



# The Theory of Dukes (Laws of Attraction #4)

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Caught wandering London unchaperoned on the search for new perfume scents, Miss Prudence Courtright is forced into a lie. Now James "Duke" Barnes believes her a worldly widow and not an innocent—albeit curious—debutante. The risk of ruination will be worth it if she can earn enough on her ventures to avoid being sold off to a staid, stuffy Englishman.

Duke Barnes has grown bored of London. Society seems both enamored of his money and repulsed at his American lineage. He is ready to abandon England for the excitement of the Continent, but bumping into the interesting, attractive widow changes his attitude. Perhaps he will delay his travel plans for a different sort of (mutually satisfying) excitement.

Their light-hearted flirtation is cut short by a masked man and a dead body. Is it a random act of violence or is a plot afoot? Prudence and Duke band together to discover the truth even as her lies fester.

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## CHAPTER 1

Prudence Courtright pulled her bonnet tighter around her face. It wouldn't do to be spotted out and about without a chaperone. Although she wasn't sure if anyone would recognize her. Her aunt Honoria's goal of Prudence taking the marriage mart by storm was not even gathering rain clouds.

Although she possessed a sizable dowry and passable looks, Prudence was deemed too... odd. She did not enjoy coquetry. She could smile and nod, but boredom often had her mind wandering. At the previous night's soiree, Lord Farmingham had asked her a question and waited with a hangdog expression for her answer. Apparently, "that sounds lovely," was the exact wrong response. He'd walked off in a huff. With her luck, he had been telling her about the loss of a favorite hunting dog. She had probably sounded like a cold-hearted harridan.

Luckily Bond Street was sparsely populated this early in the morning. Prudence's destination wasn't the milliner or dressmaker; it was a small shop several turns off the main thoroughfare.

A tingle along the back of her neck made her glance furtively over her shoulder. Was someone following her? A gentleman in a beaver hat pulled low over his brow strolled a half a block behind her, his cane tapping an insouciant rhythm.

She slammed into something hard, gasped, and threw her hands out to catch her balance. A firm grip on both her upper arms held her in place, and she fisted the lapels of a navy-blue frock coat for good measure.

Based on the quality of the wool, she had run into a gentleman. A tall gentleman, considering she stared into the messy folds of a cravat.

“Pardon me. I’m a clumsy oaf.” The man’s voice sent her heart into a panicked sprint.

Not because she could hear the aftereffects of too much liquor and not enough sleep. No, it was a voice she recognized. It was deep and husky and held the distinct inflection of an American accent. Unlike Prudence, who had been brought up by her English maiden aunts in America to speak in a British tongue, James “Duke” Barnes was an amalgam of his upbringing.

An English mother and a father born of America during its founding. His friends were legion and from all over the world and walks of life. He had traveled extensively and had gained a reputation of adventure and derring-do. He was a sought-after dinner guest and relentlessly hunted on the marriage mart in their slice of society. In short, everyone loved Duke Barnes.

Including Prudence.

Her aunts’ church pew was a respectable distance behind the Barnes family’s more prominent front-row seat. That didn’t stop Prudence from staring at the back of Duke’s head and the thick mane of hair all the Barnes children had inherited, imaging what it would feel like between her fingers.

Once he had looked over his shoulder and caught her staring. His blue eyes had burned her in their intensity. Her breath had stopped even as her heart jiggled against her ribs. She had expected everything to change now he had actually noticed her. Surely he could tell she was special and interesting and worth pursuing. Instead, he had sauntered down the aisle at the end of the services without acknowledging her.

After the deflating lack of interaction, she had done her best to quash her infatuation.

It had helped he'd left soon after to explore the world. A very large world. How was it possible they would quite literally run in to one another? If she wasn't so practical, she might believe it was fate.

She had never been this close to him. She had never had occasion to enjoy the feel of his body close to hers. He had eschewed the local dances, much to the dismay of most young ladies and their mamas. She inhaled his scent and winced. Her sense of smell was acute, considering her interests. Under a mix of liquor and tobacco, which in itself wasn't unpleasant, was the hint of cheap perfume. Not exactly the stuff of a maiden's dreams.

"Are you all right?" He dropped his hands and took a shuffling step backward.

It was a good thing she still had his lapels because his heel caught on an uneven paver and in his still-inebriated state, he stumbled to the side. She held fast and pulled him back to the center, only releasing him when he caught his balance.

"It seems I should be asking you that question." She eyed him from under the brim of her bonnet.

"Indeed." He lifted his hat, ran a hand through his hair, and set it back on at a rakish angle. His smile was equally as lopsided and charming. "I do apologize."

The last thing she needed was to be recognized and have Duke Barnes run straight to Aunt Honoria to tattle on her. Keeping her face averted, she asked, "For bumping into me or being thoroughly foxed before noon?"

His eyes widened at her admonishment, and he dipped his face to get a better look at her even as she tried to hide. "In my defense, I got foxed last evening, not this morning."

“You certainly smell like you slept in the gutter.”

He lowered his chin to his chest and took a sniff. “I’m not exactly fresh as a daisy, I suppose. I apologize if I have offended you and your?—”

He broke off as he looked over her shoulder.

She knew what he saw. Nothing and no one.

“It’s a rare pleasure to find a lady out alone,” he said.

“I’m a widow.” Her tone was too defensive and telling. Even worse, she’d lied. She owed him nothing, least of all an explanation. She kept her gaze on her toes while mouthing a curse at herself. Once he recognized her, he would know she lied. Her humiliation was nigh.

Maybe she could escape with her dignity intact.

Before she could perform an about face, his finger came to her chin to tilt her face up to his. Resisting would make matters worse. She raised her face, forcing her gaze to his. She wouldn’t add cowardice to her list of faults.

He studied her from her hairline to the ribbon tied loosely under her chin. She waited for judgment that didn’t come.

“You are very young to be a widow. My condolences. Although you are not wearing black, so I must assume you are well out of mourning.” Curiosity and something warmer and potent sparked in his eyes. Was that what interest looked like?

He didn’t recognize her. Her initial flood of relief was tempered by hurt and a shot of indignation. All the years she had watched and wanted him, and he hadn’t really seen

her. She had been insignificant.

“My name is Duke,” he added when she did nothing but stare at him.

“Is that your name or your title?” The humiliation of admitting they were already acquainted when he did not remember her was too much to bear.

“Would you believe it was my title?” he asked with sparkling eyes.

“Not with your accent.” She pursed her lips and decided to tweak his ego a bit. “Or your manners.”

His smile didn’t falter so much as morph into something naughtier. “I’ve found many English ladies secretly prefer a man who is a bit rough around the edges.”

Heat burst in her chest and inched out of her collar. It wasn’t only English ladies who turned their wanting gazes on him. The trail of feminine longing in his wake was legendary. Apparently, she had not gained immunity to his charms. In fact, despite his rumpled appearance, or maybe because she could picture him rising straight from bed, she was ready to go up in flames.

She channeled Aunt Honoria’s lessons on decorum and tried to sound prim and proper even though she had never aspired to be either. “That is quite—” Her voice was throaty and unintentionally sultry. She cleared her throat. “Quite untoward, sir.”

“I suppose it is.” He sounded unbothered by her admonishment. “Duke is not my given name, of course. It was given to me by my siblings.”

“Because you are imperious?”

“Because I like to be in charge.” Again there was a sexual undercurrent under the

words that made her insides wiggle. “What is your name?”

Usually, she missed the forthrightness of Americans. No English gentleman would consider asking a lady for her name upon meeting. They must be formally introduced by someone else, preferably of higher rank, before they could exchange even trite pleasantries. But at the moment, she wished he bent to society’s rules.

Her mind whirled for a suitable answer. “My name is... Jynx.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Jynx? That is very unusual.”

“It’s not my given name, of course. It was given to me by my friends.” Her slight mocking of his earlier explanation drew a husky laugh from him.

“How did you earn the name Jynx?”

Her friend Clara had first called her Jynx when one of her experiments went awry and acid burned a hole straight through her skirts and petticoat. “It means spell or charm.”

“Are you a witch then?” He seemed to be teasing her.

Was there any harm in confessing her interests to him? After all, his sister, Madeline, was the picture of an unconventional woman. If anyone might sympathize, it would be Duke. “I enjoy chemistry. Lately I’ve been focusing on esters.”

“Esters?”

“Scents. Perfumes. Colognes. That sort of thing.” Of course she would rather be focused on new discoveries like Sir Humphry Davy, but she was practical. If she wished to avoid marriage, she needed some way to earn a living. Her plan—hope?—was to produce signature scents so unique and breathtaking she

became sought after in the highest circles of the ton.

To do that, she needed to visit the apothecary and return to their rented town house before her aunt woke even though basking in Duke's attention made her want to wriggle like a puppy receiving pats.

"That's fascinating." He sounded unusually sincere compared to the gentlemen she'd met since being introduced into the outermost ton circles.

Was his apparent sincerity masking ridicule? "Yes, well. I must be on my way."

Instead of tipping his hat and bidding her a good day, he fell into step beside her. "I'll accompany you."

"There's no need for that," she said hastily.

"If not need, then want." He crooked his arm, and she had little choice but to place her gloved hand around his muscled forearm.

At the next intersection, when he would have remained on Bond Street, Prudence steered him down the narrowed alley. The shadows were longer, but their surroundings still respectable.

"Are you not in search of some frippery for the next ball?" To his credit, he did not balk, but kept pace at her side.

"No, I'm not." She turned left down a narrower lane that was markedly seedier.

"Count me intrigued." Indeed, a hint of excitement sparked in his tone.

His sense of adventure kindled an answering boldness in her. It was a feeling she



rarely had the chance to exercise. Her aunt had done her best to stymie any sort of rebellion. Considering she was skulking down a back-alley in London with Duke Barnes, her aunt had enjoyed limited success.

The apothecary's sign had once been colorful. Now it was faded and hung slightly askew above the sooty door. Barely legible was the name Smythe and Co. "This is my destination."

She pushed the door open. A bell tinkled. Duke followed close behind. The store was a maze of shelves filled with glass vials and flasks, hoses, burners, and more. She was surrounded by the accouterments any good chemist might need. It thrilled her more than the finest ribbons or lace.

Mr. Sharma, not Mr. Smythe, was the proprietor, and there was no company involved. Mr. Sharma was a scientist who was most often found in the back room at work on his own experiments. He did not enjoy interruptions. But while he walked around with a distracted air, he had never been dismissive of her endeavors. No doubt he understood better than most. He had not been accepted into the prestigious scientific circles because of his place of birth and lack of social standing.

Prudence had frequented the shop several times now and could find what she needed without his help. Winding through the uneven rows of shelves, she headed toward the small vials of esters at the end of one long row. They were labeled by chemical compound, and each contained a few precious potent milliliters. A single drop spilled in the shop might linger in the air for hours.

She selected two vials, mentally counting her pin money. She had just enough.

Duke was holding a decorative flask of marbled blue glass to the dim light. "A pretty thing, isn't it?"

“Unnecessarily so, if one is actually performing experiments. In fact, the blue glass would mask the color of whatever solution is being studied.”

“You are very pragmatic for a lady.” Duke looked in her direction with a half smile and brandished the flask as if a merchant hawking his wares. “Perhaps as a vase to hold the flowers of all your admirers then?”

“Perhaps.” Her cheeks heated, not sure if he was making fun of her or not. A widow should be more worldly. Prudence wanted to experience more of life, but it was nearly impossible under her aunt’s watchful eyes.

And if Aunt Honoria discovered Prudence gone without her maid or a footman, there would be hell to pay. Literally. Prudence would be forced to recite Bible verses on sin and disobedience until her lips were parched and her throat sore.

Aunt Honoria had accompanied Prudence to England partly because her health was hardier than Aunt Charity’s, but mostly because she was stricter and more rigid in her duty to keep Prudence from setting a foot off the righteous path.

Duke might not be a gentleman by English standards, but she felt perfectly safe with him. Surely spending time alone with him only qualified as dipping a toe into the devil’s water, as her aunt might say.

“As much as I would like to browse longer, I have other engagements.” She and Aunt Honoria did have plans to stroll through Hyde Park in their finest during the fashionable hour. The ritual held none of the enjoyment of a walk in the woods. In fact, she felt like a lure that could get snapped up and devoured.

“I would like for you to have this.” He didn’t immediately step out of the narrow aisle.

Decorum dictated that she should refuse. “Thank you. I will treasure it.”

His brows cocked. “If you’ll share your direction, I will be the first to send you flowers to fill it with.”

She couldn’t risk him showing up on her doorstep. He would know she had lied. But if she had told the truth on the street, then she would not be enjoying this moment with him. It was a moral conundrum. She stared up at him.

He took a step closer.

Suddenly dry, her lips parted and she dashed her tongue across them. Was he going to kiss her? Was she going to let him?

His gaze roved her face. He drew closer. So close, in fact, her sight blurred and she closed her eyes. The answer to both questions was a resounding yes.

The touch of his lips on hers sent a spark coursing through her veins. Only in her fantasies had her first kiss been with Duke. Now her fantasies were reality, and she should take advantage of the opportunity. Yet, even as energy flooded through her, she froze.

Chemistry she had studied. She had taught herself why soda and vinegar were explosive together. The bonds breaking and re-forming. She had learned why some reactions gave off heat and why others would freeze water.

Whatever reaction was fizzing between her and Duke was something she had never experienced but longed to understand. It was now or never. Once they walked out of Mr. Sharma’s apothecary shop, their paths would diverge.

His mouth was gentle on hers, coaxing a response. Her arms wound around his neck,

the vials of esters still in her grasp. If they weren't so precious—and pungent—she would drop them in order to feel his hair under her fingertips.

His mouth pressed with more intent, his tongue darting to caress the seam of her lips. She opened for him, and his tongue delved to touch hers. Even while heat built in her core, a shiver streaked through her.

He held her fast to him. One of his hands skated over her bottom and gave a squeeze. A tiny moaning gasp of delight escaped her. His lips curled against hers. Was he enjoying himself as much as she was? The same excitement infected her when she was in the laboratory on the cusp of a discovery. It was heady and addictive.

With a deft touch, he untied the wide ribbon of her bonnet and pushed it to the floor. He cupped her nape and skated his lips across her cheek to whisper in her ear. “Have you taken many lovers to your bed? Will you allow me to join you there?”

