope swelled again.

She blushed slightly. He hoped he’d haunted her dreams as she had his.

‘So where do we go from here?’ He encouraged her to take another step towards

commitment.

A frown marred her beautiful brow. She had not spent her night thinking about his offer of marriage then, merely their embrace.

‘What next?’ Drew clarified.

She shrugged, a dainty little gesture on her slim shoulders. ‘It should be nothing.’

‘But it will not be nothing, because you are here.’ She needed more persuasion. Drew leaned forward and held her hand as it held her reins. ‘Where will you be tonight?’

Maybe her common sense told her there should be nothing more, but other parts of her, that he had sway over, would bid her answer.

‘I am attending Lady Frobisher’s musical evening.’

Musical evenings were a rogue’s curse; he could do nothing untoward when seated in a row of chairs. The game was off for tonight then.

Nor could he meet her again in the park. Once could be deemed accidental but twice would draw attention. Without doubt the groom would mention this encounter to someone in the house.

‘Miss Marlow!’ A timely call came from their rear. Her groom had come to retrieve his damsel from the beast.

Drew let her hand go. ‘Tomorrow then. Where?’

‘I shall be at the Phillips’ supper party.’ She looked away after speaking, glancing over her shoulder and smiling reassuringly at the groom.

Drew's eldest brother had been at school with the Phillips' son, he could obtain an invitation. 'There then. They have a large glasshouse in the grounds, to the right of the garden. I'll meet you there at midnight.'

* * *

Mary nodded. She had begun an intrigue. She was definitely an idiot.

'I shall look forward to it,' he said, reaching out a hand, palm upwards. Instinctively, she released the reins, giving him her hand. His thumb pressed into her palm as he lifted it to his lips, turned it and kissed her wrist, above her glove.

Her heart skittered, its rhythm racing violently.

When he let go, the smile on his lips also glinted in his eyes. The gleam became a wicked expression as his gaze shifted to her groom. He turned his horse and rode away.

She'd imagined spending time with him for a year... But a year ago, she would not have agreed to an assignation.

'Forgive me, miss,' Evans said when he drew near, 'you should not speak with gentlemen.'

'I shall speak with whom I wish, Evans.' Her reply sounded like John. She was not normally harsh with servants.

'Miss Marlow.' The man lifted his fingers to his cap and tipped it forward. 'Forgive me, but it is my duty to inform your father.'

'That I met a casual acquaintance in the park by chance and spoke with him? There is

nothing to tell.' She ought to feel guilty. She did not, not yet, perhaps later. She no longer knew herself. She had lied to her family and a friend, and now she was widening the net of deceit to the servants. It would trap her in the end if she was not careful.

She turned the stallion she had borrowed from John's stables in the direction of the park gates. I cannot continue this. Tomorrow must be the last time she spoke with him and allowed his kisses.

Unless she chose ruin...

Her heartbeat flickered and her stomach somersaulted. Was she fool enough to do that?

But John had added to her father's dowry as a gift so she could broaden her choice of husbands and marry for love if she wanted to. Why should it matter if she chose a man who needed the money?

Because John thought Lord Framlington was false and heartless.

She rode out of the park gates beside Evans.

She thought Lord Framlington was sincere. He had not hidden his need for her fortune, just said he'd chosen her over other wealthy women.

Her heart wanted her to choose him.

But John did not like him and therefore nor did her father. Lord Framlington could never be hers unless she defied them.

You are a fool, Mary. End it tomorrow. It can go no further.

Outside her brother's front door, Evans swung down from his saddle and offered his hand to help her dismount. She did not need it. She lifted her knee from the pommel of her side saddle and lowered herself to the step he formed with his hands, before stepping onto the floor.

'You need not trouble yourself to tell tales, Evans, I shall inform my father,' she told him before walking up the front steps.

'Miss.' He bowed and removed his hat.

Mary entered the house, as a footman held the door for her.

Her family would be in the breakfast room. She headed there, removing her hatpin and taking off her hat, then stripping off her gloves. She passed the items to a footman on the way.

Her youngest brothers and sisters ate in the nursery, but those who could sit sensibly shared the adults' table and so the breakfast room was noisy. She smiled at her father and mother when she entered and at John and Kate.

Mary loved her family. She'd never wanted for anything. She'd always felt secure. So why did the danger Lord Framlington dangle draw her away?

'Mr Finch said you were riding, Mary,' her mother said with a gentle smile. 'That is unusual for you.' It was a subtle question.

'I slept poorly and the morning was so sunny I could not resist.' Mary sat among her younger brothers and sisters.

'Had you asked I would have ridden with you,' her father said.

‘It was a momentary decision, Papa.’ A blush warmed her cheeks. Her eyes focused on the spout of the chocolate pot a footman used to fill her cup.

‘Was Hyde Park busy?’ John asked from the head of the table.

John was older than her by a decade. He behaved more like a second father than a brother. She helped herself to bread from a plate a footman held. ‘Not very.’ She looked at John. ‘I saw Lord Framlington, though. He stopped and spoke to me.’

‘Then you must not go again without a chaperon,’ John responded.

‘John,’ Kate said from the other end of the table. ‘Mary is sensible. She took a groom and I’m sure she can cope with Lord Framlington. She was in the open.’

Mary smiled a Thank you at her sister-in-law.

The footman dished up some scrambled eggs and smoked fish.

‘I have no concern over Mary’s behaviour,’ John answered. ‘It is his I worry about.’

Mary looked at him. ‘Why do you dislike him?’

‘He’s a fortune hunter,’ her father said.

John’s eyebrows lifted. ‘And a man of his ilk is not for you.’

‘His ilk... What does that mean? What is his ilk?’ Mary could not help pressing for an explanation. She wanted to understand. She wanted to convince her heart it was wrong.

‘This is why she needs a chaperon.’ John looked at Kate. ‘He speaks to her and now

she is asking foolish questions.’ He looked sternly at Mary. ‘What did he say?’

Heat burned under her skin. ‘Nothing beyond courtesy.’

‘So, he put on the charm. Do not believe any of it. It is feigned.’

Mary set down her knife and fork. ‘I cannot see?—’

‘Mary!’ Her father silenced her. ‘This is an inappropriate conversation.’ He glanced at her younger sisters. ‘I trust you to be sensible. But I agree with John, no more unaccompanied rides.’

She held her father’s gaze for a moment, then looked at John. What had Lord Framlington done to be deemed such a villain? Men needed to marry for money, that was not a crime. He was a rake, but many men were that also – they lived recklessly then grew up – as John had done.

But surely if Lord Framlington intended on marrying her, his rakishness was over and her father’s and brother’s arguments were groundless.

Mary focused on her breakfast.

Perhaps John had a vendetta against Lord Framlington; John had not spoken against any other man so vehemently.

Tomorrow she would ask him why her brother disliked him so much.

The thought of meeting him stole her appetite as a dozen butterflies took flight in her stomach.

8

Drew strolled into White's, his gentleman's club, seeking masculine company, a game of cards and conversation.

He found his friends in their usual place. Harry Webster, Mark Harper and Peter Brooke sat in the first salon.

'Fram!' Harry called. 'I thought you were courting Miss Marlow.'

Drew smiled. 'She is attending a musical soirée, a place where it is impossible to pursue the chase.'

His friends laughed. Drew signalled to a footman to bring him a glass of brandy.

'How goes the seduction?' Mark asked when Drew sat beside him.

'If it were simply seduction it would be done, but as I am seeking a wife the game is more complex. Despite allowing me certain favours, Miss Marlow has given not a single indication she will agree to become my wife.'

'Favours?' Peter smiled.

'Do tell,' Harry said.

Drew leaned back into the winged leather chair, letting his hands rest on the arms and grinned. 'I will not tell and tarnish the reputation of my future wife.'

‘Your brother tells all about his wife.’ Harry returned the grin, smiling for a different reason.

Drew looked over his shoulder. Sure enough his eldest brother sat a distance behind him, accompanied by their brother-in-law, Lord Ponsonby. Ponsonby had married Drew’s eldest sister. Neither man was an example Drew wished to emulate. His grin became a sneer.

The only member of his family who had not broken their marriage vows was Caro. However, her husband, the Earl, frequently did. Kilbride had a violent streak too, which poor Caro constantly lived in fear of.

Caro was the only member of his family Drew felt close to.

Drew turned his sneer on Harry.

‘I take it you will not then,’ Peter quipped.

Drew looked at his best friend. ‘Definitely not.’

The others laughed.

A footman appeared with a tray bearing Drew’s brandy. Drew took his drink, and sensing something, looked to the room. His eldest brother was now looking at Drew.

Drew lifted his glass, in a mocking salute, his teeth grinding. His whole body was in a state of restlessness as he waited for each minute to pass until he would meet Miss Marlow tomorrow evening.

* * *

Mary hurried along the garden path on light feet, nervous that the lichen on the paving may stain her satin slippers. They were made for dancing not walking through gardens.

She had left at the commencement of a set of six dances, which were to be danced with one partner, hoping her family would think she was dancing and not notice her absence. They were engaged in conversation, not looking about the room.

Her hosts had not intended that people stroll in the garden; there were no lanterns lighting the way. But the moon did its best to break through the clouds, its light shining through the shrubbery that arched above her, creating varied patches of light.

The path turned a corner and faced the glasshouse. There he was, at the end of the path. A gap in the clouds meant the moon shone all its light on him. Etching his figure in light and shade. He looked a little menacing in the darkness, she ought to be afraid. She only knew him by reputation and that was bad. Yet she had never felt so pulled towards someone, and her instincts about people had always been right in the past.

‘Miss Marlow.’ He stepped forward.

Her heart skipped and her stomach spun like a top. She had no appetite since she had last seen him and her thoughts had danced reels preventing sleep.

She had to end this. But she wanted to be alone with him one last time.

His lips lifted into a smile when she reached him. His hand rose and his fingertips touched her cheek. He had removed his gloves. ‘I was not sure you would come. You’ve barely given me a glance this evening.’

She smiled too but removed his hand from her face. It left her holding his hand. He glanced down and laced their fingers.

‘I did not want my family to suspect anything. I am in the mire for speaking to you in the park.’

His other hand rose to the back of her neck as his head bowed and he twisted her arm behind her back with their joined hands so her body arched forwards as his lips pressed against her. The kiss was beautiful. She was short of breath when it ended.

He was short of breath too.

His dark eyes held her gaze. ‘We should go inside in case someone walks this way.’

She had forgotten the risk. ‘Yes.’

With their hands still joined, he led her into the large glasshouse and closed the door. If she believed John, Lord Framlington thought nothing of her; he only cared for her money. Yet, the gentle hold on her hand claimed her. It said he treasured her, that this was not a meaningless liaison.

Orange, lemon and lime trees in terracotta pots lined the pathways, and the scent of warm earth merged with the floral aroma of citrus blossoms.

He turned and faced her. Moonlight reached through the glass and painted him in silver. His smile shone in his eyes. He stepped back a pace, then another, pulling her with him, leading her deeper into the glasshouse. ‘Has the exemplar Miss Marlow fallen from her pedestal?’ he said, teasing.

‘Perhaps a certain lord has pulled her from it.’

His smile broadened. 'I am sure it was deadly dull on it.'

Yes. It was. And lonely at times. Perhaps she'd been ripe for his temptation. She could not justify feeling lonely in a large loving family but she had no space to be an individual, to discover who she was without them. Sometimes she felt like a marionette puppet, dressed up to perform at parties.

She looked beyond him, not voicing her disloyal thoughts.

A small wrought-iron table stood on a paved area among the plants, with a few chairs gathered about it.

Lord Framlington raised their joined hands, brought her fingers to his lips and kissed the back of them. His dark eyes gleamed. 'May I remove your gloves?'

She nodded.

He freed the button at each wrist, then pulled each fingertip loose before he stripped off one glove then the other. He tossed them onto the table behind him. Beautiful sensations skipped up her arm as his lips pressed on her bare knuckles.

Was everything which felt good wicked?

His lips pressed a light kiss on each of her fingertips.

Her heartbeat stuttered.

When his lips reached her little finger, he sucked the tip gently.

She pulled her hand from his. 'You should not do this.'

‘You should not be here.’ His voice was deeper than usual. ‘But you are.’ His hands rested on either side of her waist.

She was suddenly aware of the danger she faced. They were a long way from the house. No one would hear her cry out if he forced himself on her.

Her heart raced harder. She held his arms and felt the strength of the muscle beneath his clothes.

‘You do not trust me.’ It was a statement, not a question.

She did not. How could she? ‘I barely know you.’

‘Apart from your brother’s tales.’

She nodded.

The moon struggled to break through the cloud again, and he stood in shadow. What had seemed an enchanted place suddenly felt like a scene from a gothic horror novel.

‘I shan’t hurt you. Don’t heed him. Mary, darling, I want you to be my wife, why would I hurt you?’

‘I... I...’ She struggled to find the words.

His gaze dropped to her lips. She turned her head, so he could not kiss her. He kissed her cheek instead.

A tremor raked her muscles as his lips touched her earlobe, then her neck.

‘Why does John dislike you?’

His head lifted. 'He sees himself in me. He was not always so saintly. He had an affair with my eldest sister.'

'No...'

He smiled. 'Yes. I suppose he never mentions that. He cuckolded Lord Ponsonby, not that I think Ponsonby cared. It was when we were in Paris.'

'You were in Paris with him...'. His palms felt heavy on her waist.

'Yes.'

John had spent seven years abroad. She wrote to him, but he had rarely replied and she had been too young to hear much of how he lived. He married Kate soon after his return.

'If you do not believe me, ask him. I doubt he would lie. A young man's recklessness is part of life – a part your brother now claims to be above. I am the same as him, beyond my lack of wealth.'

'But your reputation.'

'Ignore it. Your brother had a reputation. Now he has a wife. This is about us, no one else. You and I are all that counts.'

'Only because you need my money.'

'What I need right now, Mary, is not your money. I need you.'

Turbulent emotion writhed inside her.

When his lips touched hers, longing overrode everything. She forgot doubt, responding as his tongue slipped past her parted lips. When his tongue withdrew, she dared to slide her tongue into his mouth. He caught it lightly between his teeth, for an instant, before sucking it deeper.

It was so intimate...

Her fingers combed through his hair.

I love you. The words whispered through her thoughts unbidden. She did, though, she loved him, no matter what John said, no matter the risk. She loved him.

His lips left hers and pressed a path of kisses along her jaw, then down her neck.

‘You’re beautiful,’ he said, against her skin.

She shivered. ‘And rich,’ she whispered into the air, forcing her mind to stay aware.

His head lifted and a soft laugh left his lips. ‘Yes, you are rich, but there is far more to you than money.’

His hands rose, and his fingers gently tugged the short sleeves of her gown down from her shoulders, the neckline hung loose and her bodice sagged. His gaze dropped to her breasts, in the moment before his heated palms cupped them.

Mary’s mouth dried. She looked up and saw a faint image of them reflected in the glass. His dark hair against her pale skin, as his lips touched the hollow at the base of her neck where her pulse flickered.

His fingers slid beneath the fabric and embraced her breasts.

A sweeping sensation plunged through her middle. She ached for him.

He eased one breast free as his head lowered, then his lips covered her nipple, his tongue cradling her, and he sucked.

Her bones dissolved and her fingers curled into his hair, as she watched the mirror image above them. This was wicked, but delicious; the sensations more intoxicating than wine.

Still sucking her breast, his hands began lifting her dress.

Cold realisation drenched her, he was not going to stop. 'No.' She grasped his shoulders and pushed him away. 'No.' She had not lost all sanity.

His gaze cut through the darkness as his fingers let her dress fall, his heavy breaths echoing around the glass.

'Mary...'

She would have stepped back but his hands cupped her buttocks and held her closer, pressing the column of his erection against her stomach through their layers of clothing. 'See what you do to me.'

'Let me go.' She pushed his shoulders.

He conceded and stepped back. 'You have no need to be afraid of me.'

Her fingers shook as she righted her bodice and lifted her sleeves, unable to look at him.

'I would not hurt you.' The tone of his voice had hardened as John's did.

Fear lashed out. What if her instinct was wrong? She had good cause not to trust him. It was not only John who thought ill of him, he was an outcast, ignored by most.

‘For God’s sake, Mary.’ His pitch lifted to anger.

Her chin tilted to a defiant angle. She must stop this now. ‘I will not meet you again.’

‘I did not hurt you,’ he insisted.

She stepped away. This was the end. ‘I did not say you did, but I cannot do this. I will not meet you again. I won’t hurt my family. I cannot keep betraying their trust.’

‘Then what are you doing here?’ he shouted.

‘I came to tell you it has to stop.’

‘If that was your intent, you took your time saying so. You came to be made love to,’ he growled.

Mary held up a hand, warning him to stay away. ‘Love has nothing to do with this. I am no fool either, Lord Framlington. You may convince me you are attracted to me but you will not persuade me this has anything to do with love.’

At least not on your part.

That was the saddest thing, because she knew now she loved him. She had probably fallen at the first sight of him.

* * *

Moonlight broke through the clouds and caught in Mary’s eyes.

Pain shone there.

He'd said he would not hurt her, but he could see he had. He thought of Caro and himself as children. The only time when perhaps he could compare his feelings to understand Mary's, when he had cared more deeply for someone other than himself. It had always hurt more to see Caro beaten than being beaten himself.

Damn , he was unused to women with a heart – a woman who knew love. A woman who'd been surrounded by it her entire life.

His error glared him in the face. He should not have wooed her with passion. It was not her body he had to persuade – it was her heart. She wanted to be loved. Of course she did.

'Andrew,' he stated bluntly. Why had he given her his full name? He always introduced himself as Drew.

Her chin tilted higher, reminding him of her brother's stubborn countenance.

How the hell do I make you love me?

'What?' Her tone rang sharp.

She did not even know his name. He'd wooed her physically and not even let her in so far as to tell her his name.

His voice lowered to a calmer pitch. 'My name is Andrew, although most people call me Drew. I think you should stop calling me Lord Framlington.'

She looked confused. Perhaps she also realised how many favours she had allowed him without even knowing his name.

‘Would you say it?’ His voice held the undercurrent of the desperation humming in his blood. He could not let her walk away. Everything hung on him winning her. The idea had fermented in his head for so long, he could not choose anyone else, not now. He could not bear to be with anyone but her.

She took a breath. ‘Andrew. Though, Drew suits you better. It has a dangerous ring to it.’

A fist gripped hard and firm in his gut, and warmth seared in his chest.

‘You deem me dangerous... I’m not the devil, Mary, just a man. A man who wants you to be his wife and wake up in his bed every morning. And when we retire each night I’ll make love to you, slowly and thoroughly, so you will know it is not a marriage solely for money.’

Uncertainty flickered in her eyes. But he knew he could not progress. He needed to regroup and think of a new strategy. One that would win her heart.

Damn . He knew nothing about love.

But if she came to love him, he’d rejoice. It was what he wanted – a faithful, committed wife. He had no idea how Mary would fare once they were wed, but surely if she loved him it could not go awry.

‘If you need to be loved, I will love you, I swear it. I am half in love with you already.’ It was surely true, the emotions inside him were a turmoil of desperation, need and hope.

Her eyes turned cold. ‘Or half in love with my dowry.’

The stubborn insistence that he only desired her money made him angry. ‘You were

right earlier, you do not know me. Money is not everything to me.' He picked up her gloves and thrust them at her.

She took them. 'I must go.'

He caught her elbow before she could leave. 'Next time?—'

'There will be no next time!' Her elbow pulled from his grip, and then she was gone, disappearing into the darkness.

Bloody hell , he had lost more ground than he had gained tonight. If she would no longer come to him then how the hell was he to progress? He could not approach her, that would make her family suspicious. They would remove her from town.

When he left the glasshouse, he did not bother heading back to the ball. He needed to drink, and think, and the best place for that was at his club.

9

Mary left the breakfast table with her mother, Kate and younger sisters. She had nibbled at the edge of one slice of fruitcake, her stomach in too much turmoil to eat. They retired to the drawing room. The boys walked upstairs to begin their lessons.

Mary sat on a sofa in the sunshine, beside her sisters, Helen and Jennifer. They had collected their embroidery samplers and Mary guided them on the stitches they were practising. Kate held her son on her lap, amusing him with a silver rattle. Her mother sat on the same sofa, with Mary's youngest sister, Jemima, studying a picture book.

'Excuse me, Your Grace.' Mr Finch stood just inside the door, a small silver tray balanced on his fingers. 'A letter for Miss Marlow was delivered to the door.'

'Mary?' her mother said in disbelief.

Heat flared in Mary's cheeks. She received letters regularly from her friends and cousins, but they came with the general post.

Everyone watched her walk across the room and lift the letter from the tray.

The writing was unfamiliar. The strokes were long and bold. She broke the blank seal and looked at the bottom of the page.

D. F.

Drew Framlington.

Her heart pounded against her ribs as Mr Finch left the room.

‘Who is it from?’ her mother asked.

‘Lord Farquhar.’ Daniel was one of her friends. She’d met him at her first ball. Her mother knew him well.

She smiled warmly at Mary, before returning her attention to Jemima and the picture book.

Her mother had noticed her absence last night. Mary had said she’d gone to the retiring room. Even so, her father had admonished her for not telling her mother and Kate had cautioned her about rousing gossip, saying she’d experienced such things and would not wish them on Mary.

By the time she left the ball, Mary was thoroughly chastened and felt painfully guilty. She’d cried herself to sleep, then woken scarcely an hour later.

Mary longed to take the letter up to her room, but that would look odd. Instead, she sought seclusion on a window seat, slipping her feet from her shoes and lifting them on to the cushion before her.

My dear Miss Marlow,

Has any man told you what a treasure you truly are?

The rogue, he’d actually referred to her fortune in a pun. She smiled, more amused than angry.

What I would give to make you mine, you cannot imagine. I am yours, a hundred times over. I adore you. Your ebony hair and your alabaster skin. Your eyes, so pale

they are like diamonds catching the sky. They make me shiver when you turn your gaze upon me. Turn it my way often and forever, Mary dear. Make me yours, make me love you. If love is what you want, bring me to your heel. I will come. I will beg for you if that is what you wish, only never turn your smile away from me, that is what I live for, to see your perfect smile.

And your lips, I have not yet spoken of those...

It was nonsense of course, all nonsense, and it went on and on, profoundly expressing her beauty and his adoration, while not once claiming to love, but pleading for her to give him the opportunity to fall in love. It begged her to tame him. It asked her to show him how to love her. Then he finished it all with a silly poem about love.

When she refolded the paper, a smile curved her lips.

He'd not been deterred by her dismissal yesterday. He was more serious about choosing her than she had thought. It would be easier for him to court someone else.

'What did he say, Mary?' her mother enquired.

'He is gushing, Mama.' It was becoming too easy to lie.

Her mother and her sister-in-law Kate smiled.

'Are you interested in Lord Farquhar?' her mother asked.

Mary laughed. 'Heavens, no, but it is flattering.' She rose from the window seat and slipped her shoes back on.

'Let me see!' 'Let me read it!' her sisters cried.

‘No.’ Mary clutched the letter to her breast as they rushed over.

‘Helen, Jenny, leave your sister alone. It’s personal,’ her mother admonished.

Fortunately, her parents were not in the habit of reading her post. They trusted her.

A sharp pain cut deeply into Mary’s chest. She did not deserve their trust any more. She would have lost her family’s respect forever if she had been found with Lord Framlington. She would have ruined herself and had to marry him, and they would be embarrassed by the gossip. Yet, he had always been discreet, that too was a mark in his favour. Even his letter did not contain anything which would force her hand.

Last night he could have had what he wished, her hand in marriage and her money, if he’d arranged for someone to discover them.

Surely, that he would not act without her consent meant he was honourable despite his reputation, and he must also – to some degree – truly care for her.

‘May I take this letter up to my room, Mama, and put it in my travelling desk?’ She wanted to lock it away so her sisters could not sneak in and read it.

‘Of course, sweetheart,’ her mother said warmly.

Mary fled the room with sinful notions spinning in her head. If she knew his address she would write back.

No! I have finished with this foolishness.

* * *

Fate played an odd game on Mary at the Fosters’ ball. As Mary stood talking with

Miss Emily Smithfield, Daniel asked Mary to dance the first set.

She accepted with a shallow curtsy, smiling at him, then glanced back to give Emily, who invariably ended up the wallflower, an apologetic smile. Emily was shy, she had come out this season and was still finding her place in society.

As Mary walked out to dance with Daniel, her parents watched from a few yards away. Her father's eyes glistened in the candlelight. They thought she carried a torch for Daniel and he for her.

Daniel carried his torch for Bethany.

Nothing good ever came of lying. It was always found out. The only time she'd lied in her childhood was when she'd accidentally broken her mother's perfume bottle. She'd hidden the broken bottle and claimed no knowledge of it. Her parents had known, however, because she was the only one who smelt of the perfume. She had been in more trouble for lying than for breaking the bottle. She had not lied again until the day of the Jerseys' garden party.

Daniel's eyes shone with good humour as he led her among the dancers. She liked her friends. She'd formed a good set last season along with Emily this season. All her friends were nice, happy, and generous in nature – there was no reason for her to want more from her life. But she longed for the company of a more complex mysterious man.

Her heart ached with a bittersweet sadness. Lord Framlington was exciting, she longed to discover everything about him.

Yet, she had not even asked for his given name.

The image of his eyes as he asked her to say his name became vivid in her memory.

He was... vital... dangerous... and... thrilling. Daniel, like every other man, was bland. How could she fall for someone like that when there was Lord Framlington, Drew, in comparison? She would rather never marry.

‘You do not look quite the thing this evening, Mary. You look distracted. Is anything wrong?’ Daniel asked as they passed each other in the country dance.

‘Nothing is wrong. I am merely tired, I have attended too many entertainments.’