Her eyes widened with the shock of his words. Never had a man spoken to her so bluntly. Of course, no one else of her acquaintance thought her to be an experienced widow. Gentlemen spoke in purplish prose meant to flatter and obscure any base desires. Not only did she not feel flattered, she was annoyed by the usual treacle.

She much preferred the earthy sensuality of Duke's voice and request. If she could have, she would have led Duke to the nearest available flat surface. Alas, she wasn't Jynx, a sexually experienced widow, but Prudence, a virginal debutante.

“You are being untoward.” Even as she chided him, her head fell back to allow him greater access to her neck.

He huffed a laugh against her skin. “I believe in being honest and forthright to get what I want. And I want you.”

Guilt tensed her muscles against him. She should tell him the truth. Or if not that, then at least she should end the flirtation. She arched away from him and took a deep breath, ready to break away.

A crash sounded from the storeroom. Prudence and Duke whipped their heads to look. The door was closed. For a moment there was only silence. Then another crash and a yelp that sounded animalistic.

Had Mr. Sharma hurt himself during an experiment? He could have cut or burned himself. Or he could have been overcome with noxious gasses. Prudence sidestepped around Duke and headed to the door leading to the storeroom.

Duke took her upper arm in a firm grip and forced her to a stop. “What are you doing?”

“We must check on Mr. Sharma’s welfare. He could be injured.”

“I’ll go. You wait here.” Duke moved her aside and took the lead.

She stayed on his heels. “It might be chemical burns or gas inhalation. I have experience with that sort of thing; you don’t.”

Duke shot her a look that might have been curiosity or exasperation. Another crash brought them up short. A wail sounded but was cut off with a suddenness that spurred her heart faster.

Before they could react, the door from the back room opened with such force it bounced off the wall and slowed the man trying to make his escape. A black-brimmed hat was pulled low over his brow, but dark hair curled over the collar of a well-fitting navy frock coat. He was of average height and build.

Without hesitation, Duke launched himself at the man. While Duke was bigger, the man had momentum on his side. He lowered his shoulder and drove it into Duke's chest. Duke reeled back, gasping for breath. He stumbled into Prudence, who instinctively grabbed for a shelf to steady herself.

The two vials fell from her grasp, clinking against items on their way to the floor. A sudden burst of aroma filled the apothecary. A droplet of the ester was pleasant; this smell was overpowering and burned. She clasped a hand over her nose and mouth.

The man had not stopped, but his hat had been knocked askew. Prudence stepped over Duke, who was gagging slightly either from the smell or the hit to his sternum. The man tossed one final glance over his shoulder at them.

Not surprisingly, Prudence did not recognize him. He was neither young nor old with wide-set eyes, a thin nose, and pointed chin. Then he was gone.

Duke had regained his feet and was pinching his nose. "What is that terrible smell?"

"I accidentally dropped the vials of esters in the melee. One must have broken." With her own nose pinched, her voice took on a nasal quality. She looked toward the door to the storeroom, feeling the pit in her stomach growing. "Mr. Sharma," she whispered.

Duke swung his gaze toward the darkened maw. "Let me see to his well-being."

This time Prudence didn't protest or try to join him. Instead, she retrieved her bonnet and retreated to the front door, bringing much needed fresh air into the smelly, stuffy store. If you could call London's air fresh. It was nothing compared to the sweet, forest-scented air of New York's countryside.

Did Duke miss home? She couldn't ask him, of course, in case she gave away her

identity.

“How is he?” Prudence asked as Duke emerged from the shadows.

His grim expression was answer enough. “Dead, I’m afraid.”

Dead . Her knees trembled. “I don’t suppose his heart gave out?”

“You could say it gave out as he was strangled.”

Prudence’s hand went to her neck, a protective instinct she could not stop. Her thoughts whirled. “What happens now?”

“I’ll fetch the authorities. They’ll require a statement and testimony at the inquest.”

“There will be an inquest.” It was a realization, not a question.

Lying to Duke was contemptible. Lying to the authorities was felonious. But the truth would leave her ruined. She could imagine the headlines of the papers. Unchaperoned American Debutante Discovered at Murder Scene with Man . Any part of the truth was bad enough. Put together, she would be given the cut direct by anyone worth knowing. Her prospects for marriage—and even worse, for her perfumery—would be destroyed.

“I can’t meet with the authorities. I can’t have my name bandied about in connection with a murder. Widow or not, I have a reputation to uphold.” She took another step out the door.

“What about justice for Mr. Sharma?” Duke asked.

“You have as much knowledge as I do about what happened. My statement will add

nothing. Anyway, they are more likely to believe you.”

“Why would you say that?” His brows knitted together.

“Because the authorities will be men.”

“Yes, and...?”

Prudence gave a humorless guffaw. “They will think me on the edge of hysteria. They will take you seriously.”

Duke pulled at his lower lip and shook his head slightly but did not argue the point. “You don’t appear to be on the edge of hysteria.”

She might not be hysterical, but she was questioning reality. Was she dreaming? That would explain Duke kissing her and a murder occurring in the next room. She touched her lips. No, she did not have the experience to dream his kiss.

Not to mention, there was no imagining the cold gaze of the murderer as he pushed past her. “I’m not hysterical, but I didn’t recognize the murderer, so I’d be of no further help.”

“You saw him?” Duke’s gaze narrowed on her. “I was too busy trying to breathe. I only saw his back.”

“I gained a brief glance of his face. I’m not even sure I would recognize him again.”

“But would he recognize you?” A dark portent weighed his words.

“What do you mean?” Her mouth dried. She wasn’t a ninny. She took his meaning quite well. With her bonnet knocked away from her face and hair, he would have



little trouble in placing her if their paths crossed. Could she be in danger? All the more reason to keep her name out of the proceedings.

“Based on your sudden pallor, you understand the implications. We must talk to the authorities.” He took her arm in a firm hand and led her down the narrow alley back toward Bond Street, which was probably bustling with the beau monde.

“Sir, I cannot— will not —talk to the authorities. You are a man and are not held to the same standards as a lady. My involvement would cause a scandal and leave my reputation in tatters.” She twisted her arm free.

His steps slowed. “I forget how uptight the English are.”

“I cannot afford to forget. I will return to my home and try to pretend this never happened.”

His brows quirked. “All of it?”

It was obvious he referred to their kiss. Perhaps someday she would be able to shear away the memory of the murder from the surprisingly intimate moment, but today was not that day. “I’m afraid Mr. Sharma’s death has overshadowed an otherwise pleasant interlude.”

“Only pleasant? Ouch.” He pulled at his bottom lip again, a habit she had never noticed before that brought her attention to his mouth. She swallowed past a sudden lump. He dropped his hand to take one of hers for a squeeze. “Give me your direction, and I will call upon you to give you an update.”

Oh dear. She could do no such thing. She should pull her hand from his but instead found herself entwining their fingers. “I’m not sure that is wise,” she murmured. “The servants might talk.”

“Then meet me someplace.”

That was a terrible idea, yet before she could stop herself, she asked, “Where?”

He searched the cobblestones at their feet and hummed for a moment before his gaze rose. “Vauxhall Gardens is having a masquerade this evening. There will be entertainment and refreshments. Meet me where the musicians are playing.”

Prudence had heard stories of Vauxhall Gardens. The dinner boxes and main gathering areas were respectable enough for a widow to attend. As long as she didn’t wander down any of the darkened paths where no lady would venture, she would be fine. It was the type of adventure she longed for.

“I do want to see justice done for Mr. Sharma.” She gave a sharp nod.

“That’s a yes?”

“Yes, I will meet you.” She had no idea how she would manage it, but she would. She pulled her bonnet back on and hid behind the ruffled satin as he escorted her to the main thoroughfare of Bond Street and hailed a hack.

With a wave, she collapsed onto the stiff squab, only allowing herself once glance through the window at his tall figure. He gave her a salute. She directed the driver to a corner some distance from their rented town house and successfully snuck into her chambers, collapsing back on the bed with a long exhalation.

She didn’t have time to dwell on the tragic and shocking events of the morning. She had plans to make.

### CHAPTER 2

The crush in Vauxhall Gardens had a bohemian feel that infected Duke. The grim business of death and murder had occupied his afternoon. After giving the authorities a version of the truth that didn't involve Jynx, he was ready to shake off his worries with the mysterious lady.

He smiled as her unusual nickname rolled around his thoughts. Thoughts that had become preoccupied with the flash of her smile and expressive brown eyes. What was her real name? Something mundane, no doubt, like Mary. Just like his name. Jameses populated servant's halls and ballrooms in equal abundance.

While he wasn't as rarified and sought after as an English duke, he was finding London's entertainments diverting. Ton entertainments were varied and mindless. The gaming hells were hedonistic and lucrative. And after meeting Jynx, he was ready to shelve his plans to travel to France in search of his sister. For now.

While Jynx had the air of a guileless innocent, she was hiding something. Was she actually a widow? Or was she married and looking for a dalliance? Did it matter? He examined his conscience. The slight twinge was easily drowned out by a glass of champagne from a circulating servant.

He wore his best Weston jacket and had polished his boots to a shine. Without a manservant in tow, his cravat wasn't fancy but was respectable enough. His mask was a simple black velvet that covered the upper half of his face.

A man dressed in the powdered wig and satin breeches of the last century strolled

past. Gemstones winked on his fingers, and the head of his walking stick was encrusted with the same. His face was rouged, and a fake beauty spot sat at the corner of his mouth.

Duke scanned the crowd. Some patrons were simply masked like him, but most treated the masquerade like a costume party. A Grecian goddess was on the arm of a roguish pirate. The lady's draped white gown revealed ample amounts of her bosom, and one tug of the blue sash around her waist might see the fabric fall to the ground around her feet.

He tried to imagine Jynx in such a gown but couldn't. There was something wholesome about her sensuousness that drew him with more force than any blousy beauty he had seen so far that evening.

Where was she? A pang of worry twisted his stomach. If she didn't make an appearance, he had no easy way to find her. She had been understandably anxious to leave the scene of the crime. No lady wanted to be associated with a murder. London society was cruel.

He'd certainly heard his share of rumors and innuendo about his sister's elopement with the gambler, Damien Northcutt. Whispers about the true parentage of the man had also reached his ears. Was it true? Duke had no idea.

Was he worried about Maddie? Yes, but Maddie was the smartest person he knew. She was also the most reckless. A combination society did not understand, especially when encompassed by a lady.

No one, not even their parents, could make Maddie do something she did not want to do. If she threw over the titled son of an actual English duke for a gambler, it was because that's what she wanted. Until evidence was presented otherwise, he would assume she had chased and captured happiness.

What sort of woman was Jynx? Did she embody the same intelligent recklessness as his sister? He hoped so.

He scanned the crowd once more. This time his gaze landed on a woman in a blue gown and silver mask. Her chestnut hair was swept up in a simple style that left her neck and décolletage on thrilling display.

The male gazes around her were assessing, but before any of the gentlemen could make a move, he stepped to her side and offered his arm. "I was afraid you'd left me to face the revelries alone."

"Oh!" She started slightly, but there was no disguising the relief in her eyes as they swept to his. Her arm snaked through his and locked them together. "I entered the wrong gate and got turned around. I am glad to see you."

"You were not accosted, I hope." He narrowed his gaze and warned off the vultures who had gathered before his arrival. The men turned away to seek more vulnerable marks.

"No, of course not." Her hand came to her throat. "I thought the gardens were safe."

They were safer during the events attended by the ton, but even now no unaccompanied lady should venture down the dark walks away from the crowd. But to Jynx, he merely said, "You are perfectly safe with me."

Was that true though? He felt a bit like a wolf to her lamb.

She smiled and a burst of warmth radiated in his chest. "Now you must relay what happened after I left the shop. Poor Mr. Sharma. Did he have any family?"

"A nephew had recently arrived over from India." There must have been something

in his tone that alerted her.

She tugged him to a stop. “Is he being viewed as a suspect?”

“That is the impression I got. The runners harbor distrust of foreigners.” He did not mention his inclusion on their list of suspects.

“It was not Mr. Sharma’s nephew,” she said with conviction.

“How do you know?”

“His hat was knocked askew when he collided with you. We locked eyes.”

Duke’s heart picked up its pace. She had not been so sure of his identity earlier.

“Now that you’ve had time to ruminate on the moment, did he look familiar?”

“He was a stranger to me, but his clothes were of good quality.”

“You suspect he is a gentleman?”

“Or a well-off merchant. A business rival, perhaps? Or a scientific one?” Her voice held none of the fear pumping through his system.

He led her to the edge of the crowd, close to where the graveled paths disappeared into shadows. “We must revisit the fact that you could be in grave danger.”

She opened her mouth but closed it before speaking for a long moment. Finally she spoke, her tone smaller and less sure. “But if I didn’t recognize him, he doesn’t know me either.”

“And what happens if your paths cross at some event?” Duke gestured around them.

“He could be here tonight. If it were me, I would go to great lengths to silence anyone who could identify me as a murderer.”

“Put that way, it is worrisome.” She gnawed her bottom lip until it was plumped and rosy. “What do you suggest?”

“I suggest you visit Bow Street and present yourself as a witness.”

“I can’t do that. My reputation would be ruined.” Her eyes were as wide as prey in an archer’s sight. “I can describe him to you, and you can tell them.”

“No, I can’t. I already told them I didn’t see the man. If I return with a different story, they will assume it’s a Banbury tale. At the moment, Mr. Sharma’s nephew is their focus.”

“Are you implying their suspicions could turn to you?” she whispered, her eyes darting to either side of them.

She had moved even closer to him. Her scent was floral with an intoxicating hint of spice. He dropped his nose to nuzzle slightly at her ear. “Is this one of your creations? I can’t quite place the scent.”

“I used elderflower and pepper along with an ester to make the scent last and carry.”

He snaked an arm around her waist and moved them a little deeper into the shadows, telling himself they could not be overheard discussing murder. His conscience recognized the thin excuse, but the devilish part of him ignored it.

“It is alluring.” He ran his lips across her jaw under her mask.

“Thank you.” Her body melted into his before she jerked her head back, pushing

lightly against his chest. “Stop. You’re distracting me. Tell me truthfully: are you under suspicion for murder?”