‘You can never attend too many. Are your shoes pinching? You may have too much dancing if your shoes are pinching...’

Mary laughed at his attempt to cheer her, when in reality the weak joke sent her tumbling into the doldrums. If she never spoke to Lord Framlington again, she would have to endure an entirely dull life.

‘I should be honest. It was not I who noticed your mood. Bethany did. She sent me to cheer you up.’

Mary glanced at Bethany, who was now talking to Emily.

She smiled at Daniel. She must cease longing for Lord Framlington. This was enough. It had to be. Even if inside she spent the rest of her life screaming from boredom.

As the dance ended, Lord Framlington entered the ballroom with a group of men. They stopped still at the edge of the room and looked about the crowd. One man’s gaze passed over her, then jolted back. He turned to the others. Then they all looked at her at the same time Lord Framlington did.

‘Mary, may I have the next dance?’ Philip Smyth asked.

She turned her back on Drew and his friends. 'Yes.' She bobbed a curtsy. Drew must have said something about her to his friends; their eyes had devoured her. What would he have said?

Philip Smyth took her hand as the music began.

She began the dance one step behind everyone, so light-headed she felt as though she might collapse. But she did not give in to her weakness for the dark-haired, hazel-eyed fiend. She lifted her chin, caught up the step and continued, focusing on Philip and smiling as hard as she could.

When the music came to its crescendo, ending in a brisk flurry, relief and a desire to reach the safety of her mother swamped Mary. But before Philip could lead her back, a shadow fell over her. She turned. John's cousin, on his father's side, stood there, Lord Oliver Harding, and one of Lord Framlington's friends.

'Miss Marlow.' Oliver bowed.

She curtsied. 'Lord Harding.'

She had met Oliver several times but he'd never paid her any attention. He was older than John and not interested in John's young half-siblings.

He turned to the man beside him.

Heat burned beneath Mary's skin.

'Mr Harper begged me for an introduction. Miss Marlow. Mr Harper, Miss Marlow, is my cousin's half-sister.'

She bobbed a very shallow curtsy. Mary had no knowledge of Mr Harper. She'd

never seen nor heard of him.

He raised a hand to take hers. 'May I have this dance, Miss Marlow?'

If she refused it would be obvious to everyone around them; the sets had formed, Philip had gone and she would have to leave the floor alone.

She gave him her hand and faced piercing, assessing, blue eyes. Goosebumps ran up her arm as though a cold breeze had swept into the room.

His blonde hair gave him a look of innocence, but his eyes denied it entirely. He was a rake of the worst sort, the sort who did not even bother to court wealth. That was why she'd not seen him before, because he was not the type of man to attend sedate functions. Even the card room here, she was sure, would not play deep enough.

He was a man who usually danced with sin, not in ballrooms. And Drew's chosen companion...

Her mouth dried. Why did he want to dance with her? What had Drew said?

'You're very beautiful, Miss Marlow. More so than I'd thought. I see why he is smitten.'

'He?' Her cheeks heated with a deeper blush as they took the first steps of the dance, moving closer then away from one another. He released her hand. She turned to make a ring of four with the couple to their left and faced Drew.

So, this was the game?

They completed a full circle, hands joined as a four and then the dance led her to change partner. Of course her new partner was Drew.

‘Miss Marlow.’ He acknowledged her with perfect formality.

The next move was a closer turn, shoulder to shoulder. He pressed close. Heat scorched down her arm, and burned inside her, her heart thumping hard. She opened her mouth to breathe, but there was no air.

‘Did you receive my letter?’ he whispered to her ear.

‘Yes.’

‘Will you write to me?’

There was no time to answer. They were parted by the figures of the dance.

She faced his friend, her heart pounding as she attempted to watch Drew from the corner of her eye.

The rest of the dance seemed endless. There were no other opportunities to speak with him as the complicated patterns moved Drew further and further away.

* * *

During supper, Drew stood apart from everyone, hands in pockets, as he watched others eating. Miss Marlow was in the bosom of her family, surrounded, laughing and happy. Happy? Now there was another word like love . Had he ever known what it was to be happy? How the hell did he know who was happy?

He laughed last night, though, laughed and got very drunk. He’d tracked his friends down in a gambling den not far from St James and dragged them from their game, and Peter and Harry from the whores who had draped themselves across the men’s laps. They spent the rest of the night at his bachelor residence. He had explained his

plight and asked them how he was going to convince the girl to love him. How did a man use romance and not sex to court a woman?

Harry had laughed heartily.

Drew could see the humour in the situation: the renowned seducer smote by a lack of love.

His friends then spent the following three hours in drunken amusement, advising him on the subtleties of love, and its difference from desire.

The letter was Peter's idea. He'd leaned back in his chair, lifting his glass of brandy and grinning. 'What you need, my friend, is a bloody good poet. Prose is your key. All women fall for it. They like to be told their eyes are like this, their lips like that, they love to have their beauty praised.'

Between them then, and between bouts of laughter, they'd constructed the basics of the letter. The prose had been mostly Peter's. This morning Drew rewrote it with a sober hand and sent it off.

Having played a part in his courtship, his friends had insisted on attending the next ball. They were eager to help. They'd considered it brilliant luck that Mark knew the Harding twins, Pembroke's cousins, and then another plot had been spun, to gain Drew access to Mary in the ballroom.

The Hardings were not as high in the instep as the Pembrokes. Lord Oliver had not even lifted an eyebrow at Mark's request.

The plan was, once Mark had the introduction, he would introduce the others and then they'd all dance with her, and if Drew merely passed her during the country dances, her family would not suspect any intent. But the reality proved frustrating.

There was not enough time to speak to her.

She had said she received the letter and when he asked if she would write, there was no chance for her to answer. Beyond that he'd resorted to brushing her shoulder with his fingertips once. It was hardly enough to win him a wife. He was not going to be able to convince her to marry him like this.

He turned on his heel and walked from the supper room. He needed to think, he needed to settle his mind. Then he realised, suddenly, in a blinding thought, he had asked her to write, but she did not know his address. He could not write his address in a letter her parents might see.

Changing direction, he searched out a footman in the hall. 'May I have a quill, ink and paper brought to the gentlemen's smoking room.'

After the supper, he let her dance with her friends for the first and second dances, then asked Peter to lead her out.

The dance was a pattern of four. Drew picked a quiet little wallflower of a woman to partner him.

Two movements into the dance he and Peter swapped partners. It was not a requirement of the dance. He'd agreed the move with Peter to gain longer access to Mary.

Of course, Mary realised instantly what they were doing and her jaw dropped on the verge of exclamation, but he caught her fingers in his as part of a turn and squeezed them hard. It effectively silenced her. The little wallflower seemed to think they'd made a mistake. She smiled at Peter as though she thought him foolish, but then knowing Peter, he was probably charming the girl and making her think he was the one who had planned the swap.

‘Why are you playing this game?’ Mary whispered harshly.

He bent his head and although he felt like being harsh in return, he softened his voice to honey. Some aspects of seduction may still be useful when making a girl fall in love... he needed to convince her he might suffer the same condition. ‘My dear, it is no game. I told you, I want you for my wife. I am not backing down. Steadfastness is surely evidence of a heart’s devotion.’

* * *

Drew was arrogant tonight. He did not like losing. She had enough brothers and male relations to know how stubborn men could be in competitions.

‘It is not a statement of love to want to win at any cost. I do not like being manipulated by you and your friends. You are determined, I give you that. But devoted...’ She made a scoffing sound. ‘I am sure you are devoted to my dowry.’

‘You are on your guard, Mary, darling. It is you I am devoted to, and how many times must I say I will not hurt you?’

‘Anything between us will hurt me, because it will hurt my family.’

‘But what if it hurts us more to be kept apart?’

‘There is no us, Lord Framlington.’

His eyes shone with condescending humour. ‘Must I be set back so far? Please call me Drew.’

‘You have not been set back at all. There is simply no going forward. Our?—’

‘Affair...’ He’d leaned forward as he’d whispered the word. His voice vibrated through her nerves.

She shook her head. ‘Hardly that, but whatever it is. Was. It is over – and was always folly. I cannot hurt my family.’

‘Folly? I have heard it said that we all have a soulmate. If I am yours – if we are each other’s – would you throw that away because your family did not like the man of your heart and hurt me? Oughtn’t I be higher in your heart – your future husband. Families rear us, then they are meant to become second in our lives.’

His words struck her like a slap. If I am yours – if we are each other’s – would you throw that away because your family did not like the man of your heart and hurt me?

* * *

That was bloody poetic of him. Where the hell had those words come from? Drew would be spouting this drivel as second nature soon. But he would do anything to win her, including prattling, idiotic, poetic words.

The dance separated them for several movements. But his gaze clung to her. She was intoxicatingly beautiful. Whenever he looked at her a jolt sparked in his chest as well as his groin. His thoughts were forever transfixed by this woman, whether he was in her proximity or not. He had to win her. He refused to accept her rejection of him.

He’d chosen her last season. Nearly a whole year had already passed, and he would not wait another year. He had no intention of letting her slip through his fingers.

He needed her and not simply for her money.

Aware his gaze had hardened to glaring, when the dance returned her to him, he

whispered coarsely, 'Am I not good enough for you?' That was the gut punch. Apart from his friends, no one in this room considered him their equal. It sickened him to believe she might think the same.

Her lips parted. They drew his gaze for a moment. If they were alone, he would take her into his arms, kiss her and never let her go. She was his. She just did not know it yet. 'You are meant for me. Why can you not see it?' Forget the drivel about souls and fate and love, this much was true. She was the only woman he would be happy with.

Her lips pursed.

'I tried to tell you how I felt in that letter?—'

Her fingertip grazed his lips as she passed him in a turn, saying, be silent .

Good God! Did she not know he would give anything to have her? The problem was, he only had himself to give.

'I read your letter, I know what it said.'

Drew's heart missed a beat. The look in her eyes spoke of sympathy. Did it mean there was hope?

'Write to me,' he urged. 'I will speak to you when I can, but in the meantime write.' The orchestra slowed, the dance coming to an end.

'I do not have your address,' she said as the dancers around them bowed and curtsied in parting.

He bowed and captured her fingers, lifted her hand to kiss her glove, and as he did so,

he slid the small, folded piece of paper he'd written his address on into the wrist of her glove.

'Now you do,' he said as he straightened and let her hand fall. Then he walked away.

* * *

Mary remained in the middle of the ballroom, her heartbeat ringing in her ears, as Lord Framlington, Drew, returned to his friends.

'Miss Marlow.' The man who had led her into the dance, Lord Brooke, offered his arm. 'Shall I return you to your family?'

Her hand felt numb as she rested it on his coat sleeve.

Drew and his friends had manipulated her through nearly every dance.

'There are a dozen other heiresses he could court,' she said as they walked.

'But none as beautiful.'

'So, it is my wealth and beauty he seeks?'

They passed through people forming sets for the next dance.

'Is it not his looks which draw your eyes to him?' The accusing depth of his baritone voice made her skin prickle.

He stopped a few feet from her parents, lifted her fingers from his arm, and bowed over them. 'It has been a pleasure, Miss Marlow.' Then he also walked away.

Mary's gaze followed him to Drew. When he joined them, Drew and his friends left the ballroom, without looking back.

'Who were you with?' her mother asked.

Mary faced her. 'Lord Brooke, Mama. Oliver introduced his friend to me and his friend introduced Lord Brooke.'

'And his friend was?'

'Mr Harper.' The slip of paper tucked within Mary's glove itched. Had the whole endeavour been to slip her his address?

'Mr Harper... I think his father's money came from sugar plantations.' Her father had moved beside her. 'A dreadful business by all accounts.'

She shrugged. 'I have no idea, Papa. We danced, we did not share life histories.'

He smiled. 'No, I suppose not, but if it was that Mr Harper, avoid him, he has an appalling reputation, and Lord Brooke too. Avoid them both in the future.'

'Yes, Papa.'

She had been right; Drew consorted with men whose reputations matched his – and the rogue had left his address in her glove. She would be silly to communicate with him.

Her father tapped her chin as he used to when she was young. 'Cheer up, sweetheart, there are plenty of decent men about, and here is one. I believe Lord Farquhar wishes a second dance.'

Daniel was indeed approaching with a broad smile.

Why could Cupid not aim a steady arrow at her heart, one which led to a trustworthy man, rather than a predatory rake?

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Drew crawled into bed, three sheets to the wind. His friends had retired to his bachelor apartment for a second evening, and the first light of dawn crept about his curtains when they left.

His friends spent half the night commending him on his choice. The second half they spent constructing more verse, only this time Peter said it should praise Mary's nature, not her beauty. Apparently, she'd told Peter she did not care for compliments. Lack of vanity was another credit to be notched in her favour.

A considerable amount of laughter had followed and an inevitable quantity of wine.

When he woke, he lay hot and sweaty in a tangle of sheets, his body thrumming with the need for Mary. In his dream she had said yes in the glasshouse.

He reached for his pocket watch. It was only midday. He generally lived a nocturnal life, sleeping in the day and staying up all night. But there was no way he would be able to sleep again.

He threw the covers aside, got up, washed and shaved, planning to ride in the park to vent his frustration. Rewriting the latest letter would have to wait until he'd dealt with the pain of unsated lust. He could seek a willing woman to assuage it but he had abstained for a year waiting for Mary, and he would not break that now. To share a bed with another woman, now, would feel like treachery. It was Mary he needed, no one else.

A bitter taste filled his mouth, and it was not from last night's excess of drink; it was the taste of fear. If I fail and lose her...

On his ride he stretched out Hera's strides, hurtling the mare across the open meadow of Green Park, leaning low, holding his body close to the horse's, pushing his bodyweight into his heels, and keeping balance with his shins and thighs, riding like a madman.

He felt close to insanity. Desperate.

Still, if she was easily caught, he would be bored of her in weeks. No, her determination to withstand him only bore out his belief that she was the woman for him. Her strength of character was admirable.

Returning home, he rewrote the letter his friends had constructed in their cups last night, and as he reached its end found his own words flowing from the quill, a diatribe falling from his mind onto the paper as words had come to him last night while they danced. He blotted the ink briskly then folded the paper before he lost the courage to include his own words and sealed it with wax.

He found a young lad he trusted in the street and sent the boy off to deliver it.

* * *

Mary was sitting in the family drawing room, alone, reading. Her mother and father, John and Kate had taken the children to Hyde Park. Having declined their invitation to accompany them, she had no chaperon with her. Her father had bidden Mr Finch to say no one was at home if anyone called.

'Miss Marlow.' Finch stood in the room, balancing the silver tray on his hand.

'A letter?'

'Yes, miss.' When he bowed, offering it, Mary saw Drew's handwriting and her

wicked heart leapt with joy.

She broke the seal as soon as Finch left the room.

The letter began with another poem, commending the extreme good nature of her soul, and then gushing about her charm and eloquence.

She smiled; Lord Brooke had been telling tales.

The following paragraphs spoke of commitment, of lifelong happiness. They were only words. They meant little in reality.

But the last paragraph... The strokes of Drew's writing seemed somehow sharper, and the words on the page lifted out with feeling.

My Mary, you are, you know, mine. You always will be, accept me or not. You and I are meant to be one, half to become whole. Put us together, Mary, darling, make us one, a single being. I want you. I cannot say I love you, not yet, I do not even know what on earth love is, but I do know that I cannot sleep for thinking of you, or avoid dreaming of you. I think of you and I lose my breath. I see you and my heart begins to pound. I hear you and my spirit wants to sing. I am yours, Mary. Be mine. I cannot walk away. I will not.

Think of the possibilities. If this is love? If this is our only chance? If we are meant to be, would you throw that away? Throw me away?

Do not! Let us be.

Yours truly,

D

She could hear the words in her mind, as if he were here reading them to her.

She'd told him many times she barely knew him; now it felt as if she'd known him all her life. Perhaps it was true – he was meant for her.

A sigh slipped past her lips. If she did not agree soon, he would marry someone else. He could not live without money forever.

Her gaze drifted to the window. Birdsong permeated the glass. She did not want to marry someone else. She sighed again. She had thought that last night, and yet not thought about what he would do... She did not want him to marry anyone else. She could not watch him with a wife.

Why did her heart favour a forbidden man? She had no idea how to break free. I do not want to be free. I want to be his wife. She did not see a bad man in his eyes.

John would be furious if she chose Drew. Her father and mother would be disappointed. But they would not disown her. They would forgive her, because they loved her.

She folded the letter and took it to her room. There, she searched out his address. Then sat at her writing desk.

The quill hovered over the paper. She would not make promises. But could she have her family and Drew? Would he love her? How could she bear to hurt her parents, though? Yet, how could she bear it if Drew married someone else? She began to write.

Make me believe, if you wish . You make us be . Prove that I may trust your words. Prove that you will love me and not hurt me.

She wrote no more. She could not think of anything else to say. His ego was too big to offer him compliments. The rogue would only bask in them.

She folded the letter, reached for the wax, melted a little and sealed it.

She smiled when she rose from the desk.

Was she really doing this?

It appeared so.

The letter fluttered in her fingers, drying the wax as she hurried downstairs. Now she had made up her mind that this was the right thing to do, she no longer felt guilty. Her parents would learn the truth about him.

When Mary reached the hall, she avoided Finch's unwanted questions, left the house through the servants' stairwell and went to the stables. She found one of the boys who fed the horses and cleaned the stalls, gave him a ha'penny and sent him to deliver the letter.

Less than an hour later, the boy burst into her private sitting room with a broad grin, waving a reply in his grubby hand. 'The gent sent this back, miss. I brought it up meself 'cause he said it was a secret between you and me. I've snuck through the 'ouse. No one saw me, miss.'

Mary took the letter and found out another ha'penny – the price of deceit. 'Wait here, please.' Breaking the seal, she turned and walked into her bedchamber, closed the door and sat on the edge of her bed.

How may I prove it to you? Tell me, and I will do it. Anything. I will climb the highest mountain for you, swim a lake or run across a continent. Only tell me and I

shall prove it, Mary, darling.

Are you alone? How long for? Look from the window.

He was outside!

She went to the window.

Carriages passed at the edge of the garden in the middle of the square. People walked the pavements.

She saw him. He stood against the garden's railing on the far side of the street from John's house, smoking a cigar in a nonchalant blasé pose, the rim of his hat tipped forward, shadowing his eyes.

She returned to the sitting room where the stable lad waited. 'Let the gentleman in, Tom, please. Take him to the summerhouse and tell him to wait there. But remember, this is a secret. I will reward you for your silence later. No one must see him, you understand?'

'Yes, miss.' The lad gave an awkward bow, tugging his forelock, then he raced out of the room.

Mary went back into her bedchamber and looked in the mirror on her dressing table. Strands of hair had fallen from the silver comb she'd styled it with. She tucked them back into place, then raced downstairs as eagerly as the stable lad.

She slowed halfway down the stairs, a dozen butterflies taking flight in her stomach as she saw Finch in the hall.

He looked up and bowed, as did the footman he was speaking with.

‘I am going to read in the summerhouse...’ she said when she stepped off the bottom stair, ‘and I may fall asleep, so please do not let anyone disturb me.’

‘Of course, Miss Marlow,’ the old bulldog answered. He was her family’s guardian, and now she was deceiving him too. Her parents would send her home to the country if they knew.

She went to the library first as she’d left her book upstairs, and picked out another without even looking at its title, then let herself out through a French door.

Heat touched her face as she crossed the lawn. She did not hurry in case Finch was watching from the house.

The summerhouse was at the end of the garden, tucked away among tall shrubs. No one could see it from the house and no one could see anyone approaching it from the stables.

The path passed through a row of archways that were covered with gloriously scented flowering wisteria.

When she reached the summerhouse, he stood at the far end of the narrow wooden veranda, with his back to her. He had removed his hat and ruffled his hair.

‘This is very bad of you,’ she stated as she climbed the steps of the veranda. She did not walk to him, she stopped and leaned against the post at the opposite end to where he stood, holding the book in both hands in front of her.

He turned and faced her, a broad smile parting his lips. ‘But exhilarating,’ he answered. ‘What will you do if we are caught? Think of the repercussions.’

He was teasing her; laughter danced in his eyes. She had not seen him in daylight

since the morning they rode together. She had forgotten how the sunlight gilded his eyes, turning the hazel gold.

He walked towards her, pulling off his gloves. 'How long do we have?'

'An hour, perhaps more.'

'A whole hour to ourselves...' He threw his gloves aside. They landed beside his hat on a low table. He took the book from her hands and put that down with them.

'So, tell me...' his fingers raised her chin, 'how may I prove that we are meant for one another?'

She could not answer, she could not draw air into her lungs. It didn't matter; his lips pressed to hers. It was unlike any other kiss they'd shared – it was not urgent or hurried, or persuasive. It was just a touching of lips.

A sigh escaped his mouth when his lips left hers and the side of his nose stroked across hers. 'I've thought about you all night.'

Her head tipped back, away. 'So, we are back to seduction.'

He laughed as his hands braced her waist and shook her gently. His hands made her feel safe not in danger.

'Lord, I love you. You have convinced me of it,' he said. 'You are the only woman who can say no to me. I adore you more because you fight me. You just do not trust me enough.'

'Enough to do what?' The words I love you rang in her thoughts, but they had been casually said with a pitch of amusement. He had said in his letter he did not even

know what love was.

‘To become my wife, obviously, sweetheart.’

‘What would it be like to be your wife?’ When she looked into his eyes this closely, the hazel had streaks of colours, amber, ochre, copper, cinnamon. She looked beyond the colours, trying to see into his soul. She could not see any artifice. People were not all one shade, one attitude; they were a myriad of attitudes, beliefs and emotions. He was not all bad, there was good too.

Put us together, Mary, darling, make us one, a single being. I want you. I cannot say I love you, not yet, I do not even know what on earth love is, but I do know that I cannot sleep for thinking of you, or avoid dreaming of you.

‘I hope we will be happy. I want to make you happy. We will buy our own estate and make it a home. It need not be large. It will take time to become profitable, but I will make it so.’

I think of you and I lose my breath. I see you and my heart begins to pound. I hear you and my spirit wants to sing. I am yours, Mary. Be mine.

‘How will you be with our children?’

His smile dropped, and his gaze turned inward as he pondered the idea.

If he was unable to give her an immediate answer without thinking about it, that was surely evidence his earlier words were not a lie.

Her palm rested against his cheek. She did not see the man who watched her in ballrooms. This was who he was beneath the pretentious rogue. This was the Drew who had written those impassioned words.

‘I have never thought of having children,’ he replied solemnly.

He was human, as vulnerable as any other, no matter his reputation.

‘But I would like our children.’

Mary lifted onto her toes and touched her lips to his, briefly, as he had done.

‘Perhaps, God willing, we will have a dozen.’ A broad smile parted his lips and his eyes shone with a new light. ‘You must teach me how to be a father, as you will teach me how to love you.’

He was a good man, people just didn’t know it. She longed to prove to her parents that there was good in him.

‘Are you tempted?’

‘To marry you?’

He shook his head, the smile liltng on his lips. ‘Stop doubting me. I am not speaking of physical intimacy.’

‘Yes.’ The word slipped out before she had chance to consider it. Her heart had said it. ‘I am tempted.’

His lips pressed to hers in a strong kiss.

When he broke the kiss, his nose stroked hers again, in a sensitive gesture of affection. ‘I love you. I really think I do.’

And I love you. She did not say it. She did not dare. Her head did not trust him

enough yet. But her heart...

His hands tightened around her waist and he picked her up. She clung to his shoulders.

‘You are perfect for me, Mary.’

She laughed.

His eyes gleamed gold and then amber, changing and changing again in the light, as he swung her up into his arms and carried her inside the summerhouse. He gently put her down on the soft, cushioned, sofa.

Smiling like a fool, she sat upright.

She did not just love him, she adored him.

He dropped to one knee. ‘Mary...’ He took her hands from her lap and held them. ‘Marry me.’

Her stomach rolled a somersault.

His eyes were so earnest she believed he genuinely did care for her.

But what about her family? ‘I cannot answer yet. I am sorry. I need to think.’

His expression darkened. ‘But I may hope you will say yes?’

‘You may hope. I am not saying no.’ Mary bit her lip, afraid of what she’d said, of what she wanted to say.

His palm braced her cheek, they leaned towards one another, then kissed, as he remained on one knee, a supplicant before her.

The kiss burned like fire, as her blood ran with hunger and thirst.

He broke it. 'Let me touch you. Let me love you. I will not take your virginity, I swear, I will leave you choice. You are right, marriage is more than a physical thing, but this is what I know, let me give you this and show you.'

The agreement was her body's choice, the desire spiralled in her stomach, coiling to the point he'd touched between her legs. She nodded, her fingers sliding into his hair and pulling him back to her.

This kiss was firm, pressing against her mouth, as he rose from the floor, leaning over her so she had to lie back. His warm hand raised her knee, encouraging her to move her legs on to the sofa and lie down. His knee dipped the cushion beside hers as he lay down beside her.

His tongue came into her mouth, invading and caressing, and the heat of his palm caressed her breast.

Her nipple hardened with a sharp pain.

He broke the kiss and sat up. 'I am too hot.' He shed his morning coat and threw it on to a chair near the sofa. Then lay down beside her again, raised on one elbow, leaving one hand free. That hand reached to her dress and began lifting the hem.

Her heartbeat thundered. She should stop him. She had said no in the glasshouse. But she did not want to feel naive with him. If they married, she wanted to be his equal. It was better she knew about this...

She pressed her heels into the sofa's cushion, lifting her bottom and thighs so the material could slide up more easily as she held on to his gaze for reassurance.

When her hem slid to the top of her thighs he stopped.

A breath trembled in her lungs as he leaned in and kissed her. His hand settled on her breast and kneaded.

Her fingers shook as she swept the hair from his brow.

A firm column within his trousers pressed against her hip.