He cocked his head to the side. Was he? He shrugged. “The officer in charge holds a rather negative view of Americans, but an even dimmer view of Indians.”

“We cannot let Mr. Sharma’s nephew take the blame. Neither can we allow you to be arrested for a crime you didn’t commit. There is only one thing to do,” she said matter-of-factly.

“I agree,” he said. “You must talk to the authorities and?—”

“We must investigate ourselves and?—”

They spoke over the top of one another, breaking off simultaneously.

“What did you say?” he asked, sure he must have misheard her.

“I said we must investigate ourselves.”

“No. We can’t. That would be foolish.” He tried to paste a teasing smile on, but when her expression remained serious, he ran a hand through his hair in dismay. “Are you mad? Wouldn’t it be more expeditious for you to come forward? You can provide a description of the murderer.”

“You already told them you were alone. If I come forward now, we might both be thrown in Newgate. At the very least, they will want me to give evidence at the inquest.”

Her name would be in the papers. Even he could understand how damaging that would be to a lady.



She continued. "My pursuit of a vocation in the art of perfumery would be ruined along with my reputation."

"The difficulties are not lost upon me." If they joined forces to investigate together, it meant time in her company. It's exactly what he wanted even if the reasons were unconventional. He cocked his head slightly. "How do you suggest we proceed to discover the murderer?"

The crowd at the masquerade had grown and pushed toward them. His question garnered a raised eyebrow from a nearby man in buckskin pants and a loose shirt. A gold hoop dangled in one earlobe. His gem-encrusted cane and rouged lips belied the pirate affectation he had donned.

"Let's stroll, shall we?" He took her elbow and led her toward a darkened walk.

Jynx allowed him to lead her down the garden path. What if he stole another kiss in a secluded alcove? Would she allow it? Was she considering the same? Her scent was tantalizing and seductive. He leaned closer, seeking her neck.

"We must examine possible motivations," she said crisply.

He was flummoxed for a moment while he dragged his mind from prurient thoughts.

She leaned away to snap in his face. "You must focus, Duke."

"Of course, yes." Hopefully, the shadows hid his blush. He was acting like a schoolboy. "Money? Perhaps Mr. Sharma took a loan and was remiss in paying it back."

"If the killer wanted his money back, then killing him makes no sense. Threats? Yes. But how is Mr. Sharma to pay back the money now?"

Duke nodded at her logic. “And nothing to do with a woman, I would imagine. Mr. Sharma was not a young man.”

“The killer was a gentleman. Or at least had enough money for fine tailoring. I keep coming back to the same thing: chemistry.”

Duke couldn’t keep his chuff of disbelief in check. “Do you actually think someone would kill over science?”

“I think scientists can be protective and paranoid. What if the killer had made a discovery and Mr. Sharma had threatened to take credit? Or more likely, Mr. Sharma made a discovery and our killer wanted to take credit with no questions.” Jynx’s steps quickened. “Yes. I like that theory. It makes sense.”

“Does it?” Duke had not been the most diligent of students. He had preferred riding and fishing and... fun. Chemistry put him to sleep rather than inspired passion.

She either ignored the doubt in his voice or hadn’t noticed it. “Therefore, the logical place we will find our killer is with like-minded scientists. Unfortunately, ladies are not invited into their circles.”

There was no mistaking her bitterness. “Would you like to be invited?”

Even in the dim light, her incredulous look cut and the fire in her voice stung. “Of course I would, but men don’t respect women’s intellect. Does this actually come as a shock to you?”

He felt like an imbecile. It was easy for him to move through the social echelons without censure. He was rich enough to mingle with the ton but not noble enough to stop enjoying the seedy underbelly of gaming hells. He never worried about his reputation—even if his neck had been in danger a time or two—or what anyone else

thought of him. There were endless doors for him to choose from if one closed in his face.

It wasn't the same for women. Maddie had railed against the strictures society had placed upon her. Their parents had sent her to England to escape the gossip her intellect had stirred. If he had done what she had, it would have been dismissed as male shenanigans. Instead, she was ostracized and forced to leave the country.

Of course, it seemed she had bucked the system of oppression even in that. He stifled a smile. "You're entirely correct. I apologize for my obtuseness. I wish I could influence society on your behalf."

"Yes, well, thank you. It is no matter. I wouldn't expect you to be able to change the world." She touched her mask and dropped her gaze as if abashed at her passionate reaction.

"I would if I could, not only for you, but my sister as well." He took her hand from where it fiddled with her mask and linked their fingers. "It is not fair."

"No, it isn't, but it is a reality we must work with. Which means..." Her voice trailed off, and she chewed on her bottom lip for a moment before her gaze snapped to his. "Laughing gas."

"What about it?"

"Are you familiar with Sir Humphry Davy's discovery?" The excitement in her voice was contagious.

"I have heard of it, but I'm not intimately familiar. What are you thinking?"

"It has become popular to host parties and consume the gas. It is supposed to produce

elation. If our killer is a scientist, then we might find him at such a party. Unfortunately, I have no idea how to procure us invitations.” She trailed off in dejection.

“I’m sure I can manage it,” he said with more confidence than he felt.

It was worth it when her gaze bounced to his, a slight smile curling her lips. “You’ve been in London such a short time. How have you made such connections?”

“I haven’t. Not yet anyway. But never underestimate the value of a little charm and eccentricity. I have a feeling the set who would host laughing gas parties will be open to inviting an American of some means.”

They came to a stop where the path diverged to the left and right. Duke glanced over his shoulder, but they had left the revelries far behind. The paths were dark. What lurked in the shadows? Danger or opportunity?

He would let her decide their fate and made a sweeping gesture. “Should we return or...?”

### CHAPTER 3

The dark walk was known for improprieties. Prudence would never have ventured into it alone, but on Duke's arm, anticipation had her leaning toward the unknown. The hard muscle felt decadent against the side of her breast, and she fought the urge to press even closer. What was ladylike and appropriate seemed meaningless while wearing a mask under the night sky.

"Let's explore, shall we?" she said more breathlessly than she would have liked. She wanted to be bold and daring. Or at least have him think her bold and daring.

They turned left.

"I know widows are afforded more freedom, and you seem more curious than most ladies. Have you never ventured to the Gardens before?" He kept their pace slow.

She daubed her suddenly dry lips. She did not enjoy lying, but the hole was too deep now to climb out with the truth. No unmarried debutante would think of setting foot in Vauxhall Gardens unaccompanied. Especially during one of their notorious masquerades. Such a stupid and unfortunate creature would be ruined.

"I have been curious about the Gardens." That much was true. Perhaps she could skate as close to the truth as possible. "I am in London with an aunt who holds a more traditional view of what is appropriate for me. I already push the boundaries with my scientific interests."

"Why not set up your own household in order to pursue your interests without

judgment?”

Prudence shook her head and gave a derisive snort. “How is a woman of limited means supposed to support herself?”

He stuttered to a stop and turned to face her. “That was badly done. Your husband did not leave you the means to live independently?”

“Only the luckiest women are not dependent on a husband or relatives to survive. This is what I hope my perfumery can provide me. The freedom to make my own choices before they are thrust upon me.”

He cocked his head, but it was too dim to read his expression, especially with the mask. “What do you mean?”

“If I cannot support us through commerce, I must marry and marry well. Or remarry, that is.” She kept her tone light, but did not try to fake a smile. “I must be able to support myself and my two aunts,” she added, glad to be able to be honest in this at least.

“I’m very sorry to hear this.”

“Why is that?” She regretted the question as soon as it was out of her mouth.

Her pretty face and trim figure had attracted a fair number of gentlemen to her dance card, but her forthrightness had not produced any callers. Not many men appreciated a wife who spoke her mind.

“I have a younger sister. My parents tried to force her into a marriage and role she did not want.”

Prudence knew this, of course, but must do something that did not come naturally—play dumb. “You say they tried. Were they unsuccessful?”

“I arrived in London to find instead of marrying the son of a duke, she eloped with a gambler.” His smile was rueful.

The resulting scandal had enraged Prudence’s aunt. She was afraid it would taint Prudence’s reputation by mere geographical association. “You don’t seem worried or unhappy at the result.”

“I trust Maddie had her reasons. From what I can gather, her marriage is a love match, if an unconventional one.” If the rumors were to be believed, her new husband had taken her to France in order to further her knowledge of native plants. If true, he was a rare man indeed.

“You are an unusual man,” she said thoughtfully.

“I suppose compared to most of the English fops, I am.”

“And what of you? Are you on the hunt for a lady of good breeding to marry?” She cast him a look under her lashes. It was too dark to note his expression, but she felt his exaggerated shudder.

“Good Lord, no!” In a more modulated voice, he added. “Would my parents be thrilled if I returned with an English lady on my arm? Undoubtedly. My mother, for one, would take pride in the connection. But there are too many adventures to have.”

“You can’t find a lady to share in your adventures?”

“I have yet to meet a lady who doesn’t crave hearth and home.”

Considering she was strolling down the dark walk with him, she wanted to elbow some sense into him. Perhaps he wasn't that unusual after all. "Adventurous spirits abound among the fairer sex. Unfortunately, society and expectations raise us to be bartered and bred. Believe me, I would love nothing less than to travel and see the world I have only read about."

Prudence supposed she was lucky to have escaped America for England. At least she had experienced an ocean crossing and a different country. Some of the girls she grew up with would never leave New York. Although she was in danger of trading one prison for another.

"What was your husband like? Did he appreciate you?" Duke asked.

Oh dear. She did not want to spin another tale. The lies were mounting at a fast and furious pace. "I don't wish to speak of him."

"Ah. I apologize. Your desire to avoid marriage through trade speaks volumes."

She let out a pent-up breath. His assumption meant no further questioning on the matter. "Marriage is a terrible bargain for women. A wife becomes the property of her husband. I do not wish to be owned."

"As a widow, I suppose you can pursue less rigid connections outside of marriage." There was a leading question in his voice.

Did he mean carnal connections? A blush heated her cheeks, and she was thankful for the darkness and her mask. "I suppose I could."

He stopped in the middle of the path. She turned to face him.

"You could, but you haven't?"



She darted her tongue across her bottom lip. This conversation had veered into unknown territory for her. “My aunt keeps a watchful eye on me, and the opportunity for a tryst has never presented itself.”

“Do you wish to experience a tryst?”

“I’ll admit to a certain... curiosity.” That was definitely true. Her aunts had certainly not been forthcoming about what relations between a man and women entailed.

“You are in luck. I find myself available for a dalliance.” The white flash of his teeth signaled his smile.

“How would I know if I’d enjoy such a dalliance?” She wasn’t flirting or teasing, she genuinely wanted to know. If she was to take such a risk with him, she wanted it to be worthwhile.

He clutched his chest in mock hurt. “You wound me. Was our kiss in the apothecary not evidence enough?”

“It was just a kiss.” Just because she had dreamed of the kiss and thought about it every hour since did not signify she would enjoy what came next. Did it?

“Ah, you wish for further evidence before making your decision. Very wise. Very scientific, in fact.” He was teasing her, but in a way that didn’t raise her hackles. In fact, she was rather enjoying their repartee.

Never would he speak to her so bluntly if he knew who she was. What she was. A virgin. And he certainly wouldn’t touch her if he knew. Therefore, he must never find out. Her identity and status would remain a secret.

The opportunity to be with Duke had presented itself. If she passed it by, it would

never present itself again. If she specialized in mathematics, she could estimate the odds. In this instance, she must be a gambler and up the ante.

He led her between two rows of trees delineating one of the long walks. The branches met overhead. Although lanterns had been lit, they were far enough apart to plunge sections into darkness. Instead of being frightened, she welcomed the solitude.

They stood in a loose embrace. Her hand crept inside his waistcoat. Only the thin cotton of his shirt separated her fingers from his skin. His heart thumped, and his heat somehow sent shivers up her arms. His face was only a few inches from hers. Dare she kiss him?

Any other time and place, the answer would be no. But if she could not find the courage at a masquerade in a darkened garden, then she never would. She drew the soft cotton of his shirt into her fist and pulled him closer.

She felt the sharp intake of his breath a moment before their lips met. Although she initiated the kiss, he took control before she could process the feel of his mouth on hers. His arm circled her waist and brought her body flush against his, drawing her to her toes.

It was not uncommon for her to be able to look her dance partners directly in the eyes, but James topped her by at least four inches and was broad in the shoulders and chest. He dominated her, which was thrilling in a way she couldn't explain in the heat of the moment.

The heat . It was indescribable. She skimmed her hand from his chest to wrap around his neck, inside his collar. His hair tickled her hand in an invitation. She speared her other hand through the hair at his nape and held him close. Her breasts were pressed against his hard chest, and her heart knocked against her ribs as if trying to get to his. His hands roved over her back. The pleasure at his touch invaded every nerve.

It was as if they were two solutions combining in the presence of a catalyst. Apart, they were inert, but together, they were exothermic. She was surprised they weren't steaming or the nearby shrubbery wasn't on fire.

Duke sucked her bottom lip between his teeth and ran his tongue along the length at the same time his hand curled over her bottom and squeezed. The combination of sensations drew a gasp from her. Her lips parted, and he groaned. His tongue slipped inside her mouth.

This time there would be no murder to distract them—she hoped. Tightening her hold around his neck, she slanted her mouth to spar with his tongue. She could kiss him all night long. It was a heady experience.

His hand skated over her buttock, but did not stop. She was disappointed not to have the pleasure of a squeeze. Instead, her dress fluttered around her legs and cool air wafted underneath. Warm, callused fingers skimmed along her bare leg making her knees go watery.

He had put his hand under her skirts. Letting a man “under your skirts” was, according to Aunt Honoria's frequent lectures, the worst sort of sin. It resulted in ruination and babies and condemnation to hell.

His hand trekked upward to cup her bare buttock. At her maid's insistence, she had forgone drawers as was the custom for ladies in England. She had been skeptical, but now she mentally sent out her thanks.

Driven by some primal instinct, she lifted her right leg and curled it around his calf. The smooth leather of his boot was cold against her silken stocking. He hummed his approval, and embers exploded in her chest.

“Yes, my sweet Jynx. You want more, don't you?” He rumbled against her mouth.