Need coiled through her abdomen again.

Her mother had told her very little about the marriage act, but Mary knew what happened, she had seen animals and she had seen her brothers naked when they swam in the lake, and she knew her own body.

His kiss urged her to reciprocate as his tongue circled hers. She did, her fingers holding his hair as their tongues played a breathless game, while her hips pressed up against his, feeling the column of his arousal.

His fingers left her breast and undid a few of the buttons securing her bodice, then his hand was within, and found its way beneath her chemise to the flesh of her breast.

Her fingers left his hair and searched for the buttons of his waistcoat.

A sound of amusement rumbled in the back of his throat as his hand closed about her breast, but his body lifted to let her undo the buttons.

When his waistcoat opened her fingers pulled at his cotton shirt, yanking it out of the

waist of his trousers so she could touch his skin too. Her fingertips followed the architecture of his muscles, as his explored her breast.

His lips left hers.

She looked into eyes that looked into hers. 'You're beautiful, Mary, within and without. I do love you.'

I love you too.

His head bowed. His lips touched her chin then travelled down her neck, nipping and biting gently.

She shut her eyes, shut out embarrassment, as he moved her dress aside and kissed her breast.

A summer breeze swept in through the open doors, caressing her naked skin.

With her eyes closed she could hide in the darkness.

As he sucked her nipple with a sharp tug, the pain of desire struck like a dagger between her legs. Her body wanted him there; to know how it felt to join with a man.

A moan left her lips as she instinctively arched, pressing her breast towards his mouth.

The warmth of his mouth left her.

She opened her eyes. He was looking at her.

'Let me touch you fully.' His voice flowed over gravel.

She didn't understand at first, but then his hand lowered. 'Will you allow it?'

'Yes.' It was what she desperately wanted.

His fingers brushed the smooth inner surface of her thigh, drawing slow intoxicating circles.

A shiver raked her body.

A smile lifted his closed lips.

She wished to hide behind closed eyelids but she could not while he watched. Her lips fell open. She wanted to weep, whimper and cry out with pleasure all at once.

Suddenly his fingers swept up and touched her between her legs, pressing against her.

She bit her lip as her fingers clawed into the skin at the back of his waist.

'You're wet for me, darling,' he said as his fingers touched her.

She was terrified... and excited. She wanted him to stop and she wanted him to continue. If my parents find us...

The thought was swiftly swept away as his forefinger slipped inside her body, only slightly, but... He stroked her. Gently. Carefully. The coil in her lower body wound tighter, the tension as tight as a spring.

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She closed her eyes, gritting her teeth as the sensations wound so tight they fought for release.

The world crashed in on her as the release came, pulsing through her, her fingers curled, her nails cut into his skin, gripping him tightly as though she would fall. His lips covered hers, kissing her until the sensations passed, taking the sound that she would have cried out.

‘Good God, you are perfect,’ he said quietly, in awe.

His finger withdrew a little and she thought it was all over, but then she felt his finger again, pressing, gently stroking and provoking. Sensory delight, different than before, danced through her nerves. The day was hot; she had a desire to be rid of their clothes and lie naked together.

The column of his arousal pushed against her hip in the same rhythm that his finger withdrew and re-entered her. She wanted to touch him as intimately as he was touching her; that would be fair. Desperation pulling at her nerves again, her fingers fought to free the buttons on his waistband.

A soft laugh left his throat and entered her mouth. He did not help her, though; instead his lips left hers, his head lowered and he sucked her nipple.

The first then the second button came loose, releasing the flap of his trousers. Her fingers delved inside and touched the hard column of his flesh.

His skin felt like velvet.

She bit her lip and squeezed her eyelids tightly closed, hiding in the darkness, not wanting to witness her sinful behaviour.

She clutched it, holding firm, not knowing what else to do.

‘I’ll show you.’ His voice brushed over her breast, answering her unspoken thought. He raised his head and covered her hand with his. She opened her eyes and met his gaze. His finger and thumb were damp from where he’d touched her. ‘Like this,’ he said, as he drew her hand down and then up.

His eyes were pools of emotion, sunlight shining through honey.

I love you.

She no longer felt embarrassed by their intimacy, she was swimming too deep in their shared sensations, and she knew they were shared because his eyes told her he felt the same as she did.

His hand returned to her, and two fingers pressed inside her.

As they touched each other, they watched each other’s expressions.

The emotion caught so tight within her, it felt as though he had a hand about her heart too.

His head bowed and his hair brushed her skin as his lips touched her breast again.

Drew.

He sucked her nipple, his fingers working their charm between her legs.

Drew.

Her fingers clasped tighter about his erection, he covered her hand with his, moving it into a quicker motion then returned to the task of touching her.

Drew.

Hunger and thirst surged on a high tide, rising then pooling in the place where his fingers worked, her body impatient for more. She wanted his weight, his strength, his pressure on her and in her... there.

Her thoughts lost in the swirling turmoil, her thumb accidentally touched the tip of his erection.

A shiver racked his body.

It was a heady feeling, to discover she could move him as much as he moved her.

His suck pulled hard on her breast, then released and his head came up, a rogue's smile twisting his lips. 'Mary, darling, I'm trying to be good.'

'And if I do not want you to be good any more?' The breathless words tumbled from her dry mouth.

His eyes lost their rakish glint. 'Sweetheart, you do. I made you a promise. You can trust me. I shan't break it. I will not leave you with no choice but to marry me. I want you to choose me.' The caress between her legs grew more intense as he spoke, utterly entrancing her body.

'I am choosing you now,' she said more forcefully, desperate to know the conclusion of this.

‘No. Your body is choosing me. You would only regret it later.’

He touched a particular point inside her that made her whole body arch and her head press back into the sofa cushion. His head bent and his lips brushed her temple, then his kiss touched the skin beside her eye. Her eyelids lowered and she gave herself to whatever this would be.

He kissed her cheek, her nose, her chin as his fingers and thumb played their wicked games.

Her hand embraced his erection, just holding now, as her other hand clung to his shoulder, her breathing quickening and her heartbeat racing.

‘Let go, sweetheart,’ he whispered huskily. ‘Trust me, you need do nothing more just relax and feel.’

The tide rose within her. He knew... He knew how she would respond.

His fingers stroked deep inside her as his thumb played over a sensitive spot at the fore of her sex. Sensations flowed like ripples through her body, like the last crests of the waves rolling over the pebbles at Lyme Regis, one racing across another, drawing back the smallest pebbles and spinning them over.

‘Please, I want you...’ She begged for him to conclude this.

‘You would regret it, darling. Just let go,’ he urged her as firmly as his fingers worked. ‘Come into my hand.’

Thoughts and feelings shattered, splintering into a thousand pieces that were swept away on a surging, rolling crescent of a wave. It washed through her blood like a bore tide, ripping through her veins, stronger than she’d felt before.

‘That’s it, sweetheart...’ he said as his movement stopped. It was as though he felt the emotions throbbing within her. Then his fingers were gone and instead he held the hand that held him and looked at her face. ‘I am sorry, darling. I am sorry, but I need this.’ His gaze clung to hers as their joined hands slid up and down much faster than before. It became a painful embrace.

His eyes shone, their onyx centres broad, glazed with a dark intent.

She understood; she could see the sensations he’d taught her echoed in his expressions.

Then he stopped. It was as though every muscle in his body locked. His eyes looked up to nowhere, and a cry of revelation broke his lips, rasping from his throat. He pulsed in her hand and wet heat spilled from his tip. This was his moment of ecstasy. The intimacy and vulnerability of it touched her soul.

He closed his eyes and his head rested on her shoulder. He breathed heavily.

He was not a monster, just a man. A man she loved, and a man who cared for her. A man who was labelled bad by society. They were wrong.

When he lifted his head and opened his eyes, they shone with gratitude. ‘You are divine. Thank you. When you are certain, my darling, when you say yes, then we will join, but not before. You must know you can trust me.’

As he stood up to right his clothes, her heartbeat slowed. She felt cold, despite the hot day.

He withdrew a handkerchief from the pocket of his morning coat, wiped his hand and then held it towards her. ‘Here... You may want to wipe yourself.’ He looked as if he feared she’d bolt.

She would not. She'd made her choice. She accepted the handkerchief, wiped her hand and between her thighs, remembering how she had begged him for more...

He smiled. 'You look gorgeous with your hair tousled,' he said, as he took the soiled handkerchief and slid it back into his pocket.

Heat burned in her skin as she swung her legs from the sofa, sitting upright before pulling up the neck of her chemise and securing the buttons of her bodice with shaking fingers. She stood. The hem of her dress fell, revealing how creased the muslin had become. Awkwardness beset her. What should she say and do now?

He smiled as he slid his arms into his morning coat. His waistcoat was buttoned up once more and his shirt tucked neatly into his trousers. Looking at him, no one would know they had done anything. Yet, if they looked at her, they would see the hair that had fallen from the comb and how crumpled her dress was.

His fingers tilted her chin and he kissed her quickly.

Her heart fluttered and her stomach flipped. Lifting onto her toes, she wrapped her arms about his neck, kissed his cheek and said to his ear, 'I will, yes.'

His head pulled back, his eyes full of questions. 'Yes?'

'Yes. I will marry you.'

His brow furrowed, as though he did not believe her.

If she needed any more proof that he was not the rogue he seemed, here it was. His surprise and doubt only showed he was not as self-confident as he appeared. It was what he had not done, more than what he did, that convinced her. He'd determinedly remained mindful of her virginity. She would show people he was not what they

thought.

‘You are sure?’

‘I am sure. I think I can trust you.’ She held his gaze, stepping tentatively onto a bridge of faith.

The expression in his eyes softened. ‘You think you can trust me, and I think I love you. Is this our foundation?’

Her palm rested against his cheek. ‘Do you wish to dissuade me now? You are only proving yourself worthy of my...’ She lost the courage to say the word.

His lips tilted to his roguish half-smile. ‘Of your what...? Of your love...? Do you think you love me too?’ His voice rang with surprise and hope.

She lifted her chin. Defiant. ‘I would not have done what we did if I did not.’

His gaze bored into hers, looking for something as his fingers tenderly brushed a lock of hair from her brow. ‘Let us be in love then. Let this be a love match.’ His voice sounded as if it rolled through gravel it was so deep and filled with raw emotions. He held her hand and pressed a hard brief kiss on her lips. ‘You know we must elope; your family will never agree to our marriage.’

She nodded. ‘I know.’ The weight of her decision settled heavily on her shoulders. This would be hard, she would break their hearts. But they would come to see the good in Drew.

‘I’ll make arrangements. Send the stable boy to me in three days and I’ll write to you.’

She nodded, the muscles inside her aching from his intimate touch.

His lips brushed hers, another brief touch, then he breathed across her mouth.

‘Sweetheart, I cannot believe you said yes.’

‘You must go. My parents will be home soon. I will walk you to the gate.’

‘Very well.’ He picked up his hat and gloves.

She led him by the hand, the leather of his glove now a barrier between them, walking with him under the cover of the trees and through the avenue of arches where the sweet-scented wisteria flowers hung down.

She did not stop until they reached the gate which opened on to the alley leading to the mews.

His gaze held hers. ‘I will write. I shall tell you when and where.’

She nodded.

‘We will be together soon.’ He smiled and his gloved fingers brushed her cheek then he bestowed a brief kiss on her lips.

He turned and slid the bolt loose.

She caught her lower lip between her teeth.

He opened the gate, threw a roguish smile across his shoulder, then left.

‘Mary!’

Every muscle jumped as she hurriedly slid the bolt back into place.

‘Mary! Mary!’ Several voices shouted. Her brothers and sisters. Her parents were home.

Her siblings would have tales to tell, about everything she’d missed.

She longed to tell her own news. I am engaged. A smile parted her lips. I am going to marry him.

Her siblings found her in the wisteria walk. They charged towards her, the younger ones shouting.

* * *

As Drew jogged up the steps of White’s, he grinned from ear to ear. When he walked into the room where his friends were ensconced a few moments later his grin had dropped to a smile but joy was lodged somewhere deep in his chest. He had said the words I love you . Only God knew if they were true; he did not. No one had taught him what love was. But his feelings for Mary were so much more than lust.

She had been without guile or artifice. Beautiful. Honest. Her soul naked. She had given him her complete trust... Then love...

The word love had come to his lips, the word he never thought he would say... Even if it were not true, it did not matter, he cared a great deal for her. He knew that much.

Strange new feelings whizzed through his nerves like fireworks. Pride. Happiness. Excitement. His life had become something to look forward to.

‘Success.’ He stated the single word as he joined his friends and dropped into the one

free leather armchair about a low table. 'You may congratulate me, gentlemen, I am engaged to the fair Miss Marlow.'

'No!'

'You dark dog!'

'Bloody hell!'

All three exclamations broke at once. His friends rose to their feet, slapped his shoulder and shook his hand.

'Our letters did their job then,' Peter said.

'It was more than the letters. It appears I've not lost my charm after all.'

Peter laughed. 'You did not? It's the middle of the day. How the hell did you get within ten feet of the girl?'

Drew smiled. That is for me to know...

Peter laughed again, shaking his head before sitting back down.

The others sat too, but as they did, Drew caught sight of Pembroke looking at him from the far side of the room.

Mary's half-brother sat among his influential uncles.

Drew sent him a twisted smile. Let the bugger squirm, he would find out the cause of their exuberance soon enough. Her whole family would be baying for Drew's blood then, but it was worth the fight.

Looking away, Drew poured himself some brandy from a bottle on the table between his friends. He would need at least a day and night alone with her. It would be best to leave in daylight, then they could travel more easily and cover more miles to find somewhere to spend the night in private.

There, he would fix their fate, so when they were found, there would be no going back. That was the best approach for her sake and his. To be ruined in private and married in London in public, not in a clandestine affair in Gretna. No one need know her family had been tricked into agreement.

11

Two days later, when Mary saw Lord Framlington enter the ballroom with his friends, she could recount how many hours and minutes had passed since he'd left her at the garden gate. Their secret had been bursting to break from her lips ever since. She wished to scream it aloud, to take her mother and father aside and say, I am engaged, to whisper it into her friends' ears.

Her heart brimmed with joy.

Her family would be disappointed, and angry, but she would make them understand.

Last night she'd claimed a headache and kept to her room rather than eat dinner with them. She did not wish to face the guilt; she wished to hold on to happiness a little while longer. She'd hardly slept or eaten since then, but she was neither tired nor hungry. Her body hummed with impatient energy, waiting for the moment they would elope. Excited. Yet terrified of the moment her parents would discover her lies.

Her mother had come to her room this morning, sat on Mary's bed and asked, 'What is wrong?'

'Nothing,' she'd answered.

'We heard that Lord Farquhar announced his engagement to Miss Pope last evening. Has this upset you?'

'No. That is wonderful news.'

Her mother had not believed her denial. She kissed Mary's cheek then promised she would always be there.

Mary hoped her parents would forgive her when they found out the truth.

She hoped too, when she and Drew returned, the two of them would be like Bethany and Daniel were now, surrounded by friends congratulating them.

Her gaze left her friends and looked to the far side of the ballroom, where he and his friends stood. They may as well be a battlefield apart, the chasm between their lives was so wide. But she would cross it.

A confident smile held on Drew's lips then he said something to his friends and the group broke into laughter.

Something caught in her stomach, gripping at the cluster of nerves in her solar plexus. What had he said? Why had they laughed?

Lord Brooke and Mr Harper looked about them. Then Drew's gaze searched the room. She guessed they were looking for her.

A woman approached them. Lady Kilbride, the Marquis of Kilbride's wife. She caught Drew's attention. Mary had seen Drew speaking to her before. His friends turned away, talking among themselves. Lady Kilbride rested a hand on Drew's forearm as they spoke. He leaned forward to let her speak into his ear.

They turned together, and Mary's heartbeat stuttered.

He escorted Lady Kilbride out through an open French door.

Mary froze as they disappeared into the dark night.

She'd heard rumours of Lady Kilbride, of her unfaithfulness. Was Drew her lover?

She did not dance the next set but told Daniel her slippers rubbed. He kindly stood out with her watching Bethany dance. Emily joined them as she did not have a dance partner.

Nausea rolled in Mary's empty stomach as she struggled to make conversation.

Twenty minutes has passed when Drew and Lady Kilbride returned. She stopped mid-sentence: Lady Kilbride clutched his handkerchief in her hand.

'Mary, what is it?' Daniel looked over his shoulder, following her gaze.

Drew was hidden by the dancers.

Daniel looked back at her.

'Mary, what is it?' Emily queried her silence.

'Nothing is wrong. Sorry, I lost my thread.' Would he do that? Would he make love to Lady Kilbride after what they had done?

The dance ended and her other friends returned before Daniel or Emily could question her further.

Mary looked for Drew. He'd returned to his friends. Lady Kilbride elsewhere.

As Lord Brooke said something to Drew, Drew's gaze caught Mary staring. A bitter smile twisted his lips. The expression said he knew she'd seen him with Lady Kilbride. Lord Brooke must have seen her watching and told Drew.

Mary turned to her friend. 'Emily...'

Because Emily was uncertain of her place in society, she hated to offend, which made her a good confidant. 'I wish to talk to a group of gentlemen I met the other night. Mama would skin me alive if she knew I was going to be so forward, but you will keep me company, won't you? There is safety in numbers. There will be no harm done if we both speak to them, and I am sure your papa will thank me for introducing you to Lord Framlington and Lord Brooke.'

The naivety of Emily's family meant she would not know the reputations of those men.

She conceded rather than actively agreeing. Mary added another deceit to her list.

She threaded her arm through Emily's and led her across the room.

Lord Brooke saw them coming and turned to Drew.

* * *

Peter touched Drew's shoulder. 'You had better look sharp. You are about to become the victim of your fiancée's wrath. The lady bears daggers in her eyes.' Peter's smile said he thought it a great joke.

Drew's friends had joined him tonight not at his request, but of their choosing, insisting they should be given the opportunity to congratulate his future wife. Truthfully, they came to see him act the lover and humiliate himself. They were here to laugh at him – albeit good-naturedly.

Of course he had not told them his attempt at affection was genuine. That was for Mary to know and no one else. He would not make himself vulnerable to the whole

damned world.

But his friends' presence was welcome, especially as Peter had been able to warn Drew that Mary had seen him leave with Caro.

As she approached, the look on her face made it clear she'd misunderstood. Peter was right, a thunderstorm raged in her eyes. She probably did not know Caro was his sister, only a few people knew of their relationship. His family never acknowledged either of their bastards in public.

The pale blue satin Mary wore enhanced her eyes and made her hair and eyelashes look even darker, while the pearls about her neck made his fingers itch to touch her skin.

Kilbride had been up to his vicious games again and Caro had needed a shoulder to weep on. Her make-up had barely covered the bruises. As the family outcasts, they had turned to each other since childhood. He'd promised to intervene in her marriage a dozen times but she was too afraid of Kilbride. But when he married Mary he would have the money to get her away from Kilbride and hide her. Then he intended to insist she let him help.

Drew held Mary's gaze as she walked the final steps, laughter tight in his throat. He smiled.

Her family be damned. The girl had courage to come across the room and tackle him.

He liked this side of her nature.

He even liked that she was angry over what she must consider his betrayal – it supported his belief that she would not behave like that.

But the poor little mouse of a woman on her arm...

‘Lord Framlington.’ Mary released her friend and dropped a too-shallow, insulting curtsy. Her friend lowered much further. Mary turned to Peter and dropped deeper too, saying, ‘Lord Brooke.’ Bless her, she was mocking him before his friends. The little firebrand. His future wife had a spirit beyond his hopes. He bit his tongue to prevent any sound of amusement escaping.

She acknowledged Mark and Harry too, then introduced the mouse she was using as her cover. ‘May I introduce Miss Emily Smithfield.’ It was like tossing a lamb into a dog pit. The poor child curtsied again. She was no match for Mary’s magnificent beauty, but she was pretty, with brown hair and brown eyes. She would, unfortunately for her, be of interest to his friends.

‘Lord Framlington.’ Mary ruthlessly dragged his attention back to her.

‘Miss Marlow.’ He bowed as insultingly as she’d curtsied to him, his smile broadening. He could not hold back his joy as he wondered if he would need to fight over who wore the trousers in his wedded bliss.

She opened her mouth to speak?—

‘Before you begin, Lady Kilbride is my younger sister.’ He kept his pitch cold, for the benefit of his friends’ ears.

The storm in her eyes blew out instantly. ‘Your sister?’

‘Yes, my dear, and you may wish to rescue your friend. It is rather rash of you to throw her to the wolves, Mary.’

She glanced at Miss Smithfield, then back to him and stuttered, ‘Forgive me. I... I...

am sorry.’

‘I am not sorry. Your jealousy heartens me. It bodes well for our future. It proves you care.’ A rakish pitch rang in his voice, but he cursed internally when he saw her blush and her eyes cloud with uncertainty – yet his friends were in earshot.

His fingers itched to stroke a curl back from her brow to reassure her – but he could not touch her here.

The first notes of a waltz began. Peter asked Miss Smithfield to the floor. The poor girl.

He would risk everything if he asked Mary, but he thrived on risk. He looked towards her family and caught her father’s glare.

Drew looked back at her and said quietly to avoid Mark and Harry overhearing, ‘Your father is watching, you had better go, but tell me one thing first, are your family busy any days in the next week or so?’

Her eyebrows lifted. ‘Not that I know.’

Drew caught Harry’s glance. He lowered his voice further. ‘I think it best if we leave after breakfast so we can travel during the day. Contact me when you know your absence will go unnoticed from morning until at least the dinner hour.’

She nodded, her gaze searching his expression, looking for proof of his loyalty.

His fingers lifted and touched the bare skin above her long evening gloves, his action hidden by her body so her father could not see.

She shivered.

‘You must trust that I love you.’ He was desperate for her to believe him, even though he did not wholly believe himself.

‘I am sorry, I misjudged?—’

‘It does not matter.’ The whole world misjudged him.

Mark moved closer. Drew threw him a look that said stay away .

‘When you have a date, I will send you the details of our arrangements.’

A shallow smile touched her lips as she nodded again.

Glancing past her shoulder, Drew saw her father striding towards them. ‘Your papa is coming, darling.’

She did not turn away, still defying her father.

A tight feeling clenched hard in his chest. ‘Go, sweetheart. Write soon and set a date. Then no one can come between us.’

‘I love you,’ she whispered before turning sharply as though she had been insulted and had just given him a scolding.

The words struck his gut like a punch. Good God , someone loved him. Someone who understood those words to their full depth. Lord, he adored her strength and resourcefulness.

Her father continued to look at him. The man could fume all he wished – he’d lost – Mary was Drew’s now.

Her father walked Mary back to her mother, where she would be guarded for the rest of the night.

‘I am wondering who has seduced who.’ Harry leaned to Drew. ‘Are you smitten?’

Drew turned. ‘I must look smitten; the girl wants a love match. Was that not the whole point of our letter writing? I must convince her I am affected or she will not have me.’

Harry’s needling cut. What Drew felt, or did not feel, was his own business. He did not like people knowing the boy at the heart of the rogue, the boy who only knew rejection and become a toy and a monster to be hated.

Mark grinned. ‘Well, I was convinced.’

‘Think what you will.’

‘I am going to play cards,’ Mark said and left.

Harry followed him, a smirk on his lips.

Marlow’s judgement irked more than Drew cared to admit. Pembroke had cause to be against him, but her parents had none. Marlow’s views were based on hearsay; he ought to wait until he knew Drew to make a judgement. It was another seed thrown to grow in the bitterness that was a tangled thorny briar inside him. He hated being rejected by people who thought themselves better than him.

Drew saw his elder sister Lady Elizabeth Ponsonby among the dancers.

His reputation had been sealed before his birth. His family had dictated it. He’d never had a choice. Wickedness was expected of him.

While Mary's family tended towards happy-ever-after his family raced towards hell and Elizabeth was one of the worst of them. She danced with her latest adoring youth. She collected young men like other women collected hats. The poor chap. Drew watched her until the dance ended. As they walked to the edge of the floor she brushed the tip of her fan across his crotch. She was crass, but no doubt the boy thought himself in love as Pembroke had.

It was no wonder Pembroke judged Drew ill when he'd been entrapped by Elizabeth's games. Pembroke had arrived in Europe with his eyes shuttered. Drew had been born with his eyes open, aware that promiscuity was not love.

Faithlessness, arrogance and self-gratification were all expected of him because that was the way of his family, and until he met Mary he lived up to every one of those expectations.

Across the room, Mary was being subjected to an interrogation. She shook her head again and again.

The vicious twist he had in his nature, the side of him that raged when he was rejected, liked her lying through her teeth on his behalf – standing up for him. Soon, Mary would be his to protect and her family could go to hell. Mary had accepted him, and if Marlow wished to throw stones then he would be throwing them at Mary too. That would teach the man not to judge.

Peter returned, with a devil-may-care expression. 'Damn, that pretty Miss Smithfield is a gem. I must thank your future spouse for the introduction. I am taking her for a ride on my curricule tomorrow. Her papa is as rich as Croesus. Perhaps it's time I considered a leg shackle too.'

'You are rich enough, you don't need her money.' Drew shook his head. He would lay heavy odds Peter was not inclined to marry the girl but just wanted some fun.

‘True, but when a woman is so ripe for the picking...’

‘Remember she is Mary’s friend and play nice. For tonight, however, I vote we vacate and head for a club. I need a drink.’

Peter wrapped an arm about his shoulders. ‘Then let us find the others.’

12

Mary sat at her writing desk, her hand trembling so badly the quill tip scratched across the paper leaving a spider track instead of her usual neat hand.

John had business to attend to at his main country residence. He expected to be out of town for a couple of days. His house was within a day's travel from London so her parents had chosen to accompany him, to give the children a break from the town.

Most families left their younger children at home during the London season but her parents never had.

Mary had told her mother she was staying with Emily's family, which of course was a lie. Emily knew about the elopement, and she'd promised to keep Mary's secret. Emily knew everything, because Mary knew she was too timid to judge or tell anyone else. The guilt of using her friend was another burden to add to Mary's list of sins.

Because her parents never thought Mary would lie, they accepted an invitation Emily had written as proof and not questioned Emily's family. People would think it lapse when they found out the truth, but it was not lapse; it was love that made them trust her.

Even after her father saw her speaking with Drew, he'd assumed Drew approached her. He had not for one moment imagined she would choose to speak to Drew. Heat burned in her cheeks while he had chastised her and warned her to stay away from Drew, repeating all the reasons why Lord Framlington was unsuitable. She'd tried to tell him Drew did nothing wrong.

He would be disappointed with her when he found her gone, and her mother would be distressed and John would judge her badly.

Tears filled her eyes as she finished the note but her mind was made up. She had not seen Drew for over a week. He'd stopped attending entertainments so her father would not suspect. But he'd written, passing her letters through the stable lad.

She folded the letter and sealed it. Her heart was racing. Her emotions were like a pendulum, swinging from excitement to guilt and back again. This might tear her apart. She did not want to hurt her parents, but they would never allow her to marry Drew. This was the only way.

Mary left the letter on her desk, walked to the window and looked down at the street. Life carried on as normal, people walked by, carriages rolled over the cobbles, the sounds of the horses' iron shoes and the iron-rimmed wheels rang on the stone cobbles.

It would be the same in five days when she had gone. The world would not change; only her life would change.

He said they would live in his rooms until he received her dowry. Then he would look for a property out of town.

Her vision clouded and a tear escaped, running through her lashes and down her cheek.

She was happy, it was just that so much was about to change.

Would his family like her? He never spoke of them. She had not even known Lady Kilbride was his sister until the other night. The butterflies took flight in her stomach.

There was a knock at the door of the sitting room that was connected to her bedchamber.

Mary returned to the writing desk, opened the top and hid the letter. 'Come in.'

A maid entered and bobbed a curtsy. 'Miss, Lady Marlow asked if you would come down to the sitting room. Lady Barrington and Lady Wiltshire have called.'

Two of Mary's aunts.

'I will come in a moment.'

As soon as the maid left, Mary turned to the desk. There would be no going back once she sent the letter. Drew would make the arrangements and in five days' time they would elope.

Mary wrapped a paisley shawl about her and concealed the letter beneath.

She used the servants' stairs to reach the stables and handed the letter to the boy before going to her mother.

* * *

When Drew opened the door of his apartment, his gaze dropped to a letter at his feet. It must have been pushed under the door. He bent and picked it up.

The writing was Mary's.

The stable boy must have delivered it.

Drew had spent the day with his friends, sparring in a boxing club, then eating

luncheon at White's, before going on to Tattersall's to look at horses.

The letter could have been lying there for hours.

He lifted his hat from his head and set it on a cabinet, broke the seal on the letter and read it as he walked across the room.

My parents are going away.

A chill swept over him even though the day was warm.

Her letter said they would be gone for two days and two nights – plenty of time to get her away and irreversibly change the course of both their lives. After that long in his company, her family would have no choice but to approve the match.

I told my parents I will stay with Miss Smithfield, but I shall not go there. She knows we are eloping and promised she will not say a word to anyone. So, you may send a carriage to collect me. I shall say it is from Mr Smithfield and leave in the morning when my parents and John leave. Send the carriage driver to collect me at 10 o'clock, then he can take me to meet you...

It was a perfect plan.

He folded the letter and slipped it into his chest pocket, his heart beating hard, a smile pulling at one corner of his lips.

A pile of bills lay on the cabinet beside his hat. They would be paid soon. There would be no more dodging the duns. He would have money and he would have Mary, and he could help Caro.

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13

Mary hugged her father as they stood in the hall, tears filling her eyes. 'I love you, Papa.'

'We will only be gone two days, sweetheart.'

The luggage was loaded on to the four carriages that stood outside the house. One for John and Kate, their son and her eldest sisters. Mama and Papa were to travel in the second, with the boys and her youngest sisters. The senior servants were to travel in the third.

The fourth was the hackney carriage Drew sent.

When she released her father, he reached into his pocket for a handkerchief. She accepted it and dabbed at her tears.

'Are you upset over Lord Farquhar? There will be another man who is right for you.'

She shook her head.

She'd not told them they were wrong about Lord Farquhar because it was easier to let them think her odd behaviour was linked to that. 'I am being silly, Papa, I know. I'll miss you, that is all. Robbie and Harry spend months at a time away at college and here I am crying over two days.'

He hugged her firmly again. She pressed her cheek to his shoulder.

What if he despises me when he finds out I lied?

She kissed his cheek as he kissed hers and they separated.

She turned to her mother.

Her mother's eyes shimmered with tears too. 'I know you are sad about Lord Farquhar but time will ease the pain, you will see, be patient.'

'I know.' Mary blew her nose into her father's handkerchief.

Her mother's palms framed Mary's face. Mary looked down, unable to look her mother in the eye.

'Sweetheart, one day you will be settled with your own family to care for and you will think this all nonsense.'

Noise came from the stairs, the voices of Mary's excited younger siblings. Her mother's hands fell.

The children's governess appeared at the top of the stairs with a nursery maid who carried Jemima, Mary's youngest sister.

'I'm sorry you're not joining us, Mary.'

Mary turned. John had joined them in the hall.

John had been her hero from her birth, despite his starchiness.

He will be disgusted with me.

Mary embraced him briefly. 'I'm sure you don't care a jot whether I am there or not, you have Kate.'

He laughed. 'But Katherine does not chastise me as much as you do. You keep me grounded.' A sound lifted his gaze to the top of the stairs and his eyes glowed with admiration. Kate stood there.

Mary prayed Drew would look at her with love like that.

When Kate reached the hall, Mary said goodbye to her and John. Then in a daze she said farewell to her brothers and sisters before they were herded into the street to climb into the carriages. She wished her eldest brothers Robbie and Harry were not boarding at their college so she could say goodbye, especially to Robbie, the next in age to her. Robbie would never forgive her for keeping him in the dark.

Her father offered his arm. She took it, her heartbeat racing.

Outside, it was warm in the sun as she walked down the front steps.

What if John, or her mother and father refused to let her visit when she was married? That awful thought hit her as her foot touched the pavement.

Her fingers closed tightly about her father's arm as he walked her to the hackney carriage.

The footmen helped her brothers and sisters up into their carriages and John helped Kate with Paul.

What will I do if they never speak to me again?

'Mary.' Her father took her hand as they reached the carriage. 'Are you sure you do

not want to come with us? I'm sure Miss Smithfield would not?—'

'No, Papa, I cannot let her down.' It had become too easy to lie.

Love shone in his eyes, but it became clouded by the tears in hers.

She hugged him, then rose onto her toes and kissed his cheek, before saying, 'I will miss you.'

'And I you, but we shall see you in two days.'

She nodded.

His hand held hers as she climbed the step into the carriage.

She sat down, and both hands held her reticule in her lap. She shook as if the weather were cold not warm. The door lock clicked shut. Her father smiled at her through the window, then called to the driver, 'Ready!'

This was it.

There was no going back.

She waved as the hackney carriage lurched into motion, the first to depart, leaving them behind.

Her father and mother and her elder sisters waved. Kate and John were looking the wrong way. Then at the last moment John turned and lifted his hand before they all disappeared.

Tears spilled from her eyes. She wiped her eyes with her father's handkerchief and

curled her fingers about it, holding it in a fist.

The horse's pace picked up to a trot and the carriage turned into a side street. She could hear the strike-strike pattern of its strides.

Her heartbeat thundered as the distance between herself and her family grew.

When the carriage drew to a halt, she knew they were in the St James neighbourhood. She looked through the window. She could not see Drew. The vehicle rocked as the driver climbed down. She clutched at her dress as she prepared to get out. The driver opened the door and kicked down the carriage step.

Where was Drew? What if she was left here alone?

He walked towards the carriage, smiling broadly.

Her stomach flipped, as her heart beat hard for a different reason. She smiled, reaching for his hand to help her down. He did not offer it, instead he braced her waist at either side, and lifted her down. Then gave her a hearty kiss.

Her nervousness erupted as laughter. The tears in her eyes became tears of joy. He was her future.

His hazel eyes danced with emotions as he held the hand which bore her father's handkerchief and lifted it. 'You have been crying...'

14

Mary nodded. 'I will miss my family.'

This was not the jubilation he had pictured. Drew wished her joyful. But he understood how important her family were to her. The ability to love was one of her qualities, so he could hardly be upset by it. Yet it clawed at his mind that she may love her family more than him. He could not stand to be second best to her, when she would be everything to him.

He took the handkerchief from her fingers. 'You'll not need this now,' he said as he handed the hackney driver his fare.

The driver passed her bag to Drew.

'We are taking my phaeton.'

Mary's lower lip had caught between her teeth.

He hoped she was not having second thoughts. 'This is your chance to speak up if you have changed your mind?'

Why the hell did I ask her that? He did not want her to withdraw, it would rip him apart if she did. But he could not take her if she was not willing.

Her pale blue eyes shone even in the shadow of the narrow brim of her straw bonnet. A soft ache settled behind his ribs, emotions writhing.

The bonnet had a large lavender bow tied at one side of her chin and her light spencer matched the shade of the ribbon, while her dress was a muslin three shades lighter. She looked nothing like the women he would have spent time with before he met her.

She smiled. 'I have not changed my mind. I want to be your wife.'

'Good, because I want to be your husband.'

She kissed his lips quickly. It was placation. A kindness. It annoyed him that she had seen a weakness in his character. But no matter, as long as she did not change her mind.

He took her hand and led her to his phaeton, nodding at the groom who held the horses' heads. The man was from the mews where Drew stabled his horses.

Drew handed her up. The tall racing curricle was not designed with a lady's ascent, and he saw a flash of a narrow, stocking-clad ankle as she climbed the steps. He would soon see it in the flesh.

When she sat, he walked about the carriage. A surge of feeling weighed down on him. She was his responsibility now. He must protect her.

He put her bag under the seat, then climbed up.

One of her hands held the carriage's frame, the other her reticule.

Drew picked up the reins and nodded at the groom, telling him to let go of the horses' heads.

Drew flicked the reins. His horses, Athena and Hera, walked on. A smile pulled at his lips, soon he'd no longer need to fear the duns taking his horses.

Mary did not speak.

He had no idea what to say to her. He concentrated on driving the horses.

The sounds of the London streets, the tack, hoof beats and the roll of the carriages' wheels absorbed his thoughts. He'd lived in London for so long, and before that in cities abroad, these sounds to him were like a mother's heartbeat to an infant in the womb.

When they reached the outskirts, the traffic thinned, then they progressed into open countryside and the world expanded to distant horizons. The only sounds now were that of his phaeton and horses, the creaks as the vehicle rocked on its springs as they cantered along the dry roads, the horses' hooves pounding.

'Do you like the countryside?' Mary asked, making drawing room conversation.

'I was a boy once, and boys love trees to climb and rivers to swim or fish in. I loved the countryside then, but now I am a town gentleman. I cannot recall the last time I left town.'

'My parents have taken my brothers and sisters to Pembroke Place, not far from London, to enjoy the park. It is John's estate. The younger children become bored in town. I like London, I enjoy the season, but I prefer to be at home. My father's estate is in Berkshire. It is peaceful there.'

He stared at the road as she spoke. He felt awkward with her today. Clumsy. He could not speak of families. He could not imagine the things she was thinking.

'Where is your family's home?'

He glanced at her, a bitter smile catching his lips. 'Shropshire, just south of

Shrewsbury.'

'And your parents are there?'

He did not look at her this time. 'Yes, they are there or in town. My eldest brother lives with them. I do not visit.'

'You don't?'

'No, darling, so do not expect to go there. Long ago, I said to hell with them and promised myself I would never go back.'

Silence answered him.

He glanced at her. 'Believe me, you do not wish to know them,' he said to the look he received. Of course, she would not understand a family like his, any more than he understood hers.

'Do your parents always bring all your brothers and sisters to town?' He only spoke to crack the ice that had formed over their conversation.

'Yes. Always. We used to stay at Uncle Robert's and that was bedlam because he has a large family too. We and our cousins would run riot all season. But since Grandfather died and the title passed to John we stay with John.'

'Is he happy about that?' Pembroke was so stiff-upper-lipped Drew was surprised he could abide noisy children.

'When he came home from Egypt, I think he was a little irritated by us all. But now he has Paul he plays as rough with the boys as Papa does, they are always play-fighting.'

Drew could not imagine that, not of Pembroke or her father. He had never known a man play with children. When he and his brothers had fought it had not been play; there were bloody noses, black eyes and bruised knuckles. His schoolmaster's response was a beating with a cane and several days' isolation in a locked room with bread and water.

Out of sight and out of mind was his parents' policy for rearing their bastard brat.

'My aunts and uncles bring their children too and my cousins who are married bring theirs. We are like a hoard when we gather at Pembroke Place in the summers and over Christmas.'

He supposed she'd want him to take her there – he could let her go alone. That was if her family would still invite her. They may turn their backs on her. That thought pierced his chest. She would be devastated if her family disowned her. He'd not thought of this from her view.

He glanced at her. 'You know your family are not going to like this.'

Her blue gaze shimmered with unshed tears as she nodded.

'It may mean?—'

'I know they may never speak to me again, but I think they love me enough to accept my choice.'

Was it awful of him to feel glad that she took the risk of leaving the family she loved for him? It meant he was first in her affections. But... 'This is a gamble for you then,' and... Lord... 'If you are wrong? Can you bear it?' He pulled on the reins and halted the horses suddenly. He must be sure. He could not bear to give his heart to her completely only to be rejected; if her family turned her away and then she turned

against him. Whatever they were building together must have a firm foundation to withstand the battle he knew would come soon.

She turned sideways on the seat, facing him. 'Are you asking if I am sure again? I did not make this decision on a whim.'

He thought she had... he thought her agreement was the outcome of their physical encounter. A shallow smile touched his lips. He did not think that any more.

'I will miss my family but I will not change my mind. I hope they will welcome you eventually, but we will have each other and our own family. I made my choice.'

Lord , what a speech. She was constantly displaying new depths to her character.

Drew turned to the road and flicked the reins.

She chose him, he should be smiling again, whooping with joy, yet suddenly the knowledge of whom she chose settled on his shoulders. She did not know whom she had chosen. He did. A worthless barren soul – a man whose heart had been kicked so hard, so many times, it did not know how to function. He had no idea how to be a husband or a father. But he knew he wanted to make her happy.

Perhaps the country estate he intended to buy would be enough to fulfil her happiness. She could make a home there, with any children they had, and the children would make her happy even if he ended up an inept husband.

She slid closer to him and rested a hand on his thigh. The touch did odd things to his stomach. He flicked the reins and urged the horses to a canter. Her cheek rested against his shoulder, and the pressure of her slender fingers clutched about his arm.

Had she sensed his turmoil and was offering comfort? He hoped not. She would

definitely dislike the weak, rejected man hidden behind his rogue's facade. He wanted her to be as proud of him as she'd sounded when she spoke of her family.

Her lips pressed a kiss on his cheek.

The gesture jolted the world's axis.

He treasured this woman. Utterly adored her. Tomorrow, or perhaps the next day, or the one after that, but surely by then, she would be his wife. I love you. The words slipped through his thoughts. Am I capable of it then? Devil take it. But if this was love, it felt good.

They rode on in silence. He could not think straight with her close to him. No woman had sat like this with him.

Movement in a solitary tree at the edge of the road grasped his attention. A large buzzard landed on a branch and its sharp, predatory eyes surveyed the field beyond, searching for carrion.

It felt like life was holding up a metaphorical mirror for him to see himself. He was like a buzzard. An opportunist, yes. But a man who surveyed and ruled the world about him, rather than let it rule him. Poor Mary was his carrion, the flesh he'd found on the marriage market.

He pitied her suddenly. Reality set in. No woman could be proud of him.

He would not be accepted in her world and she would be humiliated in his, left friendless and without her family. God help her. He should stop raising foolish expectations and be prepared to comfort her when her family turned their backs on her.

Yet, he would strive to make her happy out of affection and gratitude, whether he had any finer feelings of love or not – gratitude, affection and admiration must be enough.

He hoped...

15

After hours of travel, Drew stopped at an inn for luncheon and to change his winded horses for a hired pair. Mary's bottom and back were sore and her neck stiff.

They had shared that one brief conversation and then he'd been silent again.

She'd assured him she was committing herself to him and he'd said nothing since.

The day was hot, but Mary felt cold. Her reticule dangling from her wrist, Mary crossed her arms, holding her elbows as Drew spoke to the ostler taking care of his horses.

'Please feed them and brush them down.' Drew handed him money. 'There will be more if you look after them well and let no one else near them.'

The ostler lifted his cap in a salute.

Drew spoke with self-confidence and strength. She doubted anyone would dare naysay him. But she had seen a vulnerable side to him today too. His external severity seemed to protect whatever lay beneath.

An ache clutched about her heart, and her stomach teemed with butterflies. She'd thought she'd met the real man in the summerhouse. But he was not that man today and he'd been different among his friends too. There were many layers to the man she was about to marry.

Drew checked the legs of the animals he'd chosen to replace his with. He glanced at her before looking at his horses as they were led into a stable. He said something else to the groom then turned to her.

A grim look of determination set his jaw.

Did he not like leaving his horses? 'They will look after them, I am sure.'

A smile touched his lips. 'My horses are the most expensive thing I own. I cannot leave them with any ease. I am sorry if I look troubled, I have my weaknesses, and my horses are one of them.'

He offered his arm. She held his upper arm through the cloth of his coat, rather than laying her fingers on his forearm. She had often walked with her father and John like this, it felt more intimate with Drew.

His arm lowered as they entered the inn.

'What are the others?' she asked.

'Others?'

'Weaknesses...'

'Oh. I shall wait until we're wed to share them. I would hate to put you off.' He said the words with humour but she discerned that touch of vulnerability again.

A man in livery stood in the inn's hallway which contained stacked travelling trunks. It was a posting inn.

'A private parlour, please, for myself and my wife,' Drew said to the man. He

reached into his pocket and withdrew a card. The card gave Drew's name, which she knew was a way men promised payment. Here is my card, I am a lord so I must have money, I just have none on me today. 'We'll want luncheon, and I will take a tankard of ale. My wife, I assume, will want tea.'

When Drew glanced at her, Mary nodded.

Heat burned in her skin. She was not his wife yet, but he had to say so, or say he was her brother, otherwise she would be considered a whore.

He smiled, as though sensing her insecurity but the smile twisted to a roguish lilt when he looked back at the man, his expression returning to the veneer he showed everyone but her.

The man bowed, then bid them follow. He led them past a busy taproom to another door which opened into a small rectangular parlour. An armchair stood in each corner and in the middle a circular dark oak table with four chairs about it.

'Make yourself comfortable, sir, ma'am.'

Once he had bowed deeply again, he left and shut the door.

Drew took off his hat and gloves, tossed both into one of the armchairs then smiled at her. 'Please tell me you will take off your bonnet and your spencer, it is sweltering out there. We can surely have a break from being baked like kippers when we are alone.'

She smiled, though her stomach wobbled like aspic, and pulled loose the ribbons securing her bonnet with shaking fingers.

She put her bonnet, gloves and spencer in the chair with his articles.

A dark heat burned in his gaze as he came towards her, and then his lips were on hers, brushing hers slowly.

Her hands lifted to his shoulders, as his rested on her back, urging her against him as his tongue dipped into her mouth.

A delicious curling sensation twisted low in her abdomen.

A sharp knock rang on the parlour door. Her arms fell as he stepped back. He caught her elbow, steadying her.

‘Come in!’ Drew’s voice sounded unsteady.

As the door opened, Mary caught sight of herself in a mirror above the mantle. Her cheeks shone red and her lips dark.

She turned her back on the maid and crossed to the window. It looked out across a broad valley. She could see for miles. Her arms folded over her chest as she absorbed the view and listened to the maid put down his tankard of ale and set out her tea on the table.

Drew thanked the maid, then the door closed.

Mary’s senses tingled at the sound of his footsteps approaching her. ‘There was no need to blush, they think you are my wife. It will be true soon.’ His arms came about her and folded over the top of hers. She rested back against the firm muscle of his chest. For a moment he was still, then his lips brushed her neck and his hands fell to her hips.

He pressed a kiss behind her ear. She turned and kissed him, his hands embraced either cheek of her bottom through the layers of her dress and petticoats.

When another knock struck the door, she had become breathless and her heartbeat raced.

‘Come in!’ Drew called, stepping away again.

The maid cast Mary a sly look before putting down her tray.

Drew withdrew a chair for Mary, encouraging her to sit.

The maid glanced at Mary’s left hand.

Mary slipped her hands to her lap, beneath the table. She wore no ring. She sent the maid the condemning glare her deceased grandfather, and now John, were known for.

It made the woman blush at least as she bobbed a curtsy. Then she left and shut the door.

Drew laughed as he sat. ‘I did not know you could set a person in their place so easily, Mary.’

‘There are some things you cannot help but learn when you live in the company of Dukes.’

‘Should I be warier then?’

She reached for the teapot. ‘You may be warned I am stubborn. Papa often complains I never give in.’

He grinned, both proud and amused. ‘So, you are stubborn and now I am wary. We have both discovered one new thing about each other.’

‘What do you wish for?’ She indicated the food.

‘I’ll serve myself. You select what you wish.’

As he helped himself to a piece of rabbit pie, awkwardness descended again.

How long would it be before she was used to being constantly in his company?

She cut herself a slice of bread. When she lifted it to her plate, she caught him watching her. The roguish glint in his eyes said he was laughing at her, perhaps because she was still blushing from her encounter with the maid. ‘You are very bad,’ she said. ‘You do not care what anyone thinks, do you?’

‘And you adore me for it, it is what enchants you.’

‘I take bad back, you are devilish.’ It was a joke, but when he had that dangerous look in his eyes a part of her did fear he could be wicked.

Steel gripped at his jaw, as it had done when he’d parted from his horses. ‘I will take that as a compliment. All women love a rogue, and the devil is one better.’

‘The devil is one worse.’ She wished she had not said it. It made his eyes even darker.

‘Should I become an angel when we are wed?’

Why did his words sound bitter?

Turmoil spun through her head as Mary searched for something to say quickly to redeem the conversation. She was not sure why it had become a conflict. ‘Well, the devil is a fallen angel... Perhaps there is hope for you yet...’

A strange expression passed across his face. A pained expression. She reached across the table and lay her hand over his. He pulled away; he did not care for her comfort.

She cut herself a wedge of cheese and changed the subject. 'Tell me what you were like as a child.'

A callous-sounding laugh answered her as he lifted a slice of cold ham to his plate. 'When I was a child I behaved so badly the servants removed the "an" from my name and cut it short with a capital "D" for devil.' He picked up his knife and fork. 'To save them having to say, "you devil, Master Andrew". Instead, they yelled "D-rew", and the name stuck. Even my mother uses it.'

He found the story amusing.

She found it sad.

'How many brothers and sisters do you have?' She skewered a piece of the pie with her fork.

'I have three brothers and two sisters.' He filled his mouth with ham.

'Are they all married?' She cut a smaller forkful and ate too.

He swallowed. 'Two of my brothers are not.'

'But you are not close to them, you said...'

He set his knife and fork down. 'No, Mary, I am not.' He reached for bread.

'I cannot imagine that. I have always looked up to John. Our entire generation admires him, my cousins too. Robbie is the brother I am closest to, though. He is

eighteen months younger than me. We were thick as thieves until he went to school. When he hears I am married he will hate it that I did not write and tell him what I planned.'

'Is he eighteen now, then? That is an awkward age. Most young men have an unrealistic view of the world.'

'Did you?'

His gaze met hers as he swallowed a mouthful. 'I was different, I had a very real view.'

'Why?'

'Believe me, you do not want to know.' There was that hard look in his eyes, as he ate more. It warned her away from the subject. He swallowed. 'If you had told your brother about us he would have been torn between whether to tell your parents or tackle me himself. I doubt he would have been happy for you...'

She changed the subject, another forkful hovering in front of her lips. 'Tell me what you do with your days in town.'

His eyebrows lifted. 'I thought by eloping I was avoiding an interview with your father...'

His words stung. 'I am marrying you – I need to know more about you than the colour of your eyes and that you care for your horses.'

'The colour of my eyes? You like them then?' His eyes lit up now, dancing with deviltry.

‘Yes.’

He smiled. ‘I like yours too. The blue is so pale your eyes shine like jewels. Your beauty kicks me in the gut each time I see you, Mary.’

Mary looked at her plate. She’d never cared to be complimented on her looks, her entire family had the same appearance. Gentlemen always looked. She found their interest vulgar. She wanted him to like who she was; appreciating her looks was a shallow emotion.

‘I’m sorry. I forgot you do not care to be complimented on your appearance.’

Her gaze lifted.

‘You may compliment me.’ If you love me for more than my appearance.

‘Then I consider myself honoured and if any other man compliments you now, I shall knock him down. This is another thing you must know about me – I will not be played.’

‘Played?’ She did not understand.

‘No games, Mary, no beaux, no flirting and no frolics. I will not be cuckolded nor made a mockery of.’ His eyes had changed. The man who looked at her was the man he was among his friends.

She was being warned.

Yet she saw more in him, something deeper in the jet at the heart of his eyes. Fear?

‘I would not—’ she began, intending to reassure him.

‘I know you will not. I shall not allow it.’