Yes, she did want more. Hopefully, he wouldn't ask her specifics, because she wasn't sure what more meant. Just that she wanted it.

His hand moved to the crease of her bottom and then in between. At the first brush of his fingers against her most sensitive flesh, she moaned and her head fell back, her eyes closing. Her knees wobbled, and she might have toppled over if his arm wasn't around her waist.

He nuzzled his lips against her ear. "You're slick with need, my love. It would be so easy to slide my cock inside you."

Her insides clenched at his declaration. It wasn't trepidation but emptiness that assailed her. Yes, she needed him inside her. She had seen animals rutting. It had been more horrifying than titillating. The male climbing on top and asserting his dominance over the poor female, who often cried out in shock.

Whatever she and Duke were doing held a note of gentleness, from the movement of his lips to his hands. Having someone touch her so intimately was indeed a shocking experience but so far a pleasurable one. She made sure to stifle her surprise. A widow would not express dismay over having a man's hand—or other body parts—between her legs.

His fingers danced lightly between her legs, settling on a nub at the apex of her sex. While he rubbed, one of his fingers pushed into her channel.

A breathless oh escaped her on a sharp exhale. It was too much, yet not enough. She clutched at his shoulders and nuzzled her face into his neck, breathing deeply. He smelled like... home. Clean pine and spice.

Moving deeper into the shadows, he turned them so the folds of her dress hid much of what he was doing. Anyone walking by would assume they were in a simple

embrace.

The alchemy he was performing was anything but simple. While he manipulated her sex, his finger pressed deeper. Her hips moved instinctively, chasing something she couldn't name.

“You are earning your nickname, Jynx. What spell have you cast on me?”

She was beyond being able to answer him coherently. She didn't care that they were standing in a public garden. She ground herself on his hand.

“What do you need? Tell me.”

“I need you.” She choked the words out against the skin of his jaw. His night beard tickled her lips.

“I would like to give you everything, but that must wait until we have more privacy. For now, I can give you this.” He slipped another finger inside her and pumped.

Her muscles went tight around his fingers, and a wave of pleasure descended upon her like a veil. The beat of her heart muffled her hearing, and in that moment, she didn't care if anyone saw them. Her hips bucked against his hand, milking every ounce of the ebbing feeling.

His fingers still worked her flesh, but with a lighter touch. Her skin was sensitized, and she felt as if she had quaffed a glass of the finest liquor, her head buzzing and a little cottony.

He slipped his hand free, and her foot slid to the ground. Thankfully, he did not release his hold on her or she might have crumpled to lie at his feet.

Laughter drifted toward them. Two couples were strolling toward them. Even though she was masked and in the shadows, she kept her face buried in his neck. Her composure was shattered.

She was supposed to be experienced and had stated her openness to a dalliance. He was a man of the world and had given her a taste of what that meant. Did she want to pursue a dalliance?

The answer reverberated through her so strongly she said it aloud. “Yes.”

He leaned back and tilted her face to his. “Yes, what?”

“I want to engage in a tryst with you.”

His smile was slow and full of secrets. “Accompany me back to my rooms.”

It seemed inevitable, but she must proceed with caution. After she shared his bed, she must make a clean break before he discovered her true identity. Which meant they must find the killer first.

“While I have more freedom than some, I must return home this evening or face awkward questions from my aunt.” Hopefully Aunt Honoria thought her in bed with a headache and wouldn’t bother her until morning, but there was always the chance her aunt would peek in on her.

“Then I shall see you safely to your house.” He guided her out of the darkness and back toward the revelries.

Of course now he would want to play a gentleman when he’d had his hand under her skirts only minutes earlier. “You can see me safely to a hack.”

“You are going to great pains to keep me a secret. Would it help if I called upon you tomorrow and introduced myself?”

“No!” The word came out more forcefully than she intended.

“I see,” he said darkly. Was that a hint of hurt in his voice?

Excuses scrolled, and she settled on an easy one. “My aunt holds Americans in low regard. She is old enough to remember the wars.”

“But you do not share her views?”

“I hold a certain respect for a people who buck authority.”

He laughed, and she couldn’t help but be infected by his good humor and optimism. “Given your interests, I’d say you enjoy bucking the system as well.”

More than he even knew.

He continued. “If we cannot meet in your drawing room, then we must meet somewhere else. Do you have any ideas?”

“When can you procure us invitations?”

“Since we will not be furthering our acquaintance in my bed this evening,” he said with a charming leer, if such a thing existed, “then I will spend the evening attempting to make the necessary contacts.”

“Tomorrow near Grosvenor Gate?” They settled on three in the afternoon, before it became crowded with the fashionable set.

The revelries around them had devolved into a bacchanal. The veneer of respectability had been worn away, and Prudence gaped and stared at various couples openly kissing and fondling. Her steps slowed, but Duke hurried her along toward the main gate.

“That’s no place for a respectable lady,” he said in a voice that registered as prim.

A laugh sailed out of her. “That is a kettle-and-pot situation if I ever heard one considering what we were doing in the shadows.”

He tucked her hand firmly into the crook of his elbow and leaned closer to whisper. “What we did was just for us. I would never flaunt you in front of a crowd.”

He hailed a hack and looked to her with raised brows. “What direction should I give?”

“Cavendish Square.” She and her aunt had let a small town house nearby. It was not as fashionable as some addresses, but was in a safe, respectable part of London.

“I would feel better if you allowed me to escort you home.”

“Absolutely not. Arriving home alone in a hack will raise enough eyebrows. Arriving home in the company of a man would get the servants’ tongues wagging. All will be well.” Without thinking, she leaned in to brush a kiss across his mouth.

The British did not favor showing affection to loved ones. Even a husband would be ridiculed if he danced too many times with his wife.

Duke started, but instead of disapproval, he wrapped an arm around her waist and deepened the kiss until she was on her toes and her stomach was fluttering.



“Are you sure you won’t change your mind and accompany me back to my rooms?” he whispered against her lips.

She almost said yes. But a kernel of fear sprouted, and she turned her face away with a hand on his chest. “I can’t. Not this evening.”

Even to her ears, her denial sounded weak, but he didn’t press his advantage. He loosened his grip, took her hand and brushed a kiss along the back. “The anticipation will make it all the sweeter. Until tomorrow.”

After handing her into the hired carriage, he rapped on the door as a signal to the driver and they lurched forward. She couldn’t help but glance out of the window. Duke still stood on the pavement and blew her a kiss.

She sat back with a huff. Cheeky fellow. Yet when she touched her lips, she found herself smiling.

### CHAPTER 4

Prudence lingered within sight of the Grosvenor Gate, trying to look like she wasn't pacing. Duke was late. Maybe he wasn't coming. Maybe he had rethought their assignation. Maybe he decided he didn't want to take her to bed after all.

Her maid, Jane, had settled herself on a bench to the side and was eyeing her with curiosity. The girl had been hired through an agency and held no allegiance to Prudence. On the other hand, Jane didn't owe Aunt Honoria loyalty either.

Prudence joined Jane on the bench. "I suppose you're wondering what I'm doing."

Jane cleared her throat. "I'd guess it has something to do with why you were out by yourself last night. Do you have yourself a gentleman?"

"You knew I was gone?"

"Your aunt sent me to check on you before she retired for the evening."

Prudence clutched her throat, but as her head was still firmly attached to her body, Aunt Honoria had not been told the bed was stuffed with pillows. "You didn't tell her I was gone."

"No, miss."

"Thank you." Prudence gave her a half smile.

“To be fair, I was afraid I would get sacked if she knew.”

“My absence wasn’t your fault, and I certainly don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“Does that mean you won’t be sneaking out again?” Jane asked dryly.

“Well... That remains to be seen.” Prudence craned her head toward the entrance when she spotted a tall gentleman in a beaver hat. She sat up straighter, but slumped back when it wasn’t Duke.

“I can’t say that I blame you for seeking out a little fun. Your aunt is stricter than the matron of my orphanage.” Although Jane spoke lightly, there was a deep-seated pain Prudence recognized.

“I lost my parents when I was young too. My aunts raised me.”

They sat for a moment in a shared experience. Perhaps a true lady would not speak to a servant so familiarly, but Prudence was prepared to throw her reputation to the wind with Duke. One more infraction wouldn’t make a difference.

A man walked briskly through the gate and scanned the area. Prudence stood as if she were a marionette at the universe’s mercy. Duke spotted her, doffed his hat, and strode over. His hair was mussed, and his face flushed, but he was dressed in the finest breeches, Hoby boots, and a Weston jacket that hugged his muscular torso. He had forgone a neckcloth, and the strong column of his neck lent him a rough-hewn masculinity.

Jane stood and gave a low whistle. “I was going to ask if the risk is worth it, but I can see it is.”

Prudence moved out of earshot when Duke approached to take her hand. A gallant

brush against the back made her blush. “I was worried you weren’t coming,” she said.

“I got waylaid by Lord Benson. Do you know him?”

The name sounded familiar, but she couldn’t place his face. “I believe we’ve been introduced at one time.”

“He helped me procure two invitations. It took most of the evening over the gaming table to apply the leverage I needed.”

Relief mixed with excitement. She was going to attend a laughing gas party. They drew the curious, but they also drew actual scientists looking to gather information and data. After all, Sir Humphry Davy was a genius. And not just because he supported women’s involvement in scientific discoveries.

“Why was Lord Benson reluctant?”

“Apparently, the parties can be scandalous, and wagging tongues are not welcome. I had to assure him of our discretion. Although as I was unable to give him your name, convincing him of such was difficult. We will be announced on arrival. I understand your reputation hangs in the balance, but no one will gossip about this gathering.” The look he gave her invited confessions.

It was clear she would have to lie once more. “Mrs. Jones.”

“Jynx Jones?” he asked.

The back of her neck prickled, and she said the first name that popped into her head. “Jane Jones.”

It was the blandest name possible. Prudence hoped her maid would forgive the

impertinence of borrowing her given name.

“Jane Jones ? That is your name?” It was obvious that Duke did not believe her.

“Indeed,” she choked out, but forced herself to hold his gaze.

Finally he sighed, offered his arm, and they strolled down the graveled path. “Fine. Jane Jones it is, although I will continue to call you Jynx.”

“That is what I prefer.” At least her nickname felt more comfortable. “When is the party?”

“Tonight.”

“Tonight?” She stopped and turned to him. “But I have another engagement. A musicale.”

“More important than—” He looked toward where the real Jane had stopped a few feet away and dropped his voice. “Catching a killer?”

The musicale was at the Rushtons’ town house and promised to be dull. The Rushtons’ son was a prig who favored reciting Bible verses, and the daughter was tone-deaf and sanctimonious. Of course Mrs. Rushton and Aunt Honoria had become fast friends.

“Definitely not more important. I’ll find a way to meet you.”

He recited the address. It wasn’t far from their town house. He huffed out a breath of relief. “Now that is settled, what do you say we have a stroll and enjoy the fine weather?”

Prue glanced around, but it was still early. The fashionable set had not yet descended to see and be seen. There was nothing scandalous about what they were doing. In fact, she even had a chaperone for this outing. “I would enjoy that.”

Jane fell into step several paces behind them. Duke cast a look over his shoulder at her. “I was under the impression widows no longer needed a companion to safeguard their respectability.”

“I suppose not, but bringing my maid along eases my aunt’s worries.”

“What happens once you marry? Will your aunt expect to follow you to your new home and act as controlling?” he asked.

Prue’s focus was to avoid an unwanted marriage. She hadn’t considered what would happen if she was forced into a union. Aunt Honoria would not go quietly back to America. She wanted to stay in England and ingratiate herself with society. In fact, Aunt Charity would probably join them and sever their America roots entirely.

The knot in her stomach, which had been growing daily under the pressure of the husband hunt, took on a new dread. “I think she will insist on coming with me.”

Prue stumbled over a larger rock, and Duke took the opportunity to offer his arm. She gladly took it. For right here, right now, she wouldn’t think that far into the future. She would only consider how the sun was dappling through the leaves and how strong and steady Duke felt by her side.

Anyway, she had more immediate problems than an unwanted husband. Someone might recognize her at the laughing gas party. Not only would her lies to Duke be revealed, her reputation would be at risk. On the other hand, how likely was it that the religious set Aunt Honoria favored would also be attending a laughing gas party?

It was a risk she would have to take if she was to identify a killer, experience science, and spend another evening in Duke's company. The latter of which, if she were being perfectly honest with herself, was more of a draw than justice or science. What was wrong with her? Were her morality and intellect so easily obscured by a handsome man she had longed for as long as she could remember? Apparently so.

She cleared her throat. "Do you think Sir Humphry himself will be in attendance?"

"I very much doubt it." He gave a sharp shake of his head. "In fact, we can't be sure our killer will show his face tonight either."

"It's the best chance we have." And the only chance she had of spending more time with Duke.

"Then we have a plan." They strolled in silence for a moment, and then he asked, "If you had the freedom, what would you do with your life? Where would you go?"

Women were rarely asked such questions, and she had to consider her answer. "I would travel and experience the places I've read about. Egypt. The Far East. South America. In between adventures, I would retreat to a cozy cottage in the country with my very own laboratory. All impossible."

Her rueful laugh petered out when she noticed his scowl.

"Nothing is impossible," he said.

"Spoken like a man with the world on a string. Once you assure yourself of your sister's well-being, you will be off to tour the world."

"That was the plan. I've been sidetracked by a murder." His charming half smile was back. "And a beautiful widow."

Her blush was immediate. She could question his sincerity or choose to believe him. She would do the later. "I've read travelogues from all over the world."

"So have I," he said with surprise in his voice.

She wouldn't mention their similar reading material had to do with the shared lending library they both had frequented.

Watching him pack up and leave New York to travel had filled her with both envy and devastation. He might never return. It had made the decision to travel to England easier. She had never in her wildest imaginings expected their paths to cross so far from home.

They spent the next quarter hour discussing their favorite books and the places he had already seen and planned to travel to next. The paths around them grew more crowded as the fashionable hour approached.

"I believe it is time to part ways," Prue said regretfully.

"But not for long," he said.

They made plans to meet outside at the town house of Mr. Reinhold, who was hosting the laughing gas party. As long as her aunt left for the musicale on time, Prue would make it. Outside Grosvenor Gate, they turned in different directions after exchanging a glance she could only qualify as longing.