‘I would never consider such a thing anyway.’ She would not be told, but she was happy to promise. She sipped from the cup of tea, hiding her disquiet. The Drew she had agreed to marry was the vulnerable man who’d come to the summerhouse. She wished he would let his guard down and be that man. She faced him as she lowered the cup to its saucer. ‘I will not call you Drew. I shall call you Andrew, your real name.’

His eyes widened but he did not look displeased or ask her not to use that name.

He was not a devil. He had faults and felt fear. He was Andrew beneath D-rew’s sharp edges. She hoped the rogue’s veneer would disappear when they were wed.

16

Drew kept the horses at a steady pace. He used more of the money he'd borrowed from Peter at each of the toll gates, his purse draining at a rate of knots. He spoke to the men as he paid, leaving a trail of crumbs they would recall when Mary's family followed. When they reached Banbury, Drew asked the man at the toll gate to recommend an inn. If Marlow caught up with them earlier than expected he should know where they were.

He turned the horses into the stable yard of the Black Bull, at five in the evening. He could have driven the horses for another three hours but there was little point.

A young lad ran out to take the horses' heads. The animals whinnied.

Drew looped his reins over the vehicle's bar, then leapt down. An ostler came forward. He told the man they would be staying the night, and to stable the horses and his carriage. Then turned to help Mary.

She'd slid across to his seat.

They had been mostly silent since luncheon, though she held his arm as he drove. He should have spoken but he disliked the clinical dissection she'd made of him while they ate. He did not like remembering his childhood. He lived for now, and now he lived for her... She was all he wished to think of.

Her slender fingers held his firmly to steady herself as she climbed down.

When she reached the cobbles, he tugged her close and kissed her lips. It was the only thing he could think to do to ease the awkwardness his silence created.

She blushed.

In a couple of hours, they would be in bed. Heat flared in his stomach and his breath caught in his lungs... The surge of emotion he was becoming used to, in her presence, ripped through him. Only today it was a dozen times stronger. Lust. Need. Responsibility. Caring. Hope. Fear.

Do I love her? His heartbeat thundered.

Turning away, still holding her hand, he drew her with him.

He ordered dinner served in their room and French wine to accompany it.

Their room was the first off the landing. It faced the street and the broad four-poster, dark oak bed within it stood against the wall, its canopy and covers the colour of port.

He would take her virginity on that bed.

Her hand slipped from his.

The uneven floorboards creaked as she walked to the window and looked out.

He smiled. He was avoiding her questions; she avoided the bed.

Two winged armchairs stood before the hearth, with a small table between them, and on it, a three-arm candelabrum. Another unlit branch of candles stood on a chest beside the bed. Then against the wall there was a set of drawers, with a basin and a jug on top.

Drew's gaze drifted back to the bed.

He turned away from it too, lifted off his hat and put it on the table.

A knock struck the door. 'Y'ur bags, m'lud.' A man's voice breached the wood.

'Come in!' Drew shouted.

When the man had set down Drew's and Mary's bags, Drew tipped him with coins from his pocket and shut the door.

Drew pulled off his gloves and dropped them beside his hat.

There was another knock.

The wine.

The maid informed him it would be an hour until dinner.

When the door shut again, Drew stripped off his coat, watching Mary.

She had not moved.

Noises permeated the window, voices, vehicles, horses. This was no solitary haven and yet it felt like a private island. Mary was his sanctuary.

She untied the ribbons of her bonnet and brought it across the room to put it on the table with his items. His gaze was drawn to the delicate curve of her nape.

His heartbeat thundered as the turmoil of emotion clasped in his chest. He picked up the wine, uncorked it, poured a little into each of the glasses and drank from his as

though it were water.

Patience had never been in his nature. But she was a virgin. He could not hurry this. He'd heard women bled their first time, that a man had to tear a membrane within her body and it hurt the woman. He did not want to hurt her.

He refilled his glass.

He felt her approach. It was a whisper passing through his senses, then her hands slipped over his waistcoat to his stomach as her cheek pressed against his back.

He stared at the wall, stilled. Whatever the emotion in his chest was, it fisted and clasped harder as his mouth dried. Sometimes it was as if her fingertips touched his heart.

'Will we share the bed tonight?' she asked quietly.

'We will. Does the idea frighten you?' That was a stupid question, of course it must.

'A little.' She let him go, walked past him and collected her wine, watching him as she sipped from the rim.

How I love her. He did not heed the thought. He was still unsure it was true.

'How will it be?' she asked.

He took another sip of wine. A bride's mother usually explained these things. He had avoided an interview with her father but she had lost the opportunity to ask questions of her mother.

'It will be beautiful, I hope. But I believe there will be some pain for you this time. I

shall do my best to make the pain brief. Even if the first time is not good for you, I will make it wonderful in the future.'

A blush coloured her skin. 'Wonderful... You have a high opinion of yourself.'

A rough sound of amusement made him almost spit out his mouthful of wine. He gave her a wicked grin. 'It is not my opinion.'

She looked away, towards the window. Damn... That had been the wrong thing to say, he should not have boasted about other women's views. He must remember she was not the same as those women; they would have appreciated the boast.

He put down his glass and took Mary's glass from her hand. 'Now my skill is all for you.'

His palm braced her nape and he kissed her.

Her fingers combed into his hair.

Within hours...

Today was the first day he would put any woman's needs before his own.

He broke the kiss, picked up her glass and gave it back to her.

There was a tremor in her hand.

She is afraid. Remember it!

17

The room span as Mary sipped her wine. She had drunk four full glasses through dinner. The conversation was easier, though. They spoke of their friends, sharing stories, while Andrew continually refreshed her glass.

She had drunk quickly, using the wine to calm her nerves, but she was sure she was babbling inanely for the last hour.

She had not eaten much, her stomach had fluttered with too many butterflies and the bed had shouted its presence behind her.

He'd said it might hurt.

Her mother had not mentioned pain when Kate had given birth to Paul months ago, and they'd discussed such things. Her mother had said the marriage bed need not be unpleasant.

The things she and Andrew had done in the summerhouse had not been unpleasant.

'Mary?'

She'd let their conversation ebb.

The stem of her glass dangling through her fingers, she leaned back in her chair.

'Do you want any more to eat?'

She shook her head, her heartbeat drumming in her ears.

His plate was empty, hers was still full.

This was nothing to him.

Her palms were sweaty. 'I am not hungry.'

'You are nervous...' His gaze held hers.

'A little. Can you blame me?'

'No, sweetheart, I do not blame you.' He rose and something sliced through her middle, cutting to the point between her legs, but he did not come towards her, he turned to the bell pull and rang it.

Her mouth dried. She sipped more wine, her fingers embracing the glass.

'I think you have had enough of that, I do not want you unconscious.' He lifted the glass from her hand and set it on the table.

Her hand fell to her lap.

'When they clear the table, I'll ask them to send up a maid to help you undress, and I shall go outside for a smoke to give you time to prepare.' His fingertips touched her cheek. 'Smile, sweetheart, this is meant to be a happy thing.'

She licked dry lips. He smiled. The room span again.

His eyes held the depth she'd seen in the summerhouse; Andrew's eyes, not D-rew's.

A light knock struck the door.

She stood. The floor swayed.

A maid entered and loaded a tray with the empty dishes and their leftovers.

‘Could someone come to the room and help my wife undress.’

‘Of course, sir.’ The maid looked at Mary, ‘I will return to help you, ma’am.’

‘I will go for a walk and give you time to undress,’ Drew stated.

When the door closed behind him, Mary’s heart raced so hard she thought she might faint. There was no going back after this... This was like her wedding night, but they were not married.

Her hands shook as she took her nightdress out of her bag. She unlaced her boots, slid off her stockings and put the items on top of her travelling bag.

When the maid returned, she lit the candles, drew the curtains, released the buttons at the back of Mary’s gown and unthreaded the laces of the short corset.

‘I can manage now, thank you,’ Mary said as the lacing slipped free.

‘Very well, ma’am, good evening to you.’ The maid bobbed a curtsy and left.

Once Mary was in her nightgown, she could not decide whether to climb into the bed.

When Andrew knocked quietly on the door, she stood at the end of the bed – still undecided.

‘Come in,’ she called.

As he opened the door, his gaze dropped to her toes peeping from beneath the hem of her nightgown. Darkness had gathered in his eyes when he closed and locked the door; a darkness implying deep unfathomable seas of emotion.

The butterflies in her stomach flew so raucously it made her nauseous when his fingers slipped the buttons of his evening coat loose. She got into the bed then, fleeing, so she could hide beneath the covers and not obviously watch him undress.

He shucked his coat off and draped it over the back of a chair, then with his back to her he unbuttoned his waistcoat. Before removing anything else he sat down to pull off his boots, and as he did so he looked up and smiled at her.

She smiled back, her nerves easing.

He stopped undressing when there were only his trousers and shirt left to remove and walked towards the bed. But then he pulled his shirt from his waistband, lifted it up over his head and threw it to the floor.

‘My mother would tell you to pick that up and not cause a mess.’

A deep chuckle resonated from his throat. ‘I shall pick it up – in the morning.’

Her gaze flowed over the contours of muscular ridges and hollows. He was beautiful.

‘Will you get up and remove your nightdress.’

Was it possible for butterflies to stampede? If so, that is what they did within her stomach.

‘There is no need to be afraid, Mary. I just do not want us to have to undress awkwardly in the bed. It would make things less enjoyable for you.’

Every limb trembled as she pushed back the covers and climbed off the bed, but she would not be a coward.

He stepped close and kissed her, his hand at her waist over her nightgown. The touch was not intimate and yet it felt intimate because she had nothing on beneath the fine cotton.

He broke the kiss and smiled. The candlelight from the candelabrum beside the bed reflected in his eyes, turning them gold. ‘Do you want to remove your nightdress or shall I take it off?’

‘You may,’ she said bravely, her chin tilting up and denying her fear.

His fingers held the cotton of her nightgown at either side of her thighs and lifted.

Her breath trapped in her lungs as the cotton brushed quickly across her skin. She raised her arms so it would come off easily.

When she stood naked, the air in the room raised goosebumps on her skin and made her shiver, even though it was not cold.

He dropped her nightgown on the floor, not stopping to stare; he understood her embarrassment. He kissed her shoulder and her neck, his hands touching her waist as they had when she was clothed. He kissed her cheek and then her lips.

The trembling in her limbs eased. Perhaps the wine had helped because with the room spinning, it was hard to be too conscious of anything but the sensations he stirred inside her.

His hands slid up to her breasts and his thumbs brushed her nipples.

Her body arched towards him, her head tilting back as his kisses trailed from her mouth to her neck. Then he stopped.

She sighed.

He straightened.

‘Lie down...’

He looked hazy through her wine-tinted gaze.

She sat on the bed and shuffled back to the far side as he undid the buttons of his flap.

At least she had seen that part of him before. But that did not stop the heat burning in her cheeks.

He slid off his trousers and underwear in one movement.

Her stomach tumbled upside down at the sight of his masculinity, the muscles in his thighs and buttocks and the part of him that on her brothers had hung limp but on him stood proud. His body was more handsome than the life-size marble statues in John’s collection.

She swallowed, trying to clear the dryness from her throat.

‘Lie back,’ he said, as his first knee rested on the bed, denting the mattress, and he climbed up.

She swallowed again as she lay awkwardly, with one knee bent but standing upright

and one knee bent but resting slackly to the side.

‘Relax, sweetheart.’

She nodded, though her muscles refused to relax.

He knelt beside her, his gaze skimming over her body. ‘You are perfect.’

‘So are you.’

He smiled. ‘No. I am not. But I do think you are.’

He came down on all fours, his head lowered and he kissed her breast first.

The candles beside the bed flickered. Tremors that felt like the flicker of a flame raced through her body.

On all fours above her, he licked and then sucked one nipple, not touching her anywhere else.

‘Andrew.’ It was an exquisite sensation.

When his fingers touched her skin, he was shaking too – he was nervous too.

Her hands braced either side of his head, encouraging him to lie beside her and kiss her mouth, to steady them both with what they had done many times before. As they kissed, facing one another on their sides, her leg rested over his hip; the sensation of skin against skin a new discovery.

With a slight pressure he rolled her onto her back, his kiss left her mouth and his hand slid to her hip. His mouth followed the path of his hand, kissing down her middle to

her stomach. Her muscles jolted at each touch.

Then his kiss touched her intimately between her legs.

Her fingernails dug into his shoulders and she laughed a little. Nervously.

He did not stop. His tongue swept out to taste her there.

‘Andrew!’

‘Relax.’ The heat of his breath burned her there, before he licked again.

He sucked her there, as he had sucked her nipple, sparking sharp sensations to spin through her body.

‘Andrew.’ His name came on a tide of want.

She was the worse for wear due to the wine, wistful and weak, and that meant everything that he did seemed... wonderful.

Then his fingers were within her as they had been the other day and his tongue claimed her too, and this time it was no slight invasion, it was a deep intrusion.

‘Ah.’ Her head pressed back into the bed, and her body lifted to his touch as her fingers clasped into fists in his hair. The sensations he had first taught her in the darkness swelled.

‘Please,’ she whispered, not even knowing what she was asking for. She was so hot. She just wanted this to be complete.

‘Not yet. We will wait until you experience the little death.’

It felt as though her fingers were clinging to sanity while he continued trying to steal her away with his wickedness.

‘Oh...’ then... ‘Andrew...’ There was that rush of intoxicating overwhelming sensations.

* * *

The flavour of Mary’s nectar filled Drew’s mouth as the spasm of her release pulled at his fingers and pulsed on the tip of his tongue.

Emotion tightened his throat and clasped in his stomach.

He’d known she was beautiful, but... naked... she outshone every other woman. There was not a single blemish on her pale skin. Her body was truly like porcelain.

‘Mary.’ He rose and moved over her.

Her eyes were glazed by the wine and her limbs moved clumsily to accommodate him between her legs. She had drunk her wine too quickly, and drunk more than she should have. But he understood she had needed the courage. She was everything pure and beautiful – and any moment now she would be his. He would be the very first, and he hoped the only man. He would marry her and keep her for himself. I do love you.

He positioned himself carefully above her, feeling his tip at the moist juncture between her thighs.

Her blue eyes were wide and luminous, revealing her fear.

‘It will hurt, just for a moment,’ he said, then plunged into her body hard and quick.

She gasped and cried out as his penetration pierced her barrier.

Buried inside her he held still, as she bit her lip and he fought not to express the emotions that dammed his throat.

After a moment, he kissed her brow, her nose, her cheekbone. He wanted to take the pain from her.

‘I love you, I do’ – he’d never known anything so precious.

When her body relaxed, he withdrew slowly. He had not been with a woman for a year, not since he decided Mary was his choice. He had waited a long time for today.

His friends would laugh if they knew how important she’d become to him. They had no idea he’d entirely abstained. But he was committed to her, as he wished her to be to him.

Pressing back in, he relished every sensation, preserving it to memory.

Her eyes closed.

If this was pain for her, it was heaven for him.

He withdrew and pressed in, cautiously, over and over again, trying not to hurt her any more than he had, but knowing the best cure for her pain was pleasure.

The candlelight cast light and shadow over her skin. Every contour of her face and her body was beautiful.

She opened her eyes and watched his face. The glaze in her eyes was from desire now, not wine. But he could see she did not understand why she felt like this.

He did not understand either. The emotion inside him made him feel like he would split in two as he held her gaze and swallowed back the lump in his throat.

‘Mary.’ Her name was a supplication, a promise – he idolised her.

Her hands held his shoulders. She had such a gentle touch.

‘Come again for me, sweetheart,’ he urged vocally as he moved.

Her blue irises shone like glass.

‘I love you,’ he repeated the words, his throat constricting with the emotion he could no longer hold back. Maybe it was true. Maybe it was not. He thought it was. But it was what she wished to hear and he would give her anything she wished, his heart was brim-full of her.

‘Our marriage will be a good one.’

Her eyes shimmered with tears.

‘Can you bear it if I move a little faster?’

She nodded.

‘I love you,’ he said again, working harder, moving more strongly and quickly.

‘And I you,’ she answered this time as she pressed up against his next invasion.

‘Mm...’

She licked her lips.

He worked with more skill, angling his movements for her pleasure. ‘Does it feel good now?’

Her blue eyes looked at him through a cloak of dark eyelashes and she nodded as her legs rose, and her thighs braced his hips, allowing him more depth.

He increased his intensity, pushing deep, fast and hard, forgetting her virginity and seeking bliss for them both as her breasts rocked with the force of his thrusts.

Her breath came in pants and her fingernails clawed into his back as her thighs fell open wider for him. She sighed with a whimpering sound. Then...

‘Andrew?’ Her eyes opened and her gaze clung to his, terrified for an instant as he took her to the edge. She hid nothing as she broke, crying out, her fingers clawing, her body arching into pleasure as sweat glistened gold on her skin in the candlelight.

Once, twice more, he thrust in hard, letting go of all restraint and thought. A third time, and then... he came to pieces – a wave crashing over the shore, a burst of rolling power. He had never experienced sex like this before. He held still, buried deep inside her as sensations ripped through him. He bit his tongue and shut his eyes.

When it was over, he laughed and tumbled to his back, pulling her over him. ‘Mary, you are my dream.’

‘I love you,’ she said against his neck as he drifted into sleep with her as his blanket.

18

A knock rapped on the bedchamber door.

Ellen Marlow rolled over in the bed she shared with her husband Edward. He laid stretched out beside her. They had dined and retired early. As they were at John's estate, they had reverted to country hours. The break from London's late hours was a welcome relief.

The knock struck again, this time a little more determined.

Ellen sat up. The room was dark. It was surely nowhere near dawn.

'My Lord! My Lady!' Mr Finch called through the wood.

Ellen shook Edward's shoulder. 'Something is wrong.'

His opening eyes shone in what little moonlight there was in the room.

'Mr Finch is knocking.' Ellen slid from the bed and picked up her dressing gown. She slipped her arms into the sleeves and wrapped it about her as she walked to the door. She opened it slightly. 'What is it, Finch? Is one of the children ill?'

He held out a letter. 'No, Lady Marlow. A servant delivered this a few minutes ago. I'm told it is from Lady Eleanor.'

'Eleanor...' Her niece? Ellen took the letter.

Edward's fingers rested at Ellen's waist. 'Why would Eleanor send a message in the middle of the night?' He leaned past Ellen and from the flame of the candle Finch held he lit the candle he had collected from the bedside.

'I was not advised of the content, Lord Marlow.'

Ellen broke the seal and unfolded the letter as Edward held the candle close.

Dear Aunt Ellen,

I am writing because I thought... Oh, there is no way to say this to you with any ease. But I am sure you told me, Mary was not going with you to Pembroke Place but staying in town with the Smithfields. Only, I saw that family tonight at a ball and she was not with them. When I asked after Mary, they looked at me as though I were mad, saying she was not staying with them and that there had been no intention for her to do so. I hope I misheard, or that Mary changed her mind. I thought it best that I write, though, in case she is not with you...

An ice-cold sensation flooded Ellen's chest. 'What has she done?'

'What is it?' Edward asked.

'Mary,' Ellen breathed her daughter's name, as tears clouded the words of Eleanor's letter. 'She did not stay with her friend.'

Edward took the letter and read it.

* * *

Edward's heart clenched. Mary had hugged him and cried when she said goodbye. 'She must be at John's. There must be a misunderstanding. We will go back now. She

would not have done anything silly.’

‘What about the children?’

‘We will leave them with John and Kate and return tomorrow.’

Ellen nodded, her eyes mirroring the emotions he felt.

He turned to the bell pull. Ellen would need a maid, and he did not want to wait for Finch to fetch someone. ‘You dress. I will tell John.’ He looked at Finch. ‘Have the grooms ready a carriage immediately. We will leave as soon as we can.’

He walked along the hall to John’s rooms, fear spinning in his stomach.

Was this an elopement? The words whispered in Edward’s head. He refused to believe them. Yet his mind’s eye saw her speaking with Framlington only days ago.

Mary had said, with blooms of colour in her cheeks, ‘ It was nothing, Papa. He stopped me that is all, and I argued with him and told him to stay away .’

But there had been the day she’d said she’d seen him in the park too. The day she had acted out of character and ridden alone early one morning. She’d never gone out at that hour before and she’d never gone again.

Yet Mary was sensible – level-headed... She would not. Lord, I pray she would not have been fooled by a fortune hunter.

He knew elopement was Ellen’s fear too. But Mary had been fixed on Lord Farquhar and hurt by him... had she not?

She would not have...

Or, was her distress caused by something else, someone else?

He knocked on the door of John's rooms.

'What have you done?' Edward whispered bitterly as he pictured his first child in his mind's eye as an infant in his arms.

'Come in!' John called for Edward to enter.

Mary believed Andrew loved her. While he drove the curricule on steadily through the green English landscape, her thigh pressed against his and her hand held his arm.

He had made love to her again just before dawn, kissing her throughout, whispering endearments over her lips, his pace excruciatingly slow. He had said, 'I love you' again and again.

It was not his words that convinced her; it was the gentleness of his touch. He had been mindful of her soreness. Then at the end stroked her hair back from her forehead, his eyes telling her how beautiful he thought her.

Afterwards, he slept, while Mary lay awake.

When he had woken it was full daylight. He'd got up, washed and dressed. Then helped her dress and kissed her nape while she pinned up her hair, saying, 'I love you' again, against her skin. She had turned and said it to him too, then kissed him for a long time before they left the room to eat breakfast downstairs.

She ate heartily, because her stomach was calmer. He had teased her over her sudden appetite. Then rose, walked about the table and licked the bacon grease from her lips.

The tenderness in that gesture still wrapped around her. It was a gentle sensation, like the weight and embrace of a shawl that constantly reminded her she was loved and she knew love to its full extent – in the expression of its ultimate physical act.

20

A tight pain bit hard in Edward's gut when the carriage drew to a halt before John's ostentatious townhouse. Dawn had broken as they travelled, flushing the sky pink. Now it was full light, and the sky an azure blue.

If Mary is not here...

That was a thought he had refused to consider during the journey.

John rose from the opposite carriage seat. He had chosen to accompany them, leaving Kate with the children. He opened the door to alight. A footman was already there, setting down the step. John turned and offered his hand to his mother. Ellen descended hurriedly, asking the footman, 'Is my daughter here?'

The man looked blankly at her.

'Is Miss Mary here?' Edward asked. She had to be.

'Miss Marlow left with you, sir, a day ago. She has not returned. I did not think she was expected.'

The answer hit Edward like a fist to the stomach.

'Have the stables quickly saddle horses for myself and His Grace.' Perhaps Mary was at the Smithfields after all and Eleanor was mistaken.

The footman had not moved. 'Horses! Now! Run!' Edward barked.

The man ran.

Edward looked at John. 'We will ride to Smithfield's. If she is not there his daughter may know where she is.'

Ellen looked sickly pale. 'I will go to her room.' She rushed up the steps to the house. The porter had opened the door. 'Perhaps she left a letter.'

If Mary had left a letter, it could only mean one thing – she had eloped.

Edward followed Ellen across the grand hall of the town mansion, and up the broad stairs. John came too.

Edward felt torn from reality. Where was his precious daughter, his firstborn? Flashes from the past illuminated his thoughts. A small child taking her first steps. A young girl rubbing his earlobe while she fell asleep on his lap. An impatient young woman tapping his leg beneath the table to gain his attention. The beauty of her smile when she had attended her first ball.

In her rooms, everything was where it ought to be.

Two days ago, he had handed her up into a carriage. Where the hell had it taken her?

'Check the writing desk,' John said.

Edward had bought that desk for her, as a gift. It was mahogany inlaid with a delicate pattern of roses formed from rose, walnut and apple woods. He opened the lid. It contained a muddled pile of letters.

The letter on the top was the one from Smithfield's daughter, confirming her parents' agreement for Mary to stay. Was that a lie? Had he not ever known Mary? How many times had she lied?

John took out some letters. Edward passed some to Ellen and picked up a first letter to read.

The letters Edward read were inconsequential letters from her friends, they contained young women's chatter. 'There is nothing here.'

'DF...' Ellen looked at him and John, holding up the letters she had been reading. 'Mary received a letter that was delivered by a servant. She said it was from Daniel. I thought she had feelings for him but within days he proposed to her friend. These are all love letters signed DF or D and most are dated after Daniel's engagement... Why would I disbelieve her? Mary never lied. Never...

'They speak of meeting her, Edward. Who was she meeting? I thought her silence and distraction a symptom of a broken heart. These letters urge her to trust him. Why did she not speak of this man to me?'

Anger clasped at Edward's jaw. Had Mary been that foolish? 'DF. Drew Framlington.'

He cast the letters he held down into the desk and comforted Ellen, feeling no comfort himself. 'She did not tell you because they are from a man we told her to avoid.'

'She would not d—' John growled.

'It looks as though she has.' Fear froze Edward's skin.

Ellen pulled away from him. ‘They were passing these letters through a stable boy. Find him.’ She looked at John.

John turned away.

‘She has eloped,’ Ellen said when John left the room. ‘We do not even know him, Edward. Why did she not at least try to persuade us? We told her she may choose her husband.’

‘Because both John and I would not have tolerated a match. My guess is she feared speaking would only alert us to the possibility. The man is a manipulator, he has charmed her. He will have told her not to speak to us.’

‘If he has hurt her?—’

‘I will kill him.’ What had Framlington said to her, done to her, to persuade her? Edward should have challenged her harder the other day, he could have prevented this.

John had returned with a young lad. The boy looked scared. ‘I found Mary’s little messenger. Tell Lord and Lady Marlow what you told me.’

‘I didn’t do nothin other than what malady asked.’

Edward glared at the boy. ‘What did she ask you to do?’

‘She gave me letters an said no one else should know. She made me swear.’

‘Who did you deliver the letters to?’

‘I don’t know the gent’s name, milord, ee was just some toff who lives in the Albany.’

I took letters there, an ee sends em back and one time ee came ere.'

A knife lanced into Edward's chest. 'The man was here?' Had Mary lost her mind? What had happened then? What was happening now?

'Lord Framlington lives in the Albany,' John said.

Edward could not look at Ellen. 'We had better start our search there. I saw her speaking with Lord Brooke and Framlington only days ago at a ball.'

'Brooke is Framlington's best friend,' John stated, 'and he rarely goes to such things?—'

'Well, he has attended balls recently, and twice, he danced with Mary,' Ellen interjected. 'Oliver had introduced one of his friends. I never thought to question it.'

'And Oliver clearly never gave a damn,' John spat.

'It hardly matters now,' Edward said. 'What is done is done. Now we must simply find them...'

21

Mary had no idea how many miles they had travelled but it seemed a considerable distance. Her bottom was sore from being bounced about on the seat of his curricle over rutted tracks. She ached in other places too after last night. They had stopped at a busy coaching inn for luncheon, but that was hours ago. So, when he said they would stop for the night, relief overrode every other emotion.

Tomorrow, her parents would discover her gone and follow. Her parents would be angry and heartbroken when they discovered that Mary had lied. John would be disappointed.

Andrew said it would take three or four more days to reach Gretna. He'd said he did not care if her father caught up with them, because what was done could not be undone, so they need not rush now.

She hoped Papa would find them. At least then her parents would be at her wedding. But she still believed this had been her only choice. Papa and John would not have let her marry Andrew unless he forced their hands.

On arrival, they had dinner in a parlour downstairs. As they climbed the stairs to their room. Andrew held her hand.

The soft light of a vibrant sunset flooded the small room. It gilded Andrew with gold.

'You're silent,' Andrew said as he closed the bedroom door and turned the key in the lock. His eyes gleamed a dark honey colour. 'What are you thinking? Tell.'

Ah. Why must tears come? They stung in her eyes. Her teeth caught her lip to stop them tumbling over but failed.

‘Mary? You are not regretting...’ His expression twisted as he caught her hand. He would have pulled her to him, but she pressed her other hand against his chest to stop him and wiped the tears away.

‘I am not regretting what we did. I am thinking of my parents. They will know I am not there tomorrow.’

His thumb brushed a stray tear from her cheek, as a bitter sigh escaped his lips. He turned away. ‘Must you think of them now? Why do you care? You left them behind.’ His voice was tinged with impatience and anger.

He picked up the decanter of wine on the table and poured some into a glass.

He did not understand because he was not close to his family. She did not try to explain. Her wounded emotions meant finding the words was too difficult. Instead, she walked to his back and hugged his waist. Her hands crossing over on his stomach, she squeezed him tightly for a moment.

His body was stiff; nothing in his stance yielded as she held him.

‘I would like Papa to walk me up the aisle, and Mama there too, that is all.’

A condescending sound left his throat as he turned, forcing her to let him go. ‘Your father might drag you away from the aisle.’

‘I should have tried to persuade them to accept you.’

His eyes narrowed. ‘You would not have persuaded them.’

Mary opened her mouth to speak, but no words came as he sipped from the wine glass, his hard gaze telling her he did not want to discuss her parents' point of view.

After he had drunk, he held the rim of the wine glass to her lips and tilted it. It felt like he was offering her a poison chalice as the devil in him grinned in the black hearts of his eyes.

After she sipped from the glass he put it down.

His hands held her hips as his lips pressed hard on hers. The kiss felt like a branding iron. When he broke the kiss, his hazel eyes were like treacle not honey, his pupils were so wide. Her bones were as weak as aspic.

'I love you. You know that...'

His words did not sound like a statement, but a question.

'I know.'

She believed him, but he did not understand how much it hurt her to hurt her family, and when she spoke of caring for her family it appeared as though she hurt him.

He'd said in his letter, the day she had met him in the summerhouse, he did not know love. He did not – but she would teach him. 'I love you too.'

A guttural sound escaped his throat. 'I like you calling me Andrew, no one else does.'

He kissed her, urgently. Her arms encircled his neck. Then she realised he was drawing up her dress.

She broke the kiss. His dark eyes stared at her.

Before she could speak, he threw her his rogue's lilted smile. 'Let me make love to you now, as we are, no foreplay, no procrastination.'

Her next breath faltered.

He moved her hand to the front of his trousers. 'See how ready I am.'

She was not ready at all.

She tilted her head. 'No.'

'I am your husband in all but name.'

'Which is why you should not ask it of me.'

He dropped her hand.

She thought he would turn away, instead he said, 'Please, may I make love to you now? Because I love you and I need to feel how much you love me.'

It was the need in his voice, not his words, the voice of the Andrew she thought she was the only one who knew, that made her want this too. She answered physically, stepping forward and kissing him.

Yesterday, he had been tender. Tonight, he was wicked. But his wickedness made something lurch low in her stomach as her body recalled the feel of him inside her, while his hands pulled up her dress. It was as if she had touched a flame to tinder and ignited an inferno.

Within minutes, he freed himself from the restrictions of his clothing, lifted her feet from the floor, wrapped her legs about his waist and pushed into her. There was pain at first, and heat in flashes, as he pounded into her. Her arms clung about his neck as her head and back hit the bedchamber wall over and over.

‘Am I hurting you?’

The urgency in his voice caught at her heart. He was hurting her, but it was pleasure too. He loved her passionately, there was nothing wrong in that. ‘No,’ she lied.

His fingertips pressed hard into the flesh of her thighs as he held her up, the sounds escaping his throat like an animal’s growl.

She thought he would reach his conclusion before she was even close to it. Then. ‘Andrew!’

When the ecstasy of their union struck, it was in a rush that knocked her flying, the surge of it racing to her toes and fingertips. Before she had come down from her peak, he sighed heavily, his breath brushing her earlobe, and she felt him pulsing inside her, his conclusion reached too. Her body trembled as his stiffened.

After a moment, he lowered her legs. He smiled. His forehead rested against hers and his nose brushed hers tenderly. ‘I felt as desperate as this last night, but... well... it would have been wrong for your first time.’

The tone of his voice told her he needed her more than physically. She kissed him, just a press of lips to lips.

‘Say you love me,’ he said.

Mary smiled. There were so many seams in him for her to mine, she did not understand all of his motivations and behaviours, but she had a feeling his past, perhaps the family he hated talking about, had made him the man he was. ‘I love you.’

‘And I you, Mary.’ The husk in his voice seemed heavy with unspoken words.

She would make her parents understand. She would make them like him. If she saw the good in him, they must see it too – and they must understand that no one else would have been enough for her, no one else could love her with the passion and intensity he did.

* * *

Drew lay still and silent, watching Mary breathing. He could not sleep. She lay beside him, naked. But it was not only her body that was naked; it was also her heart. Her openness, and innocence, cleansed him. Even the air drawing into his lungs felt cleaner. She had washed away the stains the other women he'd taken to bed had left on his soul. She was as clean and white as snow, and now he lay beside her feeling as though he was too.

He wanted to hold her. He did not, because he did not want to wake her. The candle had burned to a stub, it would go out soon and he would no longer be able to see her. Her beauty was incomparable. That was because it was soul-deep.

He had left a first footprint on her snowy white soul. He hoped they would keep walking together until the very last footprint. He hoped he did not spoil her, ruin the beautiful parts of her. If the emotions he felt were love, then love was all-consuming and possessive.

Her dark eyelashes flickered against her pale skin as her eyes moved beneath her eyelids.

She cried when they came upstairs after dinner, because she missed her family. He had feared she would change her mind when it was too late, but then she kissed and made love to him with everything she had.

No other woman, in his experience, did that.

He was afraid when the storm came she might change her mind and learn to hate him.
He was afraid she loved her family more than him...

Jealousy roared and extended its claws.

When her father caught up with them, Mary's trial would follow.

Their first coupling tonight had been quick, evidence that she would respond to him.
Their second, slow, as he tried to enchant her with his body – so that she might love
him the most.

The candle flickered, then went out. He could no longer see her, but he could hear her
breaths and feel them on his skin. Now he knew how good life could be with her, it
would be unbearable to lose her.

She must marry him, there was no choice now. But he could not endure a heartless
marriage. He wanted this sprouting seed of love to grow. Roses blooming on the briar
inside his soul. She could give him that, teach him how to live like that. Life would
become the two of them together against the world, he would be her defender and she
his. That is what he wanted.

He had not prayed for years, but today... Please, Lord, let her lean towards me for
comfort and protection. Let me be who she cries her tears for.

He wanted her now.

He needed her now.

He only had a few hours left to convince her to love him as much as he loved her.

His hand touched the satin-soft skin at her hip.

He wished to be inside her, to calm the fear in his head, and appease the possessiveness in his soul. He did not know how to be what she needed. He was terrified of failing her – of failing himself. Of her rejection. How could his love compare to the affection of her family?

She moved beneath his hand, rolling onto her back. His palm rested over her breast and he kissed her shoulder.

This was all he knew, he knew how to please her in a bed.

Please, God, let that be enough. Let my physical love wrap around her heart and form a wall that will hold against her father's and brother's defamations.

22

Mary woke with a smile on her lips, blissfully happy, her muscles trembling from a night of adoration, embers glowing warm beneath her skin. She lay amid tangled sheets, his thigh resting over her legs and his palm on her stomach, weighting her down.

Andrew had made love to her thrice more through the night. After the rushed experience, they had sat side by side on the bed, drinking wine, as he talked more about his friends. He spoke of his friends as she would speak of her family, with relaxed amusement. Then he made exquisite love to her; it had been excruciatingly and beautifully slow and gentle. The next time was in the middle of the night, and that time was different too. She woke up while he was touching her, arousing her. Then he had rolled her on top of him and taught her how to kneel across him, rise and lower. It made her feel exposed, but her self-consciousness was soon forgotten as her body heated to flowing lava.

During the last time, she felt like an earthly goddess half awake and half asleep as the first light of dawn had flooded the room. He'd worshipped her body with his lips, tongue and teeth, until she was panting and begging him to be inside her. Then he had settled between her thighs and ridden her deeply until she was mindless.

It felt as though he tried to teach her everything he knew about physical pleasure in one night.

Mary pushed Andrew's leg from atop hers, rolled away, got up and gathered her clothes. The air was heavy with the scents of their bodies.

A clatter of horseshoes on the inn's cobbles in the courtyard pulled her attention to the window.

'Hey!'

'You!'

'My good man!'

Men's voices shouted and others responded in sharp tones.

'Where?' That one word sounded like her father's voice.

Clothed only in her chemise, Mary pushed aside the curtain and looked through the window, but now the sound of the commotion came from within the inn.

Outside two horses that were damp with sweat and foaming about their bits were stamping the cobbles as a groom held their reins and tried to calm them. They had been raced at a gallop for a long way by the looks of it.

Hurried steps struck the stair-boards as someone ran to the upper floor.

Andrew woke and stretched out his arms.

The aggressive-sounding strides travelled along the hall towards their room.

He sat up, no longer languid, looked at the door, then at her. He sent her a twisted nervous smile and his eyes said something she could not read.

The footsteps stopped outside their door and someone banged the flat of a fist against it, thumping it, not knocking, making the door jolt against its frame. It was only held

by the lock.

‘Mary!’

‘Papa,’ she whispered towards Andrew then rushed to grab her clothes.

Andrew’s expression immediately changed to the man she first met in the ballrooms of London. The defiant devil. ‘Andrew,’ she warned sharply. Why was he not rushing to get up and dress?

Another strike jolted the door. ‘Framlington! I know you are here!’

‘Open this door!’ John!

Mary feared the lock would break as she clutched her clothes to her chest. ‘A moment, Papa!’ she called back as Andrew finally rose and picked his shirt up from the floor.

Andrew was in his arrogant mood. His lips twisted when he smiled before he slipped the shirt over his head. It was as though he did not care that they were caught like this. He cared. She was learning his ways; the more defiant he was the more emotions he was trying to hide. Yet this was not the moment for the rogue to rebel.

‘Let me in!’ her father roared.

‘Open the damned door!’ John yelled.

The handle rattled back and forth.

Andrew walked to the door, wearing only his shirt.

She had not for one moment thought he would open the door until he'd put his underwear on but he did?—

He turned the key, released the lock and stepped out of the way.

The door was flung back on its hinges. It bounced back against the wall.

The air left her lungs as she stood motionless, her clothes clutched to her chest.

Her father's fist was already raised and he struck Andrew's jaw with a swift hard punch. Andrew stumbled back against the wall but he did not fall.

'Papa!' Dropping her clothes, Mary rushed to stop them fighting.

Her father's gaze did not even acknowledge her. 'I will kill you!' he growled at Andrew, spittle flying from his mouth.

She stood in front of Andrew. He had not raised a hand, not even to defend himself, let alone fight back. 'Please, Papa!'

His eyes fixed on her. 'Why would you do this? You have hurt your mother! Do you know how terrified we were to find you gone?'

'Sorry.' The word leaked from her throat on a torrent of pain as tears of anger as well as sadness glazed her vision.

John stood behind her father, his fingers curled into fists too.

'Don't hurt him,' Mary begged. 'I love him.'

'You love him!' Mary's father scoffed, his eyebrows rising. Then he glared at Drew,

contempt and condemnation burning in his eyes.

‘He’s charmed you,’ John said. ‘Nothing you feel was your choice. He’s made a fool of you.’

23

Relief firmed in Drew's chest; she was taking his side. He pushed himself off the wall and straightened, looking at Mary.

She glared at her father as Marlow glared at him.

Her father's timing was perfect; to arrive when they'd been in bed made the situation absolutely clear. He had to let Mary marry Drew now, and marry him publicly to avoid scandal.

Mary's fingers closed about Drew's arm as she stood at his side, in only her underwear, defending him like a shield. Her hair brushed his neck where his collar hung loose as her chin lifted defiantly in the expression he had come to know and admire. 'He loves me too.'

It was surely true, he had lived under her spell for two days; he did not wish it broken.

Her father's slate-coloured eyes judged Drew a liar and a thief.

Marlow had a hard edge when he wished to reveal it. But Drew was not cowed. He smiled, pride burning like fire in his chest. Mary was standing with him: against them. Say and think what they liked, her family could go to hell.

Marlow's fist lifted as though he would strike again.

‘Papa, it is not his fault.’

‘Whose fault is this then? Yours?’ Marlow growled at her. ‘Who approached who? Was this elopement your idea? You love him because he wants you to love him! He is playing with you! You have been seduced and manipulated!’ Marlow reached for Mary’s wrist and tried to pull her away.

She yanked her arm free and instead wrapped her arms around Drew’s middle.

Marlow’s palm hit Drew’s shoulder with a hard shove of frustration.

The force knocked Drew back against the wall and Mary fell with him. Drew’s arms surrounded her and held her steady.

‘How can you know?’ he fought back. ‘Have you ever spoken to me? You cannot know!’ Marlow was wrong, he had not abused her trust. He loved her. He had neither seduced nor tricked her, merely convinced her of that fact.

‘I know you,’ Pembroke stated, his silver eyes so like Mary’s but without the softness. They flashed ice-blue fire. ‘I’ve seen you manipulate women. You are a selfish, greedy, bastard!’

The insult hit. It was the one insult that always hit, because it was true. Drew’s hands fisted, but he did not strike. He knew he was in the wrong here.

Pembroke’s arm rose.

Drew pushed Mary out of the way.

Pembroke’s fist hit Drew’s jaw.

His mouth filled with bitter blood.

Mary screamed and her father shouted.

Then Drew was slammed against the wall by the hand Marlow pressed around his neck, the grip throttling him. In that same moment, Marlow thrust a sharp punch at Drew's side. Drew tried to turn away from it but Marlow's fist caught his lower back and knocked the air from Drew's lungs.

Her father could throw a vicious punch. He laughed internally.

Then the hand at his throat shoved Drew away, and Marlow's fist caught him firmly in the ribs. Drew's amusement ceased as a snap in his side and a sudden lancing, excruciating pain had him bending forwards and fighting for breath.

Mary screamed.

Marlow stood still, breathing hard, watching Drew double over and fall onto his hands and knees. He spat the blood from his mouth. The first punch would have given him a black eye as well as a cut mouth.

He knew they would hit him, he also knew they would not kill him. That would have left Mary in an impossible position; unmarried and possibly with child. He had planned this for that reason. If they caught up with them on a flight to Gretna and Mary was still a virgin, they would have called him out, or shot him on the spot, but this way, their fate was already sealed.

Regaining control of his breathing and ignoring the pain which roared like a demon, Drew stood. One hand pressed against the pain in his side, the other wiped the blood from his mouth on the sleeve of his shirt.

Beyond Marlow, Drew saw that they had an audience in the hall; other occupants of the inn stood watching. Because Drew only wore a shirt the reason for this argument was loud and clear.

Following Drew's gaze, Pembroke turned and slammed the door shut in their faces.

Mary's fingers touched Drew's side. 'We are to be married.'

'And yet he could not wait until then,' her father said accusingly.

Drew smiled, belittling her father's judgement.

'Do you really think he intended taking you to Gretna?' Marlow snarled, his stare challenging her.

A tear rolled down her cheek.

Drew was a naïve fool when it came to love – more naïve than she was in other things; he had known this scene would come and not once considered what this would mean to her. Her chin lifted, defiance shining in her glassy, moistened eyes, as tears streaked her cheeks.

He wrapped his arm, the sleeve bloody from wiping his cut mouth, around her shoulders and pulled her to him.

'He does not have the money to even get you there,' her brother said bitterly. 'The duns were at his apartment when we called there, they had heard he'd disappeared.'

'Mary, listen to us,' her father said, suddenly deflated. 'If he wished to reach Gretna and not be found, why are you still here at nearly eleven?' He put his hand in his coat pocket, withdrew a card and threw it so it spiralled to the floor at Mary's bare feet.

‘And why would he leave his calling card at the last inn and ensure you were noticed at every toll gate? He asked the last man to recommend this inn so we would know where you were. He has been leaving a trail, he wanted us to follow. He cannot have the funds to reach the border, and he cannot afford to keep you. He needs me to pay for your wedding...’ He sighed heavily.

Drew fought the pain in his side, standing straighter and holding Mary close. ‘Lacking money is not a crime.’ Except that he owed people, and that was. But Mary knew why they had not hurried to the border. She had wanted her father to catch up as much as he had, albeit for a different reason. Marrying in London would cement his status in the Pembroke family. A hushed wedding in Gretna would only increase the scandal that had surrounded him all his life.

Marlow and Pembroke ignored him.

‘Mary, he does not love you.’ Pembroke’s tone and temper were less harsh now. ‘He loves your wealth.’

She shook her head, but he could feel her confidence slipping as her hand fell away from him. He clung to her with an aggressive desire to keep what was his. This was like standing at one end of a hemp rope playing tug of war, and poor Mary was the rope. He would not let go. They could not pull her free anyway, she must become his wife.

‘But it is pointless us arguing. It is too late. You made your choice,’ Marlow said.

‘He does love me,’ Mary stated in trembling defiance.

‘He doesn’t know how to love, but he does know how to lie,’ Pembroke mocked. ‘You may think him in love with you, but he asked Kate to go to bed with him the same night he danced with you last season.’

Drew felt like he had been punched in the gut again. Damn Pembroke... He had asked her, but it was not a serious offer. If she had agreed he would have declined. It was only because Pembroke annoyed him. 'It was a joke,' he thrust back.

Mary's lips parted as she looked at him with shock and she stepped away.

Drew's pain intensified, emotional now as well as physical.

If Mary loved him, she should trust him.

Her arms hung limp at her sides, her eyes expressing her confusion. 'It is true...?'

'It was over a year ago. I said it to annoy him because he was warning you against me.'

She turned away and picked up her clothes.

The devil take it... He would not demean himself and beg for her understanding.

Mary! his inner voice shouted.

'It would serve him well if I withheld your dowry,' Pembroke said. 'But I cannot leave you in poverty, Mary, which I presume is why he bedded you, to make sure we agreed the match.'

Pembroke walked across the room to where Mary stood with her clothes once more clutched to her chest. 'Mary...' He touched her arm. 'Do not trust him. I'm sure he's seduced you with kisses and words of love, but they are false. I'm sorry.'

She was as still and pale as a statue.

She was listening to him.

Drew's muscles stiffened. If it would have gained him anything he would have hit Pembroke. But there was no point, Marlow would join the fight and Drew would end up more bruised and have gained nothing.

Damn her, why was she listening?

You should be loyal!

Drew's instinct was to reach for her but even begging her physically to believe him and not them would unman him. He would look vulnerable in front of them.

'I warned you,' her father said, raising an arm, as Drew had earlier, offering to hold her.

She walked quicker to her father than she had ever walked to him, and embraced him as he embraced her.

Mary! You know they are wrong! Drew gritted his teeth on the words his pride would not let him shout. Her rejection stung even more as she sobbed against her father's shoulder as though Drew had hurt her. He had tried so hard not to hurt her...

Drew turned away and picked up his underwear.

The pain in his side burned as he dressed. Already there was a vivid red bruise spreading across his side.

He looked at Mary's father as he secured the buttons of his waistcoat. 'You will want to obtain a special licence, or perhaps you would prefer to wait for the bans and have a public wedding so that society believes this was not clandestine.' He picked up his

boots without looking at Mary.

Marlow's expression said, I would prefer to kill you .

'I am sure you wish to protect Mary's reputation. But remember, a child may arrive early if we wait for the bans.' Drew's voice deliberately thrust their punches back at them. Fuck them and their lies.

Marlow glared.

'A licence or bans...' Drew mocked him as he sat to pull on his stockings and boots. Drew could say, I love her . He could promise to protect and care for her. He did not. Why should he make promises to a man who had no respect for him? Let Marlow sweat. Let him fear for his child. Let him believe what he liked.

Drew stood.

Marlow looked at Mary. 'What do you wish for?'

Drew looked at her too, as he picked up his morning coat. Her pale gaze looked at him as though she looked at a stranger – with doubt, not love.

A sour taste filled his mouth. It was not blood; it was the taste of disgust. He felt betrayed. Yet, he was even more convinced he loved her because it hurt so much. He wanted to be everything to her because she was all to him.

Anger and jealousy twisted inside him as his soul screamed. You should know nothing they said is true! But he would not vocalise it still. He had never begged anyone in his life, for anything. But God, her rejection kicked the hardest of all. He should have known he could not compete against the deep affections that ran like a seam of granite through her family. Not like granite, like gold. Love like that was as

precious as gold – he understood that much about love now.

Drew looked away from her.

‘Obtain a special licence, Papa.’

‘I will hire a carriage from this inn. A groom will drive your rig back, Framlington. I want you where I can see you. I shall send up a maid to help you dress, Mary.’
Marlow had taken back control.

Pembroke hovered near the door, watching. ‘None of us can help you now,’ he told Mary.

She said nothing.

Damn it. He looked at Marlow. ‘There is no need to send for a maid. I shall help Mary dress, and we will join you downstairs.’

Her father’s and brother’s heads spun to look at him.

He was to be Mary’s husband. He had learned every inch of her body in the last few days. It was too late for prudishness.

Marlow looked at Mary. She nodded her agreement. There was some hope for him if she did not fear being alone with him.

‘Do not be long,’ Marlow ordered, then he and Pembroke left the room.

Drew walked across and locked the door behind them. When he turned Mary was sliding her dress over her head, not bothering with her short corset. Presumably because she did not want him to lace it.

He wanted to say something to make her feel as she had before her family arrived. Yet what could he say? He was not sorry for anything he had done. He loved her. And this was the only way her father would agree a marriage. At least, no matter what happened now, he would have her money. His heart may be as wounded as his ribs, but his purse would be full. I am not sorry. Everything he told her was true.

What of her? Did she not love him now? Was love that fleeting? Perhaps it was for him; because of who he was.

She turned her back, showing him the buttons that needed to be secured. He sighed and went to her. She stood stiffly as his fingers worked. Last night her body had been pliant like soft clay to be moulded into a beautiful sculpture.

When all the buttons were secure, he went to the washbowl to pack away his razor and brush. He watched in the mirror as Mary pulled on her stockings. She did not look at him.

24

Mary's fingers shook as she packed everything back into her travelling bag. Her tears had dried but she felt morose. As empty as a conker husk.

Was everything he had said a lie?

He'd admitted to propositioning Kate... John had not told her about that. She should have asked Andrew how many women he had been intimate with.

The room was warm but her skin felt icy cold. They'd not eaten this morning, but she could not eat now if she tried, and a headache was brewing behind her left temple.

Drew stood by the window, looking down at the stable yard, waiting for her to be ready. Appearing as impenetrable as stone.

Last night, he said, 'I love you' numerous times. But words were easily said.

He turned and looked at her.

John is right. I have been fooled.

Within half an hour, she sat in a hired carriage opposite her father. He had only spoken in growls as he directed their departure.

John was not with them, he had taken a horse and ridden on ahead of them.

Andrew sat beside her, his shoulders resting back against the squabs and his arms crossed over his chest, while one of his booted feet rested on the opposite seat. His hat was tilted forward so the rim covered his eyes, and he stared through the window.

She looked through the window at the passing fields. How long would it take to get back to London? How long before this agony was over?

But then she would have to face Mama.

Suddenly, she'd had enough of the judgement that screamed from her father's silence. She faced him across the narrow carriage. 'Do you not love me, Papa? Is there only hate now?' It was a childish question, but she did not care, she could not bear his silence.

His gaze met hers, the slate blue depths unusually unreadable. 'I could not hate you, Mary, never that.' He leaned forward and gently squeezed one hand that lay in her lap. 'I will always love you, but, at this moment, I am furious with you.' He released her hand and sat back. 'And I am in no mood to talk.' A muscle flickered at the back of his jaw as he stared at Andrew who ignored them.

She could feel Andrew's body bristling with irritation, and his posture said he was in a sulk.

She sighed, folded her arms across her chest and looked through the window. She was angry too, and hurt, and confused.