Once he was out of sight, Jane stepped to her side, sending her a look both knowing and teasing. "I understand now why you feigned sickness and lied to your aunt. He is very handsome."

"He will travel on soon." Prue bit her bottom lip, wondering how far she could trust



Jane. Making a decision, she said, “I am meeting him again this evening. Aunt Honoria must still attend the musicale. Will you help me?”

“If your aunt finds out, I would be tossed without a reference,” Jane said darkly but with a thoughtful expression.

“That’s not a no.” A kernel of hope burst into excitement.

“The matron told me I read too many novels. I especially enjoy a good love story.”

Prue made a choking sound. “This is not a love story. It’s a?—”

What was it? Not love, but... something. A mystery or an adventure, perhaps. Whatever it was, they were in the final chapters. A sense of melancholy filled her, but she shook it off. She wouldn’t grieve what she hadn’t yet lost. There would be time for that afterward.

After Duke left, she would rail against the world and the box it tried to keep her in. Until then, she would escape even if it was only for a night.

### CHAPTER 5

Duke lingered across the street from Mr. Reinhold's town house and tried not to be obvious in his agitation. Time was growing short. It would do no good to attend without her as she was the only one who could identify the man who had killed Mr. Sharma.

It was absurd they were pursuing a murderer on their own. He knew that. The rational thing to do would be to take her to Bow Street and make her tell the authorities what she witnessed.

The problem was when he was around her, he felt distinctly irrational. He was a parched man in need of her attention. She was smart and funny and adventurous. Not to mention exceedingly lovely. She was all he had thought about—dreamed about—since their meeting on the street.

Even if he was panting after her like a dog, he wasn't an idiot. She was lying to him. Her name was not Jynx or Jane Jones. She had not revealed her address. She was secretive about the minutia of her life, even as she was open about her dreams and hopes of the future.

Did he even know her? He ruminated on the question as he drummed his fingers on an iron railing. He knew the important things about her. And he strangely felt like he had known her forever. She would eventually trust him enough to reveal her secrets. Perhaps once he coaxed her into his bed.

Just the thought warmed his blood and tightened his chest with anticipation. Would it

happen tonight?

It was at that moment a hired carriage pulled to a stop in front of him. He stepped forward. The door swung open and Jynx was on the threshold, already leaning over to step out. She wore a cloak with a hood, but her eyes were luminous. He offered his hand, and her palm slid against his. Neither of them wore gloves.

“I apologize for my tardiness.” Her voice was frazzled with nerves and panic.

She stepped out and the carriage drove on, leaving them alone.

He didn’t release her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “We can be fashionably late.”

“A killer might be on the other side of that door.” She glanced toward the town house across the street.

“It’s possible.”

“Or someone from society might recognize me.”

He harrumphed. “And it would embarrass you to be seen with me?”

Her eyes widened. “No, of course not! But if word reached my aunt I was in attendance, it would complicate my life.”

He sighed. It wasn’t fair she had to bend to her aunt’s and society’s rules when she had paid her penance in marriage already, but who was he to argue the point? “It’s also possible we will not find him, you will see no one of your acquaintance, and you can enjoy an evening of scientific exploration.”

Her shoulders dropped slightly. “As grim as our errand is, I am looking forward to experiencing Sir Humphry’s discovery. It could have important implications beyond such frivolities as this party.”

“What would that be?” He tucked her hand in his arm and led them across the street.

“For medical procedures or for animal husbandry. We must be careful not to imbibe too much though. Sir Humphry almost died experimenting on himself.” She was prattling, but he understood it was born of nerves.

A butler greeted them, and the invitations Lord Benson had acquired for them gained them entrance. Jynx passed her cloak off, and Duke caught his breath. She was wearing a beautiful blue gown the color of the summer sky back home. Her décolletage was full and tempting. The gauzy sleeves sat on the edge of her shoulders leaving a beautiful expanse of skin.

She touched her collarbone self-consciously. “I wasn’t sure what to wear.”

Her took her hand once more and drew it down, linking their fingers. “You look beautiful.”

Her skin pinkened delightfully, and her lashes swept over her eyes. “Thank you.”

The butler announced them into a large drawing room where settees and chaise lounges were arranged in a semicircle, leaving the middle of the room open and ready for a demonstration. Two dozen people mingled about the room, but only two or three glanced in their direction as he led them to the nearest corner.

Jynx unfurled her fan to partially hide behind as she studied the room like a fox among hounds. Her tension drove his own anxiety up. Finally she sighed and shook her head. “I recognize no one.”

“There is still time for him arrive, and if he does, we’ll hear him announced. This could work to our advantage.”

“And in the meantime?” She closed her fan.

A man with graying, unkempt hair shuffled to stand in the middle of the carpeted room and rubbed his hands together. Although he wasn’t a large man, he commanded attention through his vibrating excitement. The conversations around them died to murmurs.

Duke leaned in to whisper in Jynx’s ear. “We relax and enjoy ourselves.”

Their guide through the evening’s experiments slipped his jacket off and rolled his sleeves up. “I am Dr. Becker. Is everyone ready to experience the euphoria of laughing gas?” He spoke with an accent that placed him from one of the many Germanic states of Europe. “I have been tasked by Sir Humphry himself to demonstrate and oversee our evening together. Do not be afraid.”

Tittering erupted from many of the ladies present. The danger heightened the moment. The man went on to describe how they would take the gas out of special silk bags. “Do not be alarmed if you are infected by a bolt of energy and good humor. Some people find they cannot be still. Feel free to take air in the gardens or visit a different room. You may not remember what you say or do. You may find yourself laughing uncontrollably. Some find the gas an aphrodisiac. Overall, I hope you find the experience illuminating.”

Duke and Jynx held back while the more eager of the participants moved to surround Dr. Becker. Soon all that could be heard was raucous laughter. A lady emerged from the jostling crowd to run out of the drawing room, her skirts hiked to her knees, giggles trailing her. A man followed with a grin on his face to catch her around the waist and lay a kiss on her neck.

Was laughing gas indeed an aphrodisiac? Duke was suddenly much more interested in the experiment. They were the final two to partake of the gas. Merriment permeated the room and left him eager to try the gas.

Jynx's eyes were wide, and he wasn't sure her mood, but she stepped up to take her turn before him. She took a deep breath of the gas. Her eyes partially closed and her head fell back. She swayed slightly, and he moved to put a steadying hand at her waist.

The look she gave him could only be called sultry as she pushed the bag toward him. He couldn't breathe in the gas fast enough. He took in a great lungful and held it like he would a fine cheroot.

He coughed on his exhale. His head felt like an angel was plucking harp strings. It reverberated sweetly, and without knowing why, he threw his head back and laughed. Jynx joined him, and they fell into one another's arms.

She grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the gardens, her laughter trailing behind her like tinkling bells. They continued into the darkness until they came upon the brick wall that marked the boundary to the mews.

"I feel like a star exploded inside my head," she said. "I'm all tingly."

"I want to kiss you. And more." He couldn't believe the words had come out of his mouth.

"I want more too." Apparently she had lost the same number of inhibitions as he had.

Not knowing how long the effects would last, he didn't waste another second. His mouth swooped to capture hers.

There had been a finesse and gentleness about their earlier kisses. He had been wooing her. The gas had stripped away his gentlemanly veneer, leaving only the elemental. Their kiss was raw and decadent and portended what they really craved.

Her lips were aggressive, her tongue delving to spar with his. He groaned and pressed her against the ivy-covered brick wall. She fumbled with the buttons of his waistcoat until only his thin lawn shirt was separating her hands from his flesh. He tugged the gauzy sleeves of her gown down her arms edging the bodice lower. Her half-corset pushed her breasts high, and it took the flick of his thumb to pull her chemise even lower.

Her nipples were rosy and peaked and begging for his mouth. He gladly obliged, kissing each nipple before sucking hard.

Her back arched over his arm, and she threaded her fingers through his hair. “Is this the work of the gas?” she asked breathlessly.

“The gas has merely revealed our true desires.” He moved to her other breast to suck and nuzzle it.

Should he stop? The intrusive thought must mean the gas was wearing off. Before he could decide, one of her hands slipped from his hair to trail down his chest. Her fingers didn’t stop at his waistband, but continued south to where his erection pressed against the placard of his trousers.

She cupped his cock and squeezed. “Your member is large.”

It was, of course, what every man wanted to hear. “You are a tease, my lady. Do you want me to spend in my breeches?” he murmured before capturing her lips in another kiss.

He cupped one of her breasts and pinched her nipple, rolling it between his fingers. She squirmed and squeezed his cock tighter.

“What if I swept you away to my rooms? We could leave from the mews. I would wreak such pleasure upon your body, you would have no room for regrets.” He murmured into her ear, his hand on her breast, and hers on his cock.

She let out a little moan, but it wasn’t answer enough. She had to speak her desires.

“Tell me what you want?” he asked more emphatically.

“I want to share your bed tonight. Damn the consequences.”

There was no mistaking the defiance and surety in her answer. It was all he needed.

He repaired her dress, reluctantly covering her magnificent breasts, and grabbed her hand. The gate from the garden to the mews was to their left, and he led them toward it, his body humming in anticipation of sinking deep inside her.

As he was reaching for the handle, the door swung open. On the threshold stood a man wearing a dark frock coat and a beaver hat. Duke bowed slightly and took a shuffling step backward to let the gentleman pass.

Jynx’s gasp brought Duke up short. His instincts went on alert. The man didn’t wait for questions to be asked but turned on his heel and ran.

“It’s him,” Jynx said.

But Duke was already in pursuit. The laughing gas had boosted his energy along with his libido, and he closed the gap before the man had made it out of the mews and into the main thoroughfare.



Duke threw himself forward and hooked his hand around the man's back collar. The man jerked backward, his hat flying off to roll into a nasty-looking puddle. Duke landed half on top of him.

"Let me go." The man tried to wiggle free, but Duke fisted his collar even tighter.

"Not a chance," Duke said through gritted teeth.

Jynx caught up with them, breathing hard. "That's him."

Duke shook the man. "Who are you? Why did you murder Mr. Sharma?"

"Unhand me. I am a gentleman, sirrah." The man's attitude only raised Duke's ire.

"Unluckily for you, I am not." Duke punched him in the face.

Duke was no stranger to a good rumble in the dirt littered with cheap shots and insults. The man holding his bleeding nose and moaning was used to sparring at Gentleman Jack's, where decorum ruled and the jabs were above the belt.

Duke rose to his feet and hauled the man up by the lapels of his jacket, shoving him against the wooden slats of the stables. He pushed his arm underneath the man's chin with enough force to constrict his breathing.

The man kicked at Duke's legs in his rising panic, but Duke ignored the pain. "Are you ready to give us some answers?"

The man clawed at Duke's arm and choked out a yes.

Duke eased the pressure but did not release the man. "Let's start with a simple question. What's your name?"

“Reginald Atwater.”

Duke glanced toward Jynx. “Do you know him?”

“The family name is well known in scientific circles, but we are not acquainted.”

Atwater aimed a scathing look toward Jynx. “And who the devil are you?”

“That is none of your concern. Why did you kill Mr. Sharma?” Jynx asked.

Atwater’s jaw worked, and he pressed his lips together.

Duke sighed. It seemed he would have to extract the information the hard way. He pressed his arm into Atwater’s throat with such force it lifted him off the ground. Atwater’s eyes went round with terror.

“R-Research,” Atwater said on his last thread of air.

Duke eased his hold. “What research?”

“I paid the man to provide me with something—anything—to impress my father.”

“What happened?” Jynx stepped to Duke’s side.

“Sharma discovered a new element. It was amazing. My name would have been cemented in history.” Atwater spoke with the tone of a zealot.

“But it was Mr. Sharma’s discovery, not yours.”

“It was mine. I paid for it,” Atwater said vehemently.

“Mr. Sharma refused to let you take the credit. Is that it?”

“He said it was his greatest achievement. He promised to give me his research on a new kind of lamp for miners. Miners! As if I care about the dirty blighters. I needed that element. My father —” At this, Atwater dropped his gaze, but there was pain of a father’s disappointment.

Duke could sympathize. His own father had not approved of Duke’s wanderlust. He wanted Duke at home, learning the family business. It would never have driven Duke to murder though.

“What happened to the research?” Duke asked.

“I don’t know. It wasn’t there.” Atwater’s frustration did not contain even a whiff of contrition.

Duke did not bother to hide his disgust. “You killed a man for nothing.”

“I’ll find it and claim it as is my right!”

“Let’s see what Bow Street has to say about that.”

Atwater struggled against Duke’s hold. “You can’t! I’m a gentleman.”

Duke cocked his head. “But not a peer. I believe that matters in this case.”

“I’ll hail a hack,” Jynx said, retreating to the street.

Atwater nudged his chin toward Jynx. “She is the only one who can identify me. Even if she is believed, my father will make sure she can never show her face in polite society again.”

Jynx had been right not to come forward. If Atwater would kill, besmirching a woman's reputation would not leave a mark on his conscience. Duke shook his head ruefully. "Do you think you are the only man capable of deceit? I am the only witness, and I do not care a whit what your society thinks of me."

True fear finally made its way into Atwater's demeanor. "You are a foreigner. Who will believe you?"

"I am a foreigner who has more in common with a Bow Street runner than you do." Duke had, in fact, developed a rapport with two of the runners in particular. They held no affection for toffs.

"We'll see about that," Atwater said.

Duke hoped the confidence in Atwater's voice was misplaced. He maneuvered Atwater into the waiting hack, keeping a hand on the man in case he tried to run, but thankfully, he didn't. Duke did not relish a footrace across London at night. Atwater might have the upper hand if he was knowledgeable of the streets.

They pulled in front of Bow Street's offices. Duke hauled Atwater out of the hack and said to Jynx. "I'll settle the matter and keep your name out of it."

He might have said more, but Atwater chose that moment to try to run. It took one of the runners to come out and help Duke manhandle Atwater inside. The runner recognized Duke.

"Is this the apothecary's killer then?" The runner asked.

"It is. He confessed to me. I just need to..." Duke turned around to set the next meeting with Jynx, but the hack was gone.