25

They had been travelling for a day and night, breaking only to change horses. She had slept intermittently in the carriage, as had Andrew. She did not think her father slept.

She wanted to talk to Andrew but not in front of her father.

She wanted to say, do you really love me? And if his answer was yes, why did you not tell my father? And she wanted to ask, why did you say that to Kate?

When London's skyline came into view relief flooded her.

Her father sat up straighter. 'I shall take you to John's. You may wait there with your mother while Lord Framlington and I obtain a licence.'

'I'm not a child, Papa, you do not need to tell me to stay with Mama.'

A note of humour rumbled from Andrew's chest, then his hand reached to his side and he coughed as his foot lifted off the seat and moved to the floor. He straightened his hat.

Mary ignored him.

'I wish I had told you to stay with your mother these past weeks,' her father said.

Mary watched through the window as the carriage driver negotiated London's busy streets, an odd feeling in her stomach. Everything was the same yet different. The

carriage halted outside John's house – it is the same house, in the same street, but I am different; I love a man, and soon this will no longer be my home.

A footman opened the carriage door and dropped the step. Mary did not wait on the men to help her but stood, took the footman's hand and climbed out. Her father descended in her wake and Andrew followed. Mary's gaze caught Andrew's. A shallow smile raised his lips and he winked, displaying his rogue's, devil-may-care, armour.

She climbed the stairs to John's front door. Andrew caught up with her, and his hand grabbed hers. 'At least pretend you are happy to have me,' he said to her ear.

Mary stiffened her spine and ignored his churlish stab.

Her father looked at them, but she did not think he had heard, certainly Andrew had not intended him to.

John and her mother met them in the hall. He did not smile and her mother's eyes were red-rimmed from hours of tears.

Mary's hand slipped free from Drew's and she walked to her mother. 'I am sorry, Mama.' Her arms lifted to embrace her. 'I did not mean to?—'

'Fall in love,' Andrew interjected from behind her in a belligerent tone.

Her mother glared past Mary, and their embrace was brief because Drew came towards them.

'I am Lord Framlington, Lady Marlow.' He held out his hand, in a forceful gesture. There was that look of devilry in his eyes, and when her mother took his hand, he kissed the back of her fingers before releasing her.

Her mother stiffened. She dressed herself in solid steel when she was angry.

Andrew's arm came about Mary's shoulders, in a gesture that felt possessive not supportive.

Her father coughed, choking on his disapproval.

Mary silently apologised by stepping away from Andrew's embrace.

'Has John told you we've agreed to obtain a special licence?' her father asked her mother. 'I will take Lord Framlington now.'

'I have spoken to a minister,' John said. 'He agreed to undertake the ceremony in Whitechapel. Shall I come with you?'

'That is not necessary, he is hardly likely to run. He would not have her dowry, and that is all he wants.' Her father spoke about Drew as though he was not there.

'Not all...' Andrew stated and threw her father a mocking grin.

Embarrassment warmed Mary's skin. She didn't like this Andrew.

'We're leaving,' her father barked. Then he stepped forward, embraced her mother and kissed her lips quickly. 'We will be back as soon as we can.'

'I had a coach with no insignia prepared,' John told her father.

'Thank you,' her father said.

As her father walked from the hall, Andrew's eyebrows lifted and lowered, in a sort of goodbye and he nodded towards her and her mother with a tilted smile before

following her father.

‘Why?’ John asked her the moment the porter shut the door behind them. ‘I suppose he lured you with a kiss or two. What else?’

‘John.’ Her mother stopped him. ‘Mary has realised her mistake, it will do no good rubbing salt into the wound. But, Mary, why did you not speak to me? I would not have judged. I would have helped you think this through.’

Mary looked up to the beautiful paintings on the ceiling, swallowing, fighting back tears.

Her mother touched her arm.

Mary turned to her. ‘You would have told me not to speak to him.’

‘For good reason!’ John shouted.

Anger screamed inside her. ‘Stop it! You never told me the reason! You never told me what he’d said to Kate!’

‘I did not think I needed to spell it out to you! I thought you would trust my word!’

‘He is nice...’ The Andrew she knew was.

‘I’m sure he was,’ John growled, ‘and I do not wish to know how nice!’

‘John,’ her mother challenged, ‘you will solve nothing by condemning her. It is too late for this. I just wish, I wish...’ Her mother’s voice broke and her eyes glittered.

Mary was overcome with guilt as she enveloped her mother in a firm embrace to

comfort her. ‘Mama, I’m sorry?—’

‘I am not angry with you.’ Her mother wiped the tears away. ‘I am sad because you may suffer from this choice if Lord Framlington is as bad as John thinks.’ Her voice became a whisper as though emotions strangled her. ‘I know you must love this man. It is not an easy choice to elope. I know because I eloped with John’s father. I hope Lord Framlington loves you too, Mary?’

Mary had not known about her mother’s elopement.

‘Anyway,’ she said, waving away the questions Mary would have asked. ‘Whatever the outcome, unlike when I eloped, you are not leaving your family. We will always be here. Come upstairs, now, and let us find you something pretty to wear to your wedding.’ She took Mary’s hand.

A lump swelled in Mary’s throat as they climbed the stairs, emotions gathering. ‘Is Kate here?’ she asked.

‘No, she’s with the children at Pembroke Place. We left in the middle of the night. Eleanor sent word to me. She saw Miss Smithfield at a ball. She knew you were supposed to be with her and you were not.’

‘Does everyone know I ran away? Is Emily in trouble?’

‘I am sure she is. She lied for you. I have always trusted you. Why did you not trust me?’

‘She was charmed, Mama.’ Mary had not even noticed John walking up the stairs a few steps behind them. ‘I would lay odds he told her not to speak.’

Andrew had.

'I would say he promised her devotion.' John's words echoed about all the shining marble in his cold hall.

She did not want to believe what John said but Andrew had become taciturn since her family found them.

When she reached the room she had been allocated last season, as a grown woman, she felt like a child again. 'Mama, you do not need to help me. You can send a maid.'

'No matter the circumstances, this is your wedding day, and it is a mother's right to help her daughter dress.'

26

Pembroke's opulent Palladian Hall was magnificent, but when Drew saw his future wife walk down the stairs she outshone all the gilded splendour. She had changed her clothes and dressed in a pale shimmering dove-grey muslin, shot through with silver thread. The fabric caught the daylight from the long window above the door, and it made her appear unearthly. The colour engaged with her eyes; and her dark hair and pale skin made a perfect contrast for the colour too.

The bonnet she wore was a slightly darker grey, and at the edge of its brim were small white rose buds. She looked like a virginal bride. She was not that.

When she looked at him, her beauty knocked the air from his sore lungs, and a memory of how flawless her porcelain skin was under that gown dried his throat.

A slight lift of her lips, scarcely a smile, acknowledged him as she stepped from the bottom stair.

I love you , the thought spun through his head. He was certain of it. The ground shifted, tilted, beneath his feet when he had seen her.

Her look did not say, I love you too . Her eyes were cold. But then, when she'd walked downstairs, she would not have been admiring him; he sported a black eye and a bruised jaw.

Drew swallowed the knot tied in his throat.

‘Are you ready?’ Marlow asked his wife who’d followed Mary downstairs.

Marlow had lectured Drew on the way to the bishop’s palace to obtain the licence. The return journey had been full of threats. If Drew hurt her; if he did not look after her; if he treated her false; if Marlow heard that Drew was behaving inappropriately, setting up a mistress or having an affair... Marlow had found a hundred different reasons to threaten Drew, promising castration at least, murder at most.

Drew did not care. The only thing he did care for was Mary, and judging by her look, she no longer cared for him.

He sighed. He would not survive if she turned her back on him.

He had informed her father it was a mistake to tell him not to do things, because he was a contrary man. He also told Marlow his daughter was as contrary, and if they had not warned her off, she’d probably never have gone near him. Then ignoring the pain of his broken rib, he had patted Marlow’s shoulder with a smile, rejecting her father’s prejudice.

Marlow’s hand had fisted, and Drew had readied himself not to flinch if the man hit him. Marlow had gritted his teeth, dropped his hand and snapped, ‘You are not worth hitting.’

Now, Drew lifted his arm, offering it to Mary. His rib, and his heart, hurt like hell, but he was not going to show it and let any of them know how much they had upset him.

Mary rested her hand on his sleeve.

Pembroke glowered.

Ignoring him, Drew walked Mary towards the front door. 'I suppose your brother has been insulting me again,' he said to her quietly.

Her gaze flicked up to meet his, then darted away, in a way that implied Drew was right.

Clearly all the words he said to her counted for nothing compared to Pembroke's.

'And you've been lapping it up...' he said. 'Do you think I am a villain now?'

She did not answer, yet her eyes told him to be quiet .

Never tell me not to do something , Mary. Have you learned nothing about me? It is like a red rag to a bull.

'What did he say? Am I charged with something new or is it still seduction? Perhaps I should ask him to a duel and shoot him so he has a decent complaint. Or I could?—'

'This is not a game,' she whispered harshly as they led the wedding party out into the street.

'Am I laughing?' he answered.

But then, he could not help himself, he had always been easily spurred. He looked over his shoulder at Pembroke. 'Have you the cheque?'

Mary's hand, as light as a feather, flinched, her fingers clawing for an instant.

It had been the only way he could think of to hit back at Pembroke, but yet again he had not thought about Mary.

When they reached the carriage, Drew held Mary back, letting the others enter first.

He did not want to cause her any suffering, but he did not know how to manage this – and she is hurting me.

A footman held the carriage door open and two grooms held the horses' heads. The coachman was already in his seat. Another two grooms hovered by the footplates at the rear of the glossy black coach. All were dressed in Pembroke's livery.

Hell, if this was the service Mary was used to, she would find life sparse at the Albany in Drew's two unstaffed rooms.

Drew handed Mary up, then climbed in after her. Pembroke's pale impenetrable gaze was no more than a mirror. The man must be good at cards; no one would guess what was in his hand.

As he sat beside Mary, Drew grinned, striking back. Let them think he was taking Mary just for their money. Let them feel the pain of this too.

Mary pressed up into the corner. He slid up close, only because she sought to move away.

His ill-temper was getting worse by the minute.

The door shut.

He picked up her hand and wove his fingers through hers, then rested their combined hands on his thigh, in clear view of her father, mother and brother sitting opposite.

From their dire looks anyone would think she was going to her death. His reputation was surely not that bad. But then, society had tarnished him from birth with prophetic

words about the outcome of his parentage, and he had done nothing to dispel their prophecies.

But why the hell should I care about the people who don't even care to know me?

The carriage rocked into movement.

Mary's mother was the only one who looked at Mary, her face a picture of concern. While Mary was doing her utmost to pretend Drew did not exist.

She knew he existed the night before last. He rubbed his thumb across her wrist above her glove to remind her of his presence. Not a single muscle in her face moved. He supposed she had learned that stony expression from her brother.

When the carriage entered Whitechapel's narrow streets, lined with crowded and crooked houses, the stench of the city's less affluent area assaulted Drew's nostrils.

Pembroke must have brought them here to avoid the world believing Mary had been forced to marry him. Yet the state of Drew's face was testimony of that.

Reputation was everything in high society – but it never mattered what people did behind closed doors, just as long as no one actually saw.

The coach stopped beside a small church.

Drew opened the door and leapt out before a servant could reach it. He kicked down the step and raised his hand to help Mary down.

The look Marlow gave Drew when he descended the step spiked him into saying, 'So, what do I call you once we are wed? Papa?' He had a vicious vein running through him today. Sod them and their lies.

‘You may call me Lord Marlow, and it will always be so.’

‘Please stop stirring the pot,’ Mary whispered.

Drew shot her a smile, saying, must I? He was enjoying making Pembroke and Marlow uncomfortable.

She shook her head, saying, do not , then her fingers slipped from his and she turned to her father.

The rejection kicked Drew in the gut, making his ire burn hotter. His patience was wearing thin, I love you, you foolish woman...

She walked beneath the thatched canopy of the wooden lychgate, her hand on her father’s arm. Pembroke and Lady Marlow followed. Drew followed them, his hands slipping into the pockets of his trousers.

The vicar waited inside the church porch.

Drew took off his hat and gloves and entered the church.

The dark stained glass let only a little light in, making the small church gloomy.

The vicar led them along the aisle to the altar, the sounds of their footsteps on the glazed stone tiles echoing from the walls.

The vicar bid Mary and her father stand on the left, and Pembroke and his mother to sit. Then he looked at Drew with disapproving eyes. ‘Stand here, Lord Framlington.’

Drew placed his hat and gloves on the end of a pew. If he did not hit someone, or something, soon, he was liable to explode.

A page of the leather-bound book the vicar held was marked with a red ribbon. He opened it on that page and began reciting the words.

When they came to the point where Marlow had to put Mary's hand into Drew's, Drew grinned at him. Fuck you, Marlow. She is mine.

The vicar continued reading, looking from Drew to Mary and back again.

When it came to their vows, though, Drew forgot her family, and, looking into her eyes, made his promises with a firm intonation he hoped Mary believed.

She looked at the knot of his cravat, and when it was her turn to speak, she mumbled the reply with no conviction.

This would never be a romantic memory to hold dear for the rest of their lives, but he wanted it to be sincere.

'Have you a ring, Lord Framlington?' the reverend asked.

Lifting his right hand to his mouth, Drew gripped the signet ring on his smallest finger between his teeth, pulled it off, then he took it from his mouth and polished it on his coat.

His mother had given him the ring. His father, whoever he was, left it on her bedside as a thank-you gift for a night's entertainment, and later, an unwanted son. The gift had become his compensation for his undesired life. Fitting, he thought as he slid it on Mary's finger.

She did not even lift her gaze then.

Yesterday, this was not how he had pictured their wedding. He'd thought her feelings

for him would hold. He'd thought she would be glad. Happy, despite her parents' fury.

He sighed as her hand trembled in his, love lodging like a spear, not an arrow, through his heart.

Then, finally, she looked up.

He smiled, emotion rising from his heart, offering reassurance.

The vicar said words for Drew to repeat. She held his gaze as he spoke, her pale eyes shining with intensity. The hours which had passed since her father had entered the room at the inn slipped away. It was just the two of them again.

She repeated words too, her fingers holding his hand firmly, as she spoke with clear, true emotion.

Then the vicar said, 'I now pronounce you man and wife. What God has united, let no man set asunder.' His book snapped shut.

Drew leaned to kiss Mary. She turned and the kiss fell on her cheek as her fingers slid from his.

He turned and faced her family. He could have heard a bloody pin drop in the silence of their acclamations. 'Is no one going to wish us happy?' he asked.

Her father grunted, Pembroke jeered and her mother bit her lip.

Lifting his fingers to his forehead, Drew tugged it and briefly bowed his head at her mother. 'Ma'am.'

‘You are not amusing, Lord Framlington,’ she said, her eyes flashing.

It was a look he had seen in Mary’s eyes.

‘You need to sign the register.’ The vicar’s voice cut the hostile air. ‘Come this way.’

Marlow offered his arm to Mary before Drew could. Drew reached out and held her elbow, making her the rope in their tug of war again.

He followed the vicar with his hat and gloves in one hand and Mary in the other.

‘Why are you deliberately upsetting them?’ she whispered.

He leaned to her ear. ‘They are insulting me.’ Stop siding with them. No one ever cared about his feelings.

She did not speak again, and her arm was taut.

They watched the vicar enter their names in the large record book on an old chest in the vestry. When he asked for Drew’s father’s details, Drew looked to the ceiling and mumbled the Marquis’s name, the man who’d been forced to claim him but had never been a father to him. Then they signed their names.

Her name was now Lady Andrew Framlington. Mary Rose Framlington – that sounded good.

Pembroke signed as a witness, along with Mary’s father, then the deed was done.

They donned hats and gloves, and a few moments later climbed back into the carriage.

The next stop was Pembroke's offices, where Drew was surprised to discover Pembroke's businessman, Mister Philip Spencer, was also his brother-in-law. Drew's eyebrows lifted; he'd not realised Pembroke had married a commoner.

Within a quarter hour the cheques from her father and brother were signed and in Drew's pocket. Cheques that meant safety, happiness and hope. No more hardship, no more threats of debtors' jail, and he could help Caro now.

A smile held Drew's lips as he walked back to the carriage. But then he saw her face. It was her money. He did not care what her father thought. But... Devil take it. He must remember it was hers. No matter how much he hated the men in her family, he loved her. He needed her money, and he needed her. Love, it turned out, could be a warm emotion, but also a solid, cold lump of heavy stone in his chest.

When they returned to Pembroke's mansion, Drew did not go in but held back at the foot of the steps. 'Stay with your parents and pack your things. I will collect you at five. My curricule should be back at the stables by then.'

'Where are you going?'

'I have things to arrange.' He set his expression in a smile. He was too angry to be natural.

'To arrange...?' Her eyebrows lifted, and her expression asked more questions.

'I have debts to pay, Mary.' He tapped her under the chin. 'I will collect you at five.'

'At five then.' She nodded, her expression suspicious.

He thought about kissing her but remembered the kiss she turned away from at the church and did not attempt it.

He walked away without a word to her family. But he did glance back and smile at Mary.

She was clasping the iron railing and watching him with a look of doubt.

Before he paid his debts, he would go to his boxing club and knock six bells out of someone, no matter that his rib hurt like hades.

Mary watched him walk away, his arms swinging in time with his long strides.

Her fingers clung to the iron railing to stop her knees from giving way. Within an hour of their marriage, he had taken her money and left. He had said he would come back but her belief in him had been slaughtered.

‘Where has he gone?’ Her father’s consoling touch rubbed her arm.

‘To fetch his curricule,’ she lied, but she could hardly tell her father he had gone to pay his debts with her dowry. ‘He said he will collect me here at five. I shall pack my trunk.’

Her mother smiled sympathetically.

Mary walked into the house. She had no idea where her new home was, she had never asked Andrew where he lived. I will make the best of this. If she continued to love Andrew, perhaps he would learn to genuinely love her.

Her mother called for the maids to help her pack. They emptied wardrobes and drawers, her mother and one of the maids hastily folding and layering everything into trunks; ball gowns, and dresses for the day, for travelling and walking, and for afternoon parties, as well as underwear and outerwear.

Mary filled her travelling bag with personal items. She opened her jewellery box before packing it, remembering the moments each gift had been given to her, by her

father or John.

She put her writing desk on top of one of the full trunks, tears clouding her gaze.

‘Mary.’

She turned and faced her mother, blinking away her tears.

‘When we return to Berkshire, I shall have the maids pack your winter clothes and send them to you too. But your pianoforte... shall I write and ask for that to be sent to you now?’

The tears brimmed over.

Her mother looked at the maids. ‘Thank you, we have nearly finished, you may go.’

They bobbed quick curtsies and disappeared swiftly and quietly via the door to the narrow servants’ stairs.

Her mother held Mary’s hand, led her to the bed, sat down by her side and embraced her. Mary could not expect more; it was the only comfort her mother could offer, she did not know Andrew, and he had not given them any reassurance that he cared for her.

After a while, when her tears stopped, her mother passed Mary her lace-edged handkerchief. Mary wiped her eyes and blew her nose. ‘Please do not tell Papa I cried. It will make him angrier.’ She did not want to regret eloping, but in this moment she did.

‘Would you like to take one of the maids with you? I know your father would agree to it.’

‘I should leave such decisions to Andrew.’ She had no idea if there would be space for a lady’s maid.

Her mother held Mary’s hands. ‘I must tell you all you should know. It is too late for your wedding night but I hope he has been kind to you. If you argue, then seek to resolve it before you sleep rather than let it run into another day, even if it sometimes means saying sorry when you do not think you are in the wrong.’

‘There will be disagreements at first. Arguments are natural for any couple as they come to know one another. So, you should not let them upset you too much. If you feel hurt or angry, though, you must tell him how you feel. If you do not, how is he to know? Talking to one another is the best foundation for a marriage.’

The words passed over Mary. Her mother was talking about men like Papa. He was even-tempered and thoughtful. Andrew was brash and quick-tempered. He would not be the same.

‘I shall ring for tea.’ Her mother rose from the bed.

As they drank the tea, her mother talked about running a household and managing staff.

Then Mary heard horses halting outside. They whinnied. She rose and looked through the window. Her fingertips touched the glass as she watched Andrew climb down from his curricule.

‘He’s here,’ she said and rushed from the room. Despite everything, she felt... in love.

When she reached the landing, he was in the hall. He looked up, and for a moment there was a glimmer of the looks they had shared before her father found them, but it

was gone in a second.

Was that look a lie? It felt real.

John and her father were already in the hall. She would guess they had planned a welcome reception.

Mary hurried downstairs. Her father bristled as John stood like a statue, observing. Behind her, her mother sniffed back tears.

When Mary reached Andrew, she longed to kiss him and remind him he'd said he loved her. She did not.

'Your things?' he asked.

'Papa will have them sent in a cart.' She touched the bruise on his jaw. There was another about his eye. He pulled away from her touch, giving her a look that said, do not .

Mary took her travelling bag from her mother, then Andrew took it from her. 'I will leave you my address.'

'We know your address,' John retorted.

'Perhaps you would come to dinner soon?' her mother ventured.

'I am not sure we shall be free,' Andrew answered.

'But you will visit us in the country and stay for a while once the season is over? I doubt we will stay in town much longer now.'

Mary heard the unspoken words, after this. They only came to London to find her a husband.

Her mother took a breath. 'The younger children are happier at home.'

Mary nodded. 'Let me know when you will leave?'

Andrew caught hold of her hand. Tears threatened.

Her mother moved forward, lifting her arms. 'Of course we shall.'

Mary freed her hand and hugged her mother.

They both cried.

Mary's father came close and raised his hands. She hugged him firmly too.

'I will miss you,' he said to her ear. 'I wish I was losing you in better circumstances. If he treats you badly, you must come back.'

She nodded. When he released her, he pressed his handkerchief into her hand, as he had done the day she eloped. This time there were tears in his eyes too. She hugged him again, harder.

'We need to go,' Andrew said, his voice cold.

Her father kissed her and let her go.

There was no need to hurry. Andrew was merely prodding her father's anger again.

'You will always be my daughter, and you will always be welcome at home,' he said

in a voice that ensured Andrew heard.

Mary kissed his cheek. 'I know, Papa. I love you.'

She looked at her mother. 'I love you too, Mama.' Mary hugged her mother once more, ignoring Andrew's impatience, then turned to John.

He came forward as Mary moved towards him. She hugged him too. 'Kate and I will always be here for you too. We'll be in town, the House of Lords is sitting for another few weeks. I'll send for Kate and Paul tomorrow. If you need to come back, just come, you do not need to give us warning.'

'Thank you.' Mary kissed his cheek.

John could be misunderstood, because he appeared so stone-like, but she knew her half-brother. His fingers touched her cheek, the pad of his thumb wiping away a tear.

Andrew coughed.

Mary swallowed back more tears and turned to Andrew.

'Marlow, Pembroke.' He looked from one to the other, then at her mother. 'Lady Marlow.' He bowed his head.

She held her father's handkerchief tighter. 'We will call on you soon.'

Andrew held her hand. It meant his ring pressed into her finger within her glove. Her wedding ring was loose, it would probably fall off if she took off her glove.

She had looked at it upstairs, it had the initials T R inscribed on it, not Andrew's initials. Perhaps he won it in a card game. That felt a little sordid – to have a wedding

ring which meant so little. Like a marriage that meant little.

Her parents followed them outside. Andrew released her hand, lifted her bag and slid it under the seat.

Her mother smiled. Mary did too.

He helped her climb the awkward steps to the high seat. Then walked about the carriage to climb into the driver's seat. John's groom stepped away from the horses' heads, Andrew flicked the reins and the horses walked on.

Mary waved goodbye to her parents.

Her parents waved too, tears running down her mother's cheeks.

'You may call on them. We will not,' he said as he increased the horses' pace to a trot. 'And why are you weeping? Four days ago, you chose to leave them. You look as if you've been crying ever since I left you. I'm not sentencing you to life imprisonment. You can visit them whenever you want to.'

Anger pierced her chest. 'You left me!'

* * *

'I told you where I was going.'

And so the arguments began, barely five minutes from her parents' door. But he had started this. He'd banked her brother's and her father's cheques and settled several of his most urgent debts with cheques of his own, including his rent, and after that he had gone to his boxing club and pounded the hell out of anyone daring to step into the ring with him, and the sharp pain in his side had only made him more violent. He

then washed, changed and went to the stables to fetch his curricle. It had been ridden back by one of the inn's grooms. His horses had been retrieved from the first inn by the stables he used. Before leaving, he had told them which inn he would leave the horses at and told them not to tell a soul. It felt good to see Hera and Athena again. Normal. He knew where he stood with his horses.

She said no more, staring ahead.

He guided his horses through the busy streets of St James and Mayfair in silence too.

Open carriages passed them, landaus and barouches. The people in them stared at the half-sister to the Duke of Pembroke – niece to quarter of the House of Lords – seated beside 'that bastard' Framlington – who sported a black eye. Her father would not need to publish the announcement. It had been made.

One woman even leaned from a carriage window as though she could not believe what she was seeing.

If Mary's parents went to a ball tonight they would face a thousand questions.

He glanced at Mary, she sat straight-backed, her hands folded on her lap, ignoring the speculative stares.

He liked her backbone. Some men preferred meek, mild and mouldable women. Mary had fire and passion, he would rather she stood up to him than be timid. But he did not like her weakness for the false perspectives of her family.

He sighed.

'Do you have a mistress?'

The question shocked him, not the subject, but the detachment in her voice.

‘No, Mary. Even if I had wanted one, I could not have afforded one. So, it is a good thing I did not want a mistress and I still do not. What I wanted was a wife. You.’

‘A man does not need to pay to have an affair, I am not that naive. You propositioned my sister-in-law, how many others?’