He stood on the pavement for a long moment. He supposed finding the killer was a just end to their unconsummated liaison. He had no way to contact her. He turned and entered the Bow Street offices.

Even as justice was fulfilled, his heart deflated and bitter regret was left in its wake.

### CHAPTER 6

P rue had the hack driver make the block and pull up on the far corner across from the Bow Street offices. She had not wanted Atwater to point her out to the runner who had assisted Duke in subduing him. Anxiety had her sitting on the edge of the squab wondering if Bow Street would defer to a gentleman or take Duke's accusations seriously.

After a long half hour, Duke emerged, his head down and his shoulders slumped. He turned to walk down the pavement, not even glancing in her direction. She opened the door. "Duke! Over here!"

His head swiveled around and his entire demeanor changed, a grin breaking out on his face as he strode to her and hauled himself inside the hack. "I'd thought you'd left."

"Of course not. I had the driver make the block. I didn't want to draw the attention of the authorities. Did it go well?"

"Not for Atwater. He is being held. For now."

"They believed you?"

"It helped that Atwater couldn't keep his chin from wagging and confessed. He doesn't seem to think he did anything wrong. I don't know how powerful his father is. He may swoop in to bail him out of the mess he's created, but for now justice is being served."

“That’s a relief.” Prue sank back against the cushion. “What now?”

“An inquest. I will have to remain in London for a time to testify, but I’ll be sure you are kept out of the proceedings.”

She cast a look at him from the shadows. “I meant what are our more immediate plans.”

He cocked his head. “My rooms are not far from here.”

Was she actually going to accompany him to his rooms? While she was a virgin, she wasn’t a ninny. Her innocence would be a memory by morning, but in return, she would receive experience and—dare she hope?—pleasure.

She did not hold with the tradition of keeping a woman in ignorance until she was educated by her husband in their wedding bed. Sex could happen anywhere and anytime and with anyone. Even ladies of good families found themselves in trouble. In those cases, a wedding would take place with haste.

The last thing she wanted was to trap Duke in a marriage he did not want. If she did this, he could never know her true identity. In fact, there was no reason for anyone to find out about what was about to happen. Her aunt thought her safe and sound in her bed. She had until dawn.

Betraying the meaning of her given name—Prudence—she nodded. “Yes. Take me to your rooms.”

Duke gave the driver directions, slid his arm around her shoulders, and pulled her close. As his thumb caressed her jaw, he laid a light undemanding kiss at the corner of her mouth. “You’re trembling. Are you frightened?”

Was she? A little. Perhaps more than just a little. But she was also excited. She could imagine no one better than Duke to reveal the mysteries of the bedchamber.

Before she could assemble a reasonable excuse, he asked, "I suppose it's been some time since you've been with a man?"

For a moment, she was perplexed, and then she recalled she was supposed to be a widow, and therefore experienced. "Longer than you might imagine. My late husband was not the most attentive of men in that regard." It was a neat way of explaining away any deficiencies of experience she possessed.

"I promise to be very attentive to your needs, my sweet." He nuzzled his lips against her ear and incited a rush of tantalizing shivers through her body.

After his earlier attention, her nipples were overly sensitive against the constraining fabric of her underthings. His mouth moved to hers, and their kiss was a meeting of equals. His kisses buzzed through her like a glass of the finest champagne, and she twined her arms around his neck, pressing him into the squab.

Prudence was nothing if not a quick learner, and she very much enjoyed kissing Duke. It was not a battle but a dance, and she appreciated his willingness to let her lead, at least for a time.

Soon enough, she was the one being pressed into the squab with the intensity of his kisses. His tongue darted between her lips, and she opened fully for him. The warmth of his hand encircling her ankle made her start, but he soothed her skittishness by sucking her lower lip between his teeth and giving it a little nip.

A laugh at his playfulness bubbled up but was lost as his hand moved from her ankle to her knee, drawing her skirts higher. Was he going to touch her between her legs as he had at Vauxhall?



“I can hardly wait to sample your honey.” His voice was husky and wanting. Had she done that to him?

“You are most welcome to all my honey,” she murmured in his ear before biting his lobe.

A groan rumbled from his chest. “Then I will feast between your legs until we are both sated.”

Between her legs ? She had assumed her honey referred to her admiration or her desire. Did he plan to put his mouth where his hands had delved? The thought filled her with anticipation. There was much she didn’t know but wanted to learn.

Her musing came to an abrupt halt along with the hack. They had traveled to a sleepier area of London she wasn’t familiar with. Not that she had been allowed to explore the city. Her aunt had kept her social calendar filled.

The inn was a prosperous, well-kept place of business. The gleaming brass fixtures and the jolly green paint with whitewashed walls settled her nerves. Duke guided Prudence to the door.

“We shouldn’t garner too much attention, but keep your face averted.” He took her by the hand.

Curiosity got the better of her, and she scanned the room but was only able to discern a few male figures gathered around a table in the corner playing cards before Duke pulled her up the stairs and out of sight.

The hallway was quiet and deserted. James led her to the last door on the left, unlocked it, and pushed the door open for her to enter. After locking the door behind him, he lit three tapers.

A small fire had been laid, and he stoked the flames. Warmth crept its way through the room. A small sitting area with a desk was separated from the bed and wardrobe by a folding screen. A satchel acted as a paperweight to scattered correspondence on the desk.

The four-poster bed was large with dark green brocade hangings. The pillows were fluffy and the mattress thick. It was a homey, well-appointed room. Some of the tension leaked out of her shoulders, but it only made her aware of how anxious she was.

“Would you like me to light more candles?” he asked.

While she would appreciate see Duke in all his glory, more light meant she would be equally exposed. She wasn’t confident enough for that. “No, this is perfect. Very romantic.”

She bit the inside of her lip. Romantic ? Why had that popped out of her mouth? This was sex, not romance. “Or not. This is a liaison. An interlude. A coupling. Nothing more.”

A rumbling sound came from Duke’s chest that sounded like laughter. “Don’t dash my hopes.”

“Hopes for what?”

“Hopes for more than one night together.”

“Perhaps.” The lie was bitter in her heart. She could only risk one night.

“In fact, give me enough time and I would have you feeling so comfortable in your lovely skin you would not hesitate to take tea with me naked in the middle of the

day.”

It was quite the image he planted and one she would no doubt revisit. Warmth burst low in her belly and made her muscles tighten. “That is a titillating thought.”

“Will you take down your hair?” He moved to prop himself against the mattress, pulling her to stand between his legs.

Reaching up, she plucked the pins from her hair, and shook the mass around her shoulders. She was rather vain about her hair. It had been mousey when she was young, but as she had matured, it had thickened and taken on a wave. The dull brown had deepened into a walnut with streaks of light brown and auburn.

“Wild and lovely. It’s a shame you must bind and bonnet such beauty. Although I am feeling rather special to be privy to your unveiling.” He ran a hand up her arm and cupped her nape, his thumb caressing her bottom lip. “Your lips are delectable.”

For the first time, Prudence felt beautiful and confident. Duke Barnes wanted her. It defied the bounds of her imagination. She would share his bed this one time and revel in the experience.

She popped to her tiptoes and kissed him. His lips curled into a smile against hers, but she didn’t think for one second he was laughing at her eagerness. He was pleased. Very pleased if the hardness brushing against her belly was any indication.

As their lips and tongues danced and played, he loosened the tapes of her gown. The bodice gaped. The cooler air of the room caressed her bare skin. Her nipples tightened in anticipation. He had given her a taste of what was to come, and she was desperate for more.

He broke their kiss to push the gauzy cap sleeves of her gown down her arms. She

wiggled her hips, and the fabric pooled at her feet. His earlier explorations had lifted her breasts higher, and her chemise offered little in the way of modesty. Her nipples were free of her short stays and clearly visible through the thin white fabric.

Her brief flare of embarrassment faded as she noted his hitched breathing. That the sight of her could affect him so was a powerful feeling. She slipped her hands inside his jacket to clutch his shoulders and arched her back.

“You are a temptress.” He stared at her décolletage while he slipped off his jacket and tore free of his cravat and collar.

Now it was her turn to battle weakness at the sight of the tanned vee of skin revealed. When he whipped off his lawn shirt and tossed it away, she clutched the post of the bed, afraid her knees might give way.

Theirs had been a household of women. She had never seen a man’s unclothed body. She hadn’t expected his chest to be so muscular. Or hairy. It was strangely arousing. Dark blond hair dusted the muscles of his upper chest, coming together to form a narrow line that disappeared into his breeches. Speaking of his breeches, a large visible hardness pressed for release at his fall. The pulse between her legs became more insistent.

He sat to remove his boots and stockings. His movements held her in thrall, and she remained a voyeur. His feet were large, and his limbs were dusted with the same hair as his arms and chest.

She was tall and strong from walking, yet felt soft and delicate in comparison. He was masculinity personified. Her arousal ratcheted up, and her core clenched in an aching emptiness.

With only his breeches left on, he came to where the post was holding her up and

twirled a lock of her hair around his finger. When he leaned in to kiss her, she pressed a hand against his bare chest, stopping him.

“Wait.” The dusting of hair was rough against her palm, the muscles twitching like a horse ready to gallop. “There is something we must discuss.”

“What’s that?” His eyes were hooded and hypnotic.

She considered letting the moment pass, but her concerns were too important to dismiss. “I don’t want you to plant a babe in my belly. You must take precautions.”

“Of course. I would not want to give you any reason to regret this night. I won’t spill inside of you. Perhaps I will mark you here.” He pinched her nipple. “Or here.” He rubbed his thumb along her lower lip.

His primitive response had her sliding her hand from his chest to his nape to pull him closer. He slipped an arm around her waist and brought her flush with his body. Her chemise was no match for the heat of his skin. She was too hot, and yet his touch inspired shivers. The maelstrom was chaotic and confusing.

He pressed kisses down her neck and herded her to the side, her steps shuffling and unsure. Her bottom bumped into the soft mattress. Trapped between the bed and his body, she felt a sudden urge to run.

What if the night was a disappointment? She had hoped and dreamed of this moment since she was too young to understand what love was. But this wasn’t love. This was two almost strangers coming together in carnal desire.

It would be enough. It would have to be.

His hand slid to tug at her chemise and exposed the top curves of her breasts to his

gaze. A rush centered between her legs. He ran his thumb over her pebbled nipple peeping over the top of her stays. Her core throbbed and clenched, needing more.

Any confusion over her deception evaporated. She wanted a night in his bed more than anything and was willing to make a deal with the devil to have it.

He loosened the laces of her stays, his fingers nimble and knowing. Her stays slipped lower, and he pushed them and her chemise over her hips in one swift motion. She kicked them to the side. Her garters and stockings were next. He knelt in front of her. She fought the urge to cover her mons. An experienced widow wouldn't cower and hide, would she? Her hands drew into fists but remained at her sides.

With a lack of urgency that only wound the coil tighter in her belly, he unfurled the bows holding up her stockings and eased them down, one at a time, until she was standing naked in front of him. His gaze wandered slowly up her body to meet hers. He rose to standing in one fluid movement, never breaking eye contact. Her breathing hitched.

He ran his hands up her hips through the dip in her waist to cup her breasts. With no chemise or stays to impede his touch, she bit the inside of her mouth but couldn't stop a moan from escaping.

"Your breasts are extraordinarily sensitive," he murmured as he brushed his lips above one of her nipples.

Her hands found purchase in his hair. The soft, springy locks weaved through her fingers. His lips trailed ever closer to her nipple.

"What do you want?" He cast his gaze up with an impish smile.

"You know exactly what I want," she said in a throaty whisper that conveyed more

knowledge than she possessed.

With their gazes still melded, he swiped his tongue over her nipple. Her knees wobbled, and she half sat on the edge of the mattress.

Each time he flicked his tongue over her nipple, pleasure shot through her. Then he swirled his tongue around the areola and closed his mouth over the tip of her breast. Her body quivered at the sensations. He suckled her breast, and her eyes fluttered closed.

The intensity he stoked bordered on uncomfortable, and she squirmed. He transferred his attention to her other breast, and she cried out. Had anyone heard her? If so, they would have no doubt as to the activities taking place. She tensed and pulled away.

“What’s wrong?” He loomed over her and tilted her face to his.

“What if someone heard me?”

“This is a corner room. I doubt anyone heard, and if they did, let them imagine the debauchery.” While he spoke, he caressed her breasts and then sighed. “I believe I could make you climax by just playing with your nipples. So exquisite.”

Her hips bucked forward into his thighs. “It is pleasurable but also torture.”

“Because it makes you ache and feel empty?”

Yes. That was exactly it. It was painful how empty she felt. She wanted his fingers inside her again. “Very empty. What are you going to do about it?” Her desperation made her words sound goading.

His lips turned in a slow, sensuous smile. “You are a surprise. Are you ready for me

to fuck you already?”

While the word fuck was foreign to her, she could guess at its meaning. Was she ready? “I think so.”

“Only think? You will be so ready that you beg for my cock.” His smile had turned feral but also teasing.

She had known this man for years. The fact was both unsettling and comforting. If her aunt had any say in the matter, Prudence would be married to a foppish Englishman by the end of the season. She might never see her homeland again. As soon as the inquest was over, Duke would travel on. Fate would not be so kind as to cross their paths again.

It was strange how comfortable she felt teasing him in return. “You think I will beg for this?” She ran her finger from the tip of the hard staff to between his legs, gratified when he jerked at her touch.

He took her hand and pressed it fully over the bulge in his breeches. His cock pulsed against her hand and seemed to grow even larger. “I know you will.”

She was so far out of her depth she was drowning, and yet it was exhilarating too. What did his cock look like? Considering he was unexpectedly hairy everywhere else, she could imagine. She fingered one of the disks holding the flap of his fall up. “May I?”

“Indeed, you may.” His voice was husky.

She slid the first disk free and then the second, slowly peeling his fall down as if opening a present. His cock jutted out from a thatch of dark blond hair. It was long and thick and topped with a mushroom-shaped head. It was unlike anything she had



ever seen before, and she couldn't hide her amazement.

"Oh my." She grasped hold and stroked from the base to the tip. "It's very smooth. I was expecting it to be hairy like the rest of you."

His laugh was rough and strained but held a note of incredulousness. "Did you not handle your husband's cock?"

She must watch her tongue, else she was going to give herself away. Her answer was a simple shake of the head.

"Did the bastard simply rut you with no thought to your pleasure?" His voice turned darker.

She nodded, unable to speak the lies.

"No wonder you are so curious and wanting." He caressed her cheek and leaned down to brush his lips over hers in a kiss so sweet tears pricked her eyes.

He guided her by the hips and moved her farther up on the bed until her head and shoulders were supported on the pillows. He sat on his haunches between her legs, leaving her unable to close them. She was fully exposed, thankful the flickering candles allowed her a modicum of modesty. Even so, her hand crept toward her mons to offer cover. It never made it.

He took both her hands by the wrists, pressed them into the pillows above her head, and held himself over her. His heat was intoxicating, his scent spicy and masculine. What would the coarse, springy hair of his chest feel like against her breasts? She wiggled closer but too many inches separated them.

He moved his hips slightly, and the tip of his cock bumped against the sensitive folds

between her legs. Her gasp made him give her a devilish smile.

“You will have all of me soon enough, but I fear once inside you, I won’t be able to stop from fucking you senseless.” He leaned down to brush his nose against hers. “You deserve to be worshipped like the queen you are.”

He slid his hands down her arms to cup her breasts. His thumbs brushed her nipples until they were painfully sensitive. She arched her back, offering more of herself to him. He accepted, and the heat of his mouth covered one breast while he pinched her other nipple. She closed her eyes and thrashed her head, a primal need overtaking her.

His torment eased as he kissed down the softness of her belly. She raised her head to look down at him. He was lying between her legs now, his gaze fixed at the place that ached intensely for him. Heat flushed her body as if a fever had taken hold. Was she embarrassed at his study?

Maybe. Yes. But she was also unbearably aroused, and instead of trying to close her legs, she spread even wider for him.

“You are lovely and sweet.” Finally he touched her as he had at Vauxhall, his fingers stroking and pressing ever so slightly for entrance. “And so very wet.”

He removed his finger, and he threw her a mischievous grin at her breathy “No.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not done with you yet.” A second finger joined the first and pressed deeply inside her. He let out a low groan. “You are magnificently tight. I can hardly wait until you are gripping my cock.”

His double digits were stretching her. It wasn’t unpleasant, but now that she had seen his cock in all its glory, it was difficult to imagine sex would not be painful. Even so, she wanted him. Ached for him. Needed him more than she needed air. He pumped

his fingers inside her. Before she could catalog the sensations streaking through her, he leaned closer and licked the apex of her folds.

Her entire body tensed. The rush was overwhelming. She fisted her hands in his hair, thinking to pull him away, but instead dug her heels into the mattress and raised her hips for more.

He hummed against her sensitive skin, alternately licking, sucking, and nipping at a place where her pleasure seemed to grow until she thought her body might burst. Her hips circled with a faster rhythm his pumping fingers soon matched.

The pressure was agonizing and then...

Bliss . She was tumbling in pleasure. Her body clenched his fingers until they were replaced with something bigger and hotter.

She forced her eyes open. He had moved to kneel between her legs and rubbed the head of his cock against her opening. It was a delicious feeling, her body still primed and pulsing.

His hair was mussed where she had grabbed hold, and his face was flushed, his eyes alive and sparkling. "Do you want it?"

If he wanted her to beg, then beg she would with absolutely no embarrassment or qualms. "Yes please. I want your cock. I want you. Give me everything."

She grabbed at his shoulders and scored him with her fingernails. His chesty growl fed the rise of tension between them.

He pressed into her, not stopping until his hips were notched against her like puzzle pieces. Her body tensed at the slight burn of his invasion, but her climax had left her

ready to accept him.

She was officially ruined. No regret or shame surfaced, only happiness it was Duke breeching her maidenhead. It felt right.

He moved over her, settling his chest against hers, bearing his weight on his elbows. The crisp hair of his chest teased her nipples, and it was as deliciously arousing as she had imagined.

Instinctively, she raised her legs to cradle his hips between her knees. He cupped a hand under one of her buttocks, tilted her pelvis to press his cock even deeper, and took his first thrust. They moaned in tandem, and he claimed her mouth in a kiss so decadent it stoked a tide of pleasure she now recognized as the beginnings of another climax.

He thrust again and again with increasing harshness and speed. The bed rocked and groaned under them. The entire occupants of the inn could break into their room, and she would beg him to continue.

Before she could recapture the momentous feeling of her climax, he pulled out of her and bucked against her stomach, his weight heavy on top of her. Warm fluid trickled down her hip. His face was buried in her hair, his chest heaving.

She ran her hands over his smoothly muscled back to the dip where his firm buttocks curved. His weight grew uncomfortable, yet she didn't want him to leave her.

Finally he levered himself up and brushed her hair back from her face. She wanted him to say something momentous and special. Instead, his smile was the one she loved the most, mischievous and full of laughter. "I apologize for the mess."

She returned his smile, although hers felt tremulous. What had she been expecting

him to say? How one time with her had ruined him for all other women, and he must marry her? Ridiculous. She had known what this was and, more importantly, what it wasn't.

It was sex, not love. At least not for him.

### CHAPTER 7

Duke rose from the bed to retrieve a washcloth, wringing it out in the clean cool water of the basin. His legs trembled, and he felt weak. It wasn't just because it had been some time since he'd bedded a woman. It was because of the woman he'd bedded.

He could still taste her on his tongue and feel her channel clasped around his fingers. And his cock. The insatiable beast stirred slightly, and he looked down in amazement. He was no longer a green boy, but he felt like one at the moment.

He returned to her side and cleaned his spend from her belly. He wouldn't tell her, but he'd almost forgotten his promise to not release inside her. Her skin was flushed and pretty, and he couldn't stop himself from laying a kiss on one of the most perfect breasts he'd ever had the pleasure to see much less touch.

She drew her bottom lip between her teeth and worried the edge of the coverlet she had pulled to her waist. "I must return to my house before dawn."

He maneuvered them beneath the sheets and pulled her into his chest. A stab of desperation had him putting on his most convincing tone. The one that had lured his brothers into trouble back home. "Dawn is still hours away. You can stay a little longer surely."

Her laugh was one of resignation. "For just a little longer."

Her body fit into his perfectly, her pert bottom cradling his cock which had grown

semihard. He cupped one breast, his thumb idly brushing over the pert nipple. Her squirm told him she wasn't unaffected.

"I can't believe we found Mr. Sharma's killer," she said.

"Me either. We make an excellent pair." He grimaced at his wording, but it was true. They were compatible in bed and out.

"Will you leave for France after the inquest or some other exotic locale?"

"France, I suppose." Duke couldn't imagine leaving London. Or was it Jynx he couldn't imagine leaving behind?

"And what will happen once you find your sister?"

"I will wish her well. You've made me realize I have been myopic."

Jynx had forced him to consider his attitude toward Maddie. He had blown into England ready to drag his sister for an annulment if necessary. His protective streak bordered on high-handedness. Maddie was a smart, capable woman who could take care of herself. He'd seen to that. He had no right to question her decision to throw over a duke's son to marry a gambler.

She shifted enough to see his face. "I have?"

"Indeed. My sister is more intelligent than anyone I know. Why shouldn't I trust her to make decisions regarding her life and future?" He was asking himself as much as Jynx. Honestly, he hadn't thought that deeply about the plight of his sister, or any other woman, which only proved his point about his sister being smarter than anyone of his acquaintance, himself included.

“That is quite a revolutionary notion. I wish more men and women thought the same, including my aunt. She is exceedingly old-fashioned.”

It wasn't fair Jynx couldn't follow her heart. Her heart? Why was he concerned with the state of her heart? This was only a tryst, wasn't it? It was her body he should be focused on. He hugged her closer and took a deep breath. Her heart, the state of which he had no right to be curious about, beat steadily against his hand.

“I will enjoy picturing you in Notre Dame. The sketches I've seen are breathtaking,” she said with an obvious wistfulness.

What would it be like to explore Paris in her company? Adventures were always more fun when shared. She was a widow, and from what he'd read, Paris society was not as strict as London. What if he asked her to accompany him?

He popped to his elbow, and she rolled to her back to look up at him. “You don't want to remarry, do you?”

“Of course not.” She folded and refolded the edge of the sheet, her gaze cast away from his. “But if my perfumery can't support me, I won't have a choice but to marry.”

“Your late husband left you nothing?”

She turned her face away from his. “Nothing.”

“So he was too impoverished and selfish to even offer you an orgasm?”

Her husky laugh made his stomach squirm pleasantly. That a woman as passionate and vibrant as Jynx should be forced to marry another idiot was beyond his comprehension.



Her arms twined around his neck as her gaze flicked to meet his once more. “You’ve offered me more in one night than I could ever imagine.”

He wanted more than one night. He would ask her to accompany him to France. What if she said no and awkwardness overtook their intimacy? Words stuck in his throat. He would wait until the last moment.

Dawn had not yet broken. They had time.

He cupped her breast and took her mouth in a kiss full of all the emotion he couldn’t share. One of her hands slipped down his chest to grasp his cock. He grew ironlike in her tight grip.

“Can we fuck again?” she asked eagerly.

“Indeed. You deserve another orgasm.”

Her gasp was one of delight. “Do you mean I can experience another one so soon?”

He would have happily given her late husband a beating if he wasn’t already in the ground. “If I could convince you to stay in my bed all day, I would give you a dozen.”

He trailed his lips down her neck to suck at her nipple while his hand moved between her legs to stoke her arousal. Her clit was the focus of his stroking thumb while he speared her with two of his fingers.

“A dozen? I’m not sure I believe you. It’s a shame we don’t have the time for an attempt.” A dreaminess had entered her tone. Her hips began to circle, the rhythm familiar and ancient, and her hands clutched at his shoulders, trying to pull him over her.

He resisted, moving away from her and stroking his cock. “Get on your hands and knees.”

She stared at his hand moving lazily up and down the length of his cock. “Why?”

Jynx was smart and bold, but an innocent in so many ways. An innocent he longed to corrupt in the most pleasurable ways possible. “Do you trust me to make you feel good?” At her nod, he said in a firmer tone, “Then get on your hands and knees.”

She flipped over with a speed that made him smile. He positioned himself behind her, and she looked over her shoulder at him, her hair cascading over her back in beautiful waves. If he had the time, he would like to feel her hair caress his cock as she took him in her mouth. When he fit himself at her entrance, her eyes widened and her bottom popped higher, offering him a better angle.

He pressed inside her a slow inch at a time. Their gazes still held, and she bit her bottom lip as he filled her completely. His cock throbbed. This time he wanted to feel her clench around him as she reached her bliss.

Leaning forward, he wrapped his hand in her hair and tugged her back into his chest. He took slow shallow strokes as his fingers worked her clit. Her breathy moans and squirms spurred him on. He pinched her nipple and her clit at the same time, and she climaxed. Her body bathed his cock in wet heat as it throbbed around him.

He closed his eyes and let her grind on him, trying his damndest to hold his own spend in check. He wanted to eke out every ounce of pleasure for her. Only when she went limp against him did he consider his own pursuits.

Pushing her back to all fours, he grabbed her hips and pushed deep. He was neither slow nor gentle in the chase for his climax. The way she met his every thrust with breathy moans and garbled words of encouragement only drove him harder.

As he felt his seed rising, he pulled free of her body and friggd himself, his spend crisscrossing her buttocks in an erotic display. Her arms trembled, and her chest collapsed to the mattress, leaving her arse in the air for him to admire.

“Beautiful,” he whispered, rubbing his spend into her skin. If only he could truly mark her as his. The sense of possessiveness shocked him.

He retrieved the washing cloth and once again cleaned himself from her body. She rolled to her side, her expression sultry and satisfied. He collapsed in her arms, face-to-face, their legs twined together. Neither of them spoke. He played in her hair while she traced her fingers down his spine.

It was the most peaceful he’d felt since... forever. The restlessness that plagued him was soothed. It was probably just the aftermath of the satisfaction he’d reached with her. Twice. He smiled and pulled her closer. Not wanting to miss a second with her, he tried to force his eyes to remain open, but creeping sleep claimed him.

Duke woke with a start. He reached out but found the bed empty and cold in the weak morning light. He sat up and cursed. Disappointment settled heavily on his chest.

Not only had he meant to make his offer before she left, he had wanted to see her sleepy eyes and disheveled hair as he kissed her awake. He’d wanted to slip inside her wet tight body and rock them into another blinding climax. He... missed her.

How could he miss someone he’d only met a week ago? It defied logic, but was an undeniable fact.

It was early, but he would not find sleep again, so he washed and dressed. The smell of fresh baked bread had him following his nose to the common room. Lord Benson sat at a table, eating buttered bread and jam. He raised a hand in greeting, his clothing rumpled and his eyes bleary. The man had obviously not yet been to bed.

Duke joined him. The innkeeper's wife brought him his own bread and a cup of steaming coffee. She had learned his preferences, and he passed her an extra coin for her thoughtfulness.

"Have you been up all night, Benson?"

"I am never touching the blue ruin again." Benson nibbled on his bread and forced it down with a swallow of tea. He sent a speculative look toward Duke. "You, however, are looking happy and fit considering the hour. Was the lady I spied sneaking out of the inn the cause?"

"What time did your paths cross?"

"At first light. She was quite lovely." Benson's voice turned thoughtful. "She looked familiar."

Duke sat up straighter. "You are acquainted with her?"

"I believe we've been introduced at one of the events of the season, but I can't place her at the moment. What is her name?"

"J—" He'd almost said Jynx, but was the name she'd given him any more truthful? "Jane Jones. Or so she said."

Benson barked a laugh. "That does not sound right. Why would she give you a fake name?"

"Why indeed?" The pang of anger was unwarranted. He should thank the gods he had been blessed with a night of bliss with an exceptional lady and move on with his life. The memory would fade to be replaced with other nights and other ladies. As soon as the inquest was over, he would pack his bags and book passage to France. The world

was full of endless possibilities.

It was obvious she did not want to continue a relationship with him. Or was it? He hadn't had the chance to offer her a choice. If she rejected him after pouring his heart out to her, then he would walk away.

Narrowing his eyes on Benson, he asked, "Can you help me find her?"