She looked ahead, her expression blank; no one would guess the subject of their conversation.

‘I have not kept a tally. I do not notch my lovers up on my bedpost, as you will see when we get home. It is not usual for men to be celibate before they wed. I know your brother was not, he had an affair with my older sister. I made an indecent proposal to his wife, yes. It was tit for tat, if not exactly an eye for an eye. It annoyed me that he spoke badly of me. You should ask your brother, and your father, the same question. How many women? I am sure even your father will not answer none.’

They glanced at each other in the same moment, their gazes clashing and parting.

‘Am I a tooth for a tooth, then?’ she asked.

‘You are nothing to do with that. It was long ago.’ I have said I love you, and I have never said that to another woman. He did not voice his thought because they were in the street.

She was silent for several yards, then she abruptly swung about on the seat and faced him. ‘What is it that you want from me?’

A landau passed containing three matrons of high society.

He was inclined to pull over and let the passing traffic stare if she wished to argue in public. He took a deep breath. 'I want nothing from you.' That was the best lie he had ever told. I want all from you and I want to be all to you. I want you to ignore your family and believe me!

'Other than my dowry.'

He did not answer. They had pursued this conversation a dozen times, he was not returning to it. If she chose to believe her brother over him, let her. He had paid off half his debts today. He would pay the other half tomorrow. There would be no more duns knocking at his door with their threats. He wanted to feel happy...

He felt empty. Sad.

28

As soon as they reached the mews where he stabled his horses and curricie, the grooms came out.

Drew tied off the reins as they managed the horses, jumped down and walked about the vehicle to help Mary.

She had already lifted her dress and carefully climbed down.

He took her bag out from beneath the seat and set it at her feet, then walked on to speak to his horses. He slapped Athena's flank lightly. It was good to have his horses back. He'd always found solace in them. He rubbed the animals' cheeks. They nuzzled his shoulders, snorting against his ears. Saying they were pleased to see him too. He rested his forehead against Hera's bent head, whispering his gratitude. 'I shall never lose you now.'

He smiled at the groom who began unharnessing them. The man tugged his forelock.

When Drew turned back to Mary, emotions exploded in his chest. He smothered the fireworks that would have had him lifting her off her feet and swinging her around, because she clutched her bag like a weapon, anger glinting in her eyes.

He held out his hand to take the bag.

'I will carry it,' she said.

He ought let her, just to spite her. Instead, he gripped the handle and pulled it from her. Fortunately, she did not embarrass them both by fighting for it.

He offered his free arm to her.

She lay her fingers on it but in the same dispassionate way she had at the church.

At the street corner they waited for a street sweep to clear a path and when they reached the other side Drew gave the boy a ha'penny.

'Good-day, m'lud.' The boy tilted his cap. 'An dun't forget, if y'ur needing y'ur boots cleaned, I'm y'ur man.' He was not a man, he looked barely ten, but Drew had always liked these boys. He bought them bread when he could, and soup when the weather was cold, and he'd stand and listen to their tall tales occasionally.

Mary's fingers slipped off his arm as it lifted to tip his hat. He smiled. 'Good-day, Timmy, lad. When I have a task, I will let you know.'

Mary's expression turned odd. As though she saw that he was not the evil bastard her family portrayed.

Perhaps he should ignore the boys in her presence in future. He had no wish to improve her ill-informed image of him. He breathed away that contrary thought. He would never keep her if he did not learn to control his temper.

The entrance to his apartment was a hundred yards from the corner. He knocked on the door, it opened almost immediately.

'Lord Framlington.'

Drew nodded at the doorman who gave him a formal bow.

‘This is my wife,’ Drew stated, looking from Joseph to Mary. ‘This is Mr Moore, Mary, our doorman. He is the man to call upon if you need anything. Literally anything.’

‘My Lady.’ Joseph hid his surprise well and bowed deeply. ‘As his Lordship says, if there is aught you need, ask.’

Mary became the woman Drew had seen in the ballrooms, smiling and thanking the man with inherent grace.

Drew turned to the staircase and encouraged her to walk ahead. It left him with a view of her swaying bottom as he followed three steps behind.

The hallway was narrow, tiled with red and black polished diamond shapes and the stairs simple waxed oak.

Eyes wide, Mary took in all the details of her coming down in life.

If she had tried to picture his home, he doubted she had pictured this.

She stopped on the top stair, waiting for him.

Passing her, he went to his front door, one door along, put her bag down, withdrew the key from his pocket and unlocked the door. It swung open. She entered as he picked up her bag.

She walked to the hearth rug, her gaze spinning all about the square parlour.

He had a table, set to one side, which seated six. The other half of the room contained five armchairs at various angles, a games table, set for backgammon, a writing desk and a couple of other functional pieces of furniture. The room was extremely sparse,

with Pembroke's house as comparison. There were no ornaments, or decorations. The walls were pure green, nothing flamboyant. Everything he owned was for a purpose.

Her expression said she found it lacking.

He carried her bag into his bedchamber and put it on the bed. When he turned, she'd followed.

'See, no notches.' It was spiteful but he could not help it, defensiveness ran in his blood. Her lack of belief, the rejection of his love, was cutting at him.

He sighed.

She looked as if she'd been thrown into a lake and told to swim when she did not know how.

A wave of love washed over him, regardless of the feelings of betrayal warring in his chest.

He wished to take a hold of her and tell her gently not to be so foolish. To convince her of the truth. But she had made him a coward now. He was too afraid of more rejections. The kiss she had turned away from had left its scar.

Yet this was all strange to her, he did know that.

More sympathetically, he said, 'The dressing room is through there. There is space there for one personal servant, but I have none. These are my rooms, the sitting room and this bedchamber. I buy in meals or eat out, at a friend's or at my club.' Of course she could not join him at his gentleman's club. It was also a gentleman's apartment block, though. The only females who usually called here were paid. Mary would probably die of mortification if she happened to see one of those women.

‘There are people below-stairs who will do laundry and such like, and a maid who cleans weekly and attends to the grates in winter. I do not expect you to keep house for me. If you need anything, just ring.’ He pointed to the bell pull. ‘The kitchens here can bring up hot water too.’

‘What will we do for dinner tonight?’ Her skin had paled. She looked... shocked.

He smiled. ‘I know a place that sells magnificent pies, I shall send someone.’

‘We purchased a picnic once from Gunter’s tea shop...’ she said, trying to sound cheerier, ‘and took it to Green Park.’

It was not a good sign that she was reduced to small talk.

His hands hung by his sides – helpless.

A knock struck the door.

Glad of an excuse, Drew walked back and opened it.

It was Joseph. ‘Lady Framlington’s articles have arrived.’

Behind Joseph a man in Pembroke’s livery carried a small trunk. Behind him two more men bore a much larger one.

‘There are another two trunks the size of the second, my Lord,’ Joseph said.

Joseph had recognised Mary’s wealth, and also that Drew’s rooms were not large enough to accommodate it.

Drew grimaced. The doorman smiled.

Ignoring him, Drew stepped back, holding the door for Pembroke's men. When they entered, he pointed them to the open bedroom door. 'Stack them in there, against the walls and the end of the bed, if you can.'

Drew stayed by the door, as they brought up the rest.

Mary wandered about the sitting room, her fingertips trailing over his furniture, as though she expected to miraculously discover something more than the poor man's home she was standing in.

He wanted to know what she thought but he would not ask. I really have become a coward.

The men did not look at him, nod, or show any deference. Mary must be well liked in Pembroke's household and Drew had become the villain even in the servants' quarters.

Mary looked out the window. It did not look onto the street, but down onto the courtyard where the maids hung the laundry at the rear of the building. There were usually strings of sheets, shirts and men's underclothes out there – another embarrassment for her.

He stepped out of the way of the men bearing the last trunk.

Footsteps hit the stairs. David Martins came up, Drew's neighbour to the right. He grinned at Drew, looked into the room and saw Mary. 'You have a guest?'

'I have a wife.'

'Pretty...'

Resenting his neighbour's intrusive stare, Drew braced his hand on the doorframe, blocking David's view.

'We're very happy,' Drew said, answering an unasked question.

'And very rich, I suppose,' David said. 'I saw the trunks.'

'Enough to get out of here,' Drew responded, his pitch growing colder. 'Now if you will excuse these men,' he finished, letting Pembroke's men walk past.

David lifted his hat and smiled.

Drew shut the door.

'M'lud!' a man shouted through the door.

Drew opened it. Another of Pembroke's men stood there with a small, portable writing desk in his hands and a folding mirror tucked under his arm. The writing desk, Drew told the man to place on the table in the sitting room. The mirror, he had him put on the chest of drawers in the bedchamber.

Drew reached into his pocket to give the man pennies for them all.

He looked at Drew as though the coins were an insult. 'We do not want y'ur money, m'lud.'

Was there any greater insult than to be snubbed by servants?

A measure of guilt stirred in Drew's gut. It was not normally an emotion he felt. It made it harder to know what to say to her when he shut the door.

When she did not turn, he went to her, stood behind her, and held either side of her waist.

Not a single muscle yielded to his touch. Instead, her arms crossed over her chest.

‘I love you,’ he said to her hair. ‘As I said, we will move from here as quickly as possible. I will look for an estate as soon as I have the chance.’

He stroked her hair aside and kissed the curve of her neck where it turned to her shoulder.

Her muscle flinched, and then she spun to face him, her eyes saying, do not touch me.

His simmering anger boiled. ‘You were happy for my hands to be all over you the night before last, Mary! You said you loved me! I love you!’ He glared at her. He’d never been good at holding back his anger. He wanted her love. That was all he asked for. ‘But if I am nothing to you, then I want nothing from you...’ He turned away, refusing to shout any more, or be judged badly any more. He picked up his hat and gloves. ‘I am going out.’ He walked from the room and slammed the door behind him.

29

When the clock on the mantel chimed eight times, Mary rose from the armchair she had occupied for hours. Andrew obviously had no intention of returning to dine with her. She may as well retire.

Her stomach growled in complaint. She had not eaten. She could have asked the doorman to send out for something, but she was too nauseous to eat, her stomach rolled like a butter churn.

In the bedchamber, she searched through her trunks for a nightgown, then undressed, struggling to reach behind her back to release her buttons and the laces of her corset.

There was nowhere to store her clothes beyond the trunks, the one chest of drawers was full of his clothes. So, she put the clothes she removed in a trunk. Her clothes would have to stay in them.

You said you loved me. I love you, he had yelled before he left her. Was it true? How was she to know?

When she climbed into his bed the sheets were cold, and a little damp. She was unsure on which side to sleep.

This was nothing like the marriage she'd imagined, everything felt wrong, it was a nightmare.

When she heard the apartment door open, she threw back the covers to get up and

greet him, but then she heard other voices in the sitting room – his friends, the men who had danced with her.

She lay back down and pulled the covers up over her shoulder.

They were laughing.

Her heart hammered hard as she heard Lord Brooke say, ‘So where is your hard-won bride? Hiding? I have only come back with you for the pleasure of seeing our trophy. After all, we all played a part in your victory. Her dowry will be the making of you, Drew.’

‘Wait a moment, I will fetch her,’ Drew answered. Footsteps walked towards the bedchamber. ‘She must be here...’ His voice did not sound too certain.

It would have served him right if she had left.

She shut her eyes as the door handle turned, pretending to be asleep. Through her closed eyelids, she saw candlelight enter the room and held her breath.

* * *

Drew stopped still. His heart had skipped a beat when he’d entered the sitting room and Mary was not there. As he walked towards the bedchamber cold fear hammered through his veins.

He feared she had left... But there she was, captured in the shaft of golden candlelight, her dark hair splayed across the pillow he usually slept on. The sight of her made him feel like weeping, and the smell of her in his room kicked him in the chest.

He lifted the brace of candles, casting more light into the room.

Her closed eyelids were puffy. She had been crying again, then, because of him, had not eaten, there were no remnants of her dinner in the sitting room. She had ordered nothing in.

He could have at least ordered it before he left, and not have stayed away so long, but once he was with his friends it was hard to get away.

I should not have gone out.

At the time, it had seemed the best thing to do. The only way to prevent his anger getting the best of him.

He had decided to say sorry before he even reached his club. But that had not turned him back because he needed normality, the sanity of his friends, to get over a day of Pembroke's and Marlow's ill-judgement.

While his friends talked, he had planned his apology.

But cowardice had still haunted him. He should have come home then. Instead, he had procrastinated, eaten at the club and played a hand of cards. Then, when he finally plucked up the courage to return, when his friends had proposed returning with him, he agreed when he should not have done, solely to have the shelter of their friendship when he faced her. His newfound cowardice running deeper.

He had left her alone, in an unfamiliar place, on the back of an argument. She would not welcome him bringing back his friends. He'd brought them as a shield for the wrath he expected to face.

Yet this was good, kind Mary. There was no wrath in her, only hurt, which he bore

the guilt for.

Devil take it! The newly discovered voice of conscience no longer whispered; it yelled as guilt smote him with a double-edged sword. A coward with a conscience – that would be his lot as a married man.

‘My, my,’ Peter said, looking over Drew’s shoulder.

Drew shut the door. He did not want his friends ogling her.

Turning to Peter, Drew set a devil-may-care grin on his face; nor did he not want them knowing how vulnerable she made him. He would keep his love affliction to himself.

‘She is a prize.’ Peter smiled. ‘I like to think it was my prose that won her for you.’

‘You are not the only one who contributed to those words!’ Harry called from across the room, helping himself to a glass of the brandy Peter brought with them. ‘You cannot claim all of Drew’s success for yourself.’

‘Ah, but it is the prose that women love, and the prose was all mine.’

Drew said nothing, crossing the room to pour himself a drink too. The conversation carried on, as they all fought over whose words were the best, quoting their various contributions.

‘Well, if you think you helped Drew win Miss Marlow,’ Peter said eventually, ‘you can help me with Miss Smithfield. I am not getting very far, since Drew stole her pretty friend away, her parents will not consent to her driving with me.’

The others laughed.

Drew watched them in silence, as they developed a plan of attack. He sipped his brandy, wishing to be drunk, but for some reason the alcohol failed him tonight. He could not reach uncaring oblivion.

It was about two after midnight when his friends took their leave. He bid them goodnight, extinguished the candles and slipped into the bedchamber as quietly as he could, his heart thumping.

He stripped off in the darkness, leaving only his shirt on, before climbing into the bed beside her.

She did not move or make any sound beyond that of her slow, shallow breathing.

Sighing, he rolled to his uninjured side and let sleep claim him too.

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Mary woke to find Andrew looking at her, his light brown gaze soft and intense; his eyes were honey in the light room. It was morning. She had not fallen asleep until after he had cautiously lain down next to her. She must have overslept this morning.

He was lying on one side, his head cradled on his palm, supported by his bent arm, and the fingers of his free hand played with a lock of her hair on the pillow.

He wore a shirt that hung open at the neck, showing a little of his chest hair.

‘I am sorry.’ He said the words as though they could stitch her heart back together.

She’d heard his friends speaking about the letters they sent her and plotting to seduce Emily. John was right. Drew had not been truthful.

‘I should not have left you alone last night,’ he continued. ‘It was wrong of me. I was angry at your brother and your father and I took it out on you. I am sorry. Do you forgive me?’

She said nothing.

He smiled, it looked genuinely apologetic. Yet she’d thought him genuine that day in the summerhouse, when she’d read the heartfelt words in the letter his friends had written.

She closed her eyes. His breath caressed her neck, then his lips brushed her skin. A

stir of desire clasped at the juncture of her thighs.

A sound left her lips. It was grief, yet he must have heard it as pleasure as his fingers began to draw up her nightgown.

The memory of his touch whispered in ripples across her skin, and despite her broken heart and the knowledge that he was false she wanted him physically. I still love him.

His kisses brushed the skin of her neck. Her body traitorously ached for him.

His fingers touched her inner thigh.

Her arms lifted about his neck as he touched her gently.

When her lips parted on a sigh, which was pleasure, his fingers stroked deeper. His lips touched the corner of her mouth, asking her to turn her head and kiss him back. She felt like weeping as she did, so physically happy, and yet so heart sore.

She was his, no matter that he would never wholly be hers.

He moved over her and his flesh became her flesh as they joined, his palms pressing into the bed either side of her so he did not rest too heavily on her.

The cloth of her nightgown caressed her breasts as he moved, while the tails of his shirt brushed against her stomach and her thighs.

‘I love you,’ he whispered. ‘I swear that I do. With all my heart, I love you.’

Lies.

The way he moved and touched her felt like love.

It was a physical lie too.

She held his shoulders and prayed for this to end – or begin – to reach the escape of ecstasy.

Guilt pressed its short, sharpened knife into her heart, because she still enjoyed the sensations he could trigger in her body. He'd accused her of wanting nothing of him now. He was wrong. She wanted everything from him. She wanted everything he said to be real.

The look in his eyes appeared like tenderness and devotion.

She desperately wanted to believe it.

'I adore you. I will forever worship you.'

Lies.

Her fingers held his hips. Lean muscles worked beneath his skin as he entered and withdrew. She broke in half, body and soul separating, as her senses soared and burst, trembling in release...

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:26 am

Mary's wet heat surrounded Drew as her inner muscles contracted, grasping for his seed. He broke straight after her. It was becoming a pattern of their encounters. Every muscle locked. He shut his eyes and let ecstasy sweep over him, its intensity burned like lit brandy in his blood, the flame flickering through his nerves. It even smothered the pain of his broken rib, which had clawed at his side while he'd moved.

They were made for one another. Sex had never been like this for him.

He opened his eyes, only to see a tear run from her left eye.

Her lower lip quivered. She caught it between her teeth.

He could not breathe. She was crying. The mist of sexual lust left him, and cold emptiness replaced it.

She had been enjoying their intercourse, had she not? She had reached the little death.

He withdrew from her, turning away, not knowing what to say.

He said the only thing he knew, glancing back at her. 'I love you, Mary.' But he heard uncertainty in his voice.

He got up.

She sat up, holding the sheet to her chest, her pale eyes angry. 'Liar.'

They had just shared something blissful... What was this?

‘I doubt you love anyone bar yourself.’

My God. ‘I do love you. I know your family told you otherwise, but they are wrong.’

She let the sheet fall and slipped off the bed, going to one of her trunks. ‘Do not lie. I heard you last night.’

She’d been asleep.

She lifted the lid of a trunk. ‘I heard your friends joking about how they helped seduce me with those letters.’

Damn it all to hell! He crossed the room.

The lid of her trunk banged down as it slipped from her hand and she nearly fell in an attempt to back away from him.

She had feared he would hit her. He would never do that, but it cut him hard to know she thought he could. He lifted his hands, palms outwards, his painful rib roaring as it jarred. ‘You were pretending to sleep...’

Her eyes flashed fire.

God, I am an ass .

‘Your friends were laughing at me. I am glad I amuse you all?—’

‘You do no?—’

‘I shall not let them hurt Emily. I will call on her today and tell her not to trust Lord Brooke.’

‘Mary, darling, they were jesting.’

Her chin tilted up. ‘It was unkind of you to court me. You should have left me alone.’

They were not words of accusation, but those of a desperately unhappy young woman. A wave of love rolled in on top of him, crashing over him, a sensation he was becoming used to. He stepped forward, he wished to comfort her. ‘Mary... Honestly, darling.’

She pushed his hands away.

‘Mary...’ he pleaded.

She turned her back and opened her trunk. ‘What is done cannot be undone. Will you help me dress?’

‘Of course I shall. But I only asked them to help with the letters because you would not meet me again, I am not good with words, it does not make the sentiment in them untrue. I would have done anything to win you.’

‘Anything?’ She stood with a dress clasped to her chest. ‘Do you admit you lied?’

‘I have lied many times in my life, but that I love you is true.’ Anger and frustration sizzled.

‘I don’t believe you.’

Damn her. He turned away. He was tired, still half asleep, a little drugged by the aftermath of sex and in pain. He picked out his clothes and tossed them on the bed then looked back at her. ‘And I do not know how to convince you.’

‘It would be better if you did not lie.’

'I am not lying, but clearly you value your family's word more than mine. I suppose you have decided you do not love me now?' It was a childish thing to say, but Drew was out of his depth.

She did not answer.

'I will dress and then I am going out for a ride. I usually take one of the horses out before breakfast.' He was running away from her again, coward that he was. But he did not know what else to do. He was disgusted with himself. Perhaps if he had not made such a mull of things yesterday and become angry, she would still believe him.

He turned to the basin and tipped in some water from the jug, it splashed into the bowl. She kept her back to him, searching through her trunks, while he washed and dressed.

Once dressed, he looked back at her. She had laid her clothes out on the bed. He supposed she missed having a maid to do such tasks. He ought to find them better accommodation as soon as he could, with space for staff.

He sighed. 'I will leave you. What do you want for breakfast?'

She looked at him as though he was Cerberus with three heads.

He did not wait for her answer. 'I'll have some bread and cheese sent up.' He left then.

When he returned over an hour and a half later the sitting room was empty, and the untouched loaf of bread and wheel of cheese stood on the table.

The door of the bedroom was open, but she was not in there.

Fear beat its drum in his heart. Had she left him?

He'd ridden his horse hard and fast across the open lawns of Hyde Park, burning off his anger and frustration, willing himself to work out how to convince her that he loved her. He'd found no answers, but he could not keep hiding and so he returned – too late...

Her belongings were in his bedchamber, though. Hairpins, her hairbrush and the mirror stood on his chest of drawers. She had not left him.

Her short corset had been thrown on the bed.

Damn , she'd asked him to help her dress. He had not.

He returned to the sitting room. A sheet of paper rested on top of her writing desk.

I have gone home to fetch some things.

Home. The word cut as deeply as her accusations this morning. Where he was should be her home now.

Hell . She must have walked alone, there was no one to accompany her.

He would hire a maid to come during the day. He looked at his watch. How long ago had she left? Perhaps he ought to go after her. But as the bread was untouched, she must have left early and would already be there.

This was a statement to him; that she would not be tied down. He heard it loud and clear.

He could follow, but he did not want to call at her brother's house and subject himself to her male relatives' spite. He could go out again and pretend he did not care that she had gone. Or he could wait for her return. He chose the latter option, slipping off his coat as he walked to the window.

The fine weather had broken today, the sky was hidden behind grey clouds... What if she was caught in a rain storm?

She would not be, though. Pembroke would send her back in his carriage, and curse Drew.

His selfish side wished her family had cut her. But that was a stupid thought, because he had always known they would not and that was to their credit.

Drew cut some bread and cheese, as he tried to learn patience.

She returned after three tedious hours in which he played a boring game of chess against himself. The minute the door handle turned, he stood, feeling like the child who'd craved his mother's attention that he had never received.

Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright beneath the brim of her straw bonnet. She had walked back. She wore a pale pink walking dress, the cloth decorated with cream flowers. The ribbon on her bonnet was cream too. She looked beautiful, as she always did.

She stood back and let Pembroke's footman pass her, pointing to the table on which the half-eaten loaf rested. 'Put them there, please, Tom.'

The young man did not even look at Drew as he set down a pile of books. There was a small bag on his arm, which he put there too. 'Miss Marlow, if that is all.' He bowed deeply, doubling over.

'It is, thank you, Tom. And if you would call for me at two tomorrow, I would be very grateful.'

It appeared she had resolved the issue of accompaniment.

Drew's hands slipped into his pockets as she shut the door and looked at him, her fingers untying the bow of her bonnet. She lifted it off.

He sucked in a breath. 'You went to Pembroke's for the books, I take it...'

'And my embroidery and threads.' Her sweet voice denied this morning's argument.

His hands lifted out of his pockets. 'You should not have gone alone.'

'I did not. Joseph had one of the maids from below-stairs accompany me there, and as you saw Tom walked me back.' She put her bonnet on the table and tugged off her gloves.

His contrary nature admired her for defying any need to rely on him. 'You should have eaten though. You did not eat last night I know.'

'I ate at home. Breakfast was still being served when I arrived.'

'It is not your home any more.' The word had kicked him.

'Mama and Papa are going to a musical evening tonight, at the Everetts'. Mama asked if we wished to join them.'

He sighed.

She continued. 'They will collect us on the way.'

He did not want her to go and yet, as things stood, what would they do if they stayed here together? Argue and upset one another. 'You may go. I'll pass, if you do not mind.'

Her gaze fell to the floorboards. 'I am sorry I took so long,' she said to his feet,

before turning to look at the books. 'My sister-in-law returned with my nephew and my brothers and sisters. I could not just leave again.'

'I am glad you had opportunity to see them. Shall I ring for coffee or tea, or is there something else you would like?'

'No, nothing. Thank you.' She glanced over her shoulder.

'Well, I want some. I will ring.' He walked over and rang the bell. Then looked at her.

She had lifted an embroidery frame from the bag.

It was a wonder having her feminine things in his rooms, with her perfume lingering in the air. It was not just her things though; she made the place a home to him and yet she did not think it so.

Sighing, he ignored the urge to bite at her, hanging on to his patience and keeping his voice temperate. 'I am sorry about this morning. But you are wrong, I love you. Yes, my friends came up with the words in those letters, but that is the only part they played. Everything I have said to you is the truth, Mary. Now, you may believe me or not, but I have been playing an unfulfilling game of chess against myself. Do you play?' This was not the marriage he had hoped for yet. But for now, at least they could be companionable. Better that than arguing.

She looked at him. 'I can play.'

'Then would you play a game with me?'

She nodded, accepting his offer of a truce.

He turned a second armchair to face the table and reset the chessboard as she sat

down. It was like a metaphor of their marriage, this is what they would do. He would reset their places and begin again. He had convinced her to love him once. He could do so again. When every piece was back in its starting position, he sat down, facing her on the opposite side of the board.

‘You take the first move, Mary.’

It was right that she took the first move this time... It was her turn to lead this...