### CHAPTER 8

Prudence stared at the canopy of her bed. She had tarried too long with Duke and had bumped into a gentleman who looked frighteningly familiar in the door of the inn. Luckily, the gentleman had only given her a vague once-over before tipping his hat and entering the inn.

Jane, her maid, had looked like she'd stayed up all night waiting for Prudence to return. Her relief had been palpable, and she'd bustled Prue into her chambers, helped her change into her night rail, and practically shoved her under the covers.

As Aunt Honoria hadn't stomped in preaching about carnal sin and hellfire, Prudence would assume her ruse of being sick was successful. The night would be a secret she would hold dear to her heart for the rest of her days. No matter what happened, it had been worth it.

By noon, she could no longer lay in bed with her thoughts. Prudence dressed and joined her aunt in the drawing room.

"Are you feeling better, my dear?" Her aunt stabbed a needle through an embroidery hoop.

"Much better, thank you." She actually felt terrible. The lack of sleep had a headache brewing at her temples. Not to mention the sadness of knowing all she had left was a memory, no matter how sweet.

"Good, because the Henderson musicale is this evening. I heard there will be an earl

in attendance. A friend of the elder Henderson boy. It will be an opportunity to make inroads into the upper echelons.”

Aunt Honoria was maneuvering for invitations to more exclusive events to rub elbows with a variety of peers. She had hoped their connection, however tenuous, with Duke’s sister, Madeline, would prove beneficial. Her aunt had been horrified when Madeline had thrown over the Duke of Ralston’s heir for a common gamble while Prudence had silently cheered.

Unfortunately, Prudence couldn’t beg off yet another event even though she anticipated her headache only getting worse while being subjected to the generally poor singing and playing. “A musicale sounds lovely.”

It was not lovely. The musicale was crowded and hot and, as predicted, the actual music was to be endured, not enjoyed. She ignored the frustrated looks coming from her aunt and remained in the corner of the room sipping her third glass of champagne.

The poor earl who deigned to join the event was surrounded on all sides by young marriageable ladies. He had the look of a man hunted, and Prudence spared a moment of sympathy for him.

Wishing she was home in bed—or better yet in Duke’s bed—Prudence closed her eyes and tilted her face toward the cooling breeze snaking its way through the garden doors.

“I’ll have you know I’ve subjected myself to four horrendously boring events this evening searching for you,” said a deep voice.

Her eyes flew open. Duke was standing three feet in front of her. She was dreaming. She had to be. Her head felt like it was full of cotton. She swayed and grabbed the lapel of his jacket to steady herself.

A storm brewed in his eyes. His mobile mouth was turned down and his brows drawn in. His evening attire was stark but highlighted the best parts of him—which was everything. He was the most handsome man in the room.

“I— You—” Her heart was galloping, and her stays felt like they’d tightened to the point of suffocating her.

His expression softened slightly. With a firm hand on the small of her back, he guided her through the garden doors to the stone balustrade. “Take deep breaths. I’d rather not have to explain why you’ve swooned in my arms.”

She gulped in the cooler night air and looked at him from the corner of her eye. “What are you doing here?”

“As I said, looking for you.”

“But... But why?”

Duke looked unusually uncomfortable all of a sudden. He adjusted his cravat and smoothed the lapels of his jacket. “You left without saying goodbye.”

“You sought me out to say goodbye?”

“Yes. No.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I’m making a hash of this. Last night was...” He looked to the sky where the stars were hidden by clouds.

Prue filled in the blank. Bliss. Madness. Unforgettable. It was too complicated for one emotion. She glanced toward the large, crowded drawing room. Had her aunt noticed her absence? Her lips grew dry. This was teetering on a disaster. She had to get him to leave.



“A mistake,” she said emphatically.

His gaze dropped to hers. “Do you really believe that?”

Of course she didn’t, but she had to make him think she did. “Last night can never happen again.”

“Last night was incredible, and you know it.” Anger and hurt sizzled in his voice.

“I thought it was understood it would be one night and nothing more.”

His jaw worked as he stared at her. “What if I want more? What if I want to court you properly? Flowers and stilted conversations in drawing rooms and walks at the fashionable hour in Hyde Park. We could start with an introduction to your aunt.”

Her breath caught. “It’s impossible.” For reasons Duke wasn’t even aware of.

“Why? I am not without means. You have the freedom of being a widow.” He grasped her hands. “We could travel together. You want to see Paris, don’t you?”

Hope sparked in her heart, but reality snuffed it before it could flame. “I do, but there’s something I haven’t told you. I’m not?—”

“Mr. Barnes. What a surprise!” Aunt Honoria’s voice was Prudence’s nightmare.

Duke turned slowly. “Mrs. Courtright?”

“I see you have found Prudence. Are you in town because of your poor sister? Unfortunately, it is too late to save her.” Her aunt’s voice dropped as if discussing a tragedy.

Duke did not move or speak for a long moment. Slowly, he turned back to face Prudence, his gaze raking over her face. “I’ve been blind. And idiotic. Were you trying to make a fool of me? Was that your plan?”

“No! Of course not. We met by chance. I didn’t orchestrate it. Everything”—she made an all-encompassing gesture—“just happened.”

It was a weak and pathetic excuse, but how could she tell him the truth? She had dreamed and longed for him for as long as she could remember. How could she not take advantage of the opportunity fate had provided?

Aunt Honoria looked between Prudence and Duke, her brow scrunched and her mouth pinched. “What is going on here?”

If he told her aunt exactly what had gone on, her situation would be dire. She begged Duke with her eyes. His mouth tightened, but when he turned to her aunt, his voice was calm. “If you are receiving tomorrow, I would like to call upon you ladies.”

Her aunt looked flustered. “Of course we would be pleased to receive you, Mr. Barnes.”

After her aunt gave Duke their direction, Duke bowed, turned on his heel, and disappeared.

Prudence ignored the glare from her aunt. Trying to regulate the shock and distress of her unmasking, Prudence forced her lips into the tiniest of smiles. It was all she could manage. “It will be good to catch up with a friend from home, won’t it?”

“I didn’t realize you were on friendly terms at home. He never acknowledged your presence.” It would be just like her aunt to point out the obvious.

“We were acquainted.” Prudence took a side step to escape, but her aunt matched her movement, keeping her blocked in.

“And you have become reacquainted while in London?” Her aunt was getting worked up, which would be sure to cause a scene and make matters even worse, if that was possible. “Why did you not tell me before now?”

“We can discuss this later, Aunt Honoria. You are drawing attention.” Prudence sent a steadier smile at the people who were casting them curious glances.

“You can be sure we will discuss it.” Her aunt smoothed a hand down her dress and took a deep breath. “I feel a headache coming on. We should depart.”

The next morning, Prudence sat on the edge of the settee and sipped a cup of coffee. Her eyes were sandy and her head fuzzy from two nights of poor sleep. She had managed to put her aunt off the night before, but the coming visit from Duke was sure to prove difficult.

Tears that had flowed into her pillow prickled her eyes once more. She looked to the ceiling and blinked to beat back the emotion. The beautiful night they’d spent together was now tarnished. Her biggest fear was that Duke would hate her and regret bedding her.

Her aunt bustled into the drawing room, her face thunderous. “Are you ready to speak now?”

“I will speak to you after Duke’s visit.” While Prudence’s voice was calm, her cup rattled on the saucer.

“You are taking unusual liberties with his name. Just how intimately acquainted are you and Mr. Barnes?” Her aunt was inching toward the truth.

The man who they were employing as a butler-footman stepped into the room. “Mr. James Barnes, ma’am.”

“Show him in, Perkins.”

The butler inclined his head and stepped back. Duke walked in, looking handsome in a navy frock coat and the same buff-colored buckskins she had unbuttoned with relish. She tore her eyes away from the fall. Knowing what lay underneath was torturous. His dark blond hair was windblown, and his color was high. His masculinity was potent and filled the room with energy.

An ache spread for what she’d enjoyed so briefly and lost. She stood on wobbly knees. Duke spared her aunt a brief acknowledgment, but his gaze eviscerated her as if searching for her truths. His anger and shock from the musicale were gone. In their place was something she couldn’t name. Speculation? Curiosity?

“I would like to know what is going on,” Aunt Honoria said stridently into the long silence.

“I would beg your patience, ma’am.” With his focus still on Prudence, he said in a voice that brooked no argument, “Your niece and I must talk. Alone. We will take a stroll to the park. A footman or maid can accompany us for appearance’s sake.”

While her aunt sputtered, he offered his bare hand to Prudence and waited. The same hand had touched her intimately and given her unspeakable pleasure, yet the simple act of slipping her hand into his felt momentous.

The squeeze he gave her hand steadied her nerves as he led her into the foyer of the town house. She asked Perkins to fetch Jane.

Jane? Duke mouthed, raising an eyebrow, but otherwise they waited in silence, their

hands still joined. Prudence cast her gaze up at his face, but could not predict the direction of the coming conversation.

With protests from her aunt still ringing in their ears, they departed the town house, shoulder to shoulder, Jane trailing behind them. He untangled their fingers and offered his arm. She tucked her hand into the crook. It was a short stroll to the small park across from their town house.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice cracked with a bolt of emotion.

“As am I.”

“But I knew who you were from the start, and you didn’t recognize me.”

“Well, I’m a fool. I should have remembered you. It’s just that...” He grimaced slightly. “When we were younger, you didn’t draw my attention. I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing? My aunts kept me isolated. I am a bluestocking wallflower.” She shrugged.

“But not a widow.” A hint of accusation crept in his voice.

“When you didn’t recognize me, I lied. I needed an excuse for being unchaperoned. I didn’t expect to share a kiss or stumble across a murder. It complicated the moment.”

He stopped and faced her. “But we shared much more than a kiss.”

She was done with the lies and half-truths. “The truth is that while I did not draw your attention when we were younger, you drew mine—and every other woman’s in town, no doubt. I have been infatuated with you for as long as I can remember. One night with you was more than I ever dreamed to have. And it was worth it, no matter

what happens now.”

He glanced toward Jane, who was pretending to examine the flowers, and restarted their stroll. “You were a virgin.”

Heat flushed into her face, and she was glad to not be staring at him when she said, “I was, yes.”

“If I had known, I would have been gentler.” The castigation he had already treated himself to was apparent in his humorless laugh. “What am I saying? I wouldn’t have dallied with you if I had known.”

“Exactly why I didn’t want you to know, and if you couldn’t tell, I enjoyed being with you. Very much. In fact, our time together was more pleasurable than I ever imagined. I wanted it to be you. It was a choice fate allowed me to make.”

“It was a night to remember.” The husky knowing timber of his voice sent a bolt of awareness to her belly.

“You weren’t ever supposed to find out who I really was.”

“But I know now. We must decide what happens next.”

She whipped her head around. She had studied every line and expression of his face for years, yet he remained a mystery. “Nothing has to happen. You will travel on while I remain here with my aunt to find a husband.”

“What if I offer you a choice?”

She stuttered to a stop. “A choice.”

“Yes. Didn’t you say that every woman deserves a choice in her future? Marry me instead of some fop you care nothing for.”

Shock left her numb. “You don’t want to marry. You want to travel and see the world.”

“So do you. Why can’t we do it together?”

“I have plans for a perfumery.”

“There’s no reason you can’t concoct and sell your perfumes. In fact, as a businessman, I can provide backing. Set you up with a proper laboratory.”

Blooms of hope and love burst in her chest. “Are you trying to bribe me?”

“Consider it my dowry.”

A laugh escaped her. “The bride is supposed to provide a dowry.”

“Then we shall have an unconventional marriage.” He shrugged, but wore the half smile she so loved.

Her smile faded. “There is still a problem. You don’t love me.”

His face grew equally as solemn. “I’ve never been in love, so I’m not sure what I feel, but I know it’s something I’ve never felt before. I haven’t been able to stop thinking of you. I had made plans to ask you to accompany me to Paris last night. When I awoke and you were already gone, I felt bereft. I knew instantly I would not stop until I found you. It seems to me marriages are made on less sturdy foundations than what we have already built.”

He was correct. She had seen too many marriages decided after only a dance or even less. Money and connections were what was important. At least she and Duke had similar passions in and out of bed. Her infatuation had matured into love. Did she have the courage to wait for him to feel the same?

There was another impediment. “My aunts?—”

“Will be well taken care of. My wife’s family does not need to worry about their futures.”

Her mind whirled. While Prudence wouldn’t be making a match with an English gentleman, the Barnes family was just as wealthy, if not more so, than most peers. Her aunts would be able to hold their heads high and crow about their connections at home while Prudence could live her life with the man she loved.

“I am too selfish to turn down your offer. I have wanted you for too long.” She was determined to be honest with him.

He cupped her cheek and kissed her so sweetly she sagged into him. “My want might not be as long-lived as yours, but it is intense.”

“Will we return home to marry?” She already dreaded the long ocean journey and the expectations that would be put upon them by their families and New York society. While not as grand as anything in England, everyone would expect the Barneses to host a large wedding for their eldest son.

“While our families will be displeased, I have something more expedient in mind. I cannot fathom waiting. Let’s begin our adventures by eloping to Gretna Green.”

Aunt Honoria would be shocked, but it was a good match. Her objections would be centered around the speed and lack of fanfare, but Prudence could weather the tears



and pleas to wait. “When?”

“How soon can you be packed?” he said with an infectious grin.

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Six months later...

Hand in hand, Duke and Prudence climbed the stairs of the villa outside Paris they were sharing with Madeline and Damien Northcutt. They had spent just enough time to be polite in the drawing room after their arrival before retreating to their rooms.

“How are you feeling?” he asked with a grin.

“Tired but very happy. And you?”

“Ready to take you to bed.” At the top of the stairs, he swept her into his arms and carried her the rest of the way to their room.

After their elopement to Scotland, Duke and Prue returned to London for Mr. Sharma’s inquest. Due to his family’s influence, Atwater had been spared the hangman’s noose but was transported to Australia. Mr. Sharma’s nephew published the research, and at least Mr. Sharma had received the accolades he deserved. Bittersweet justice had been served.

Giving up her dreams of infiltrating British nobility, Aunt Honoria had resigned herself to returning to America to tout her new connection to the Barnes family there. Duke and Prue had seen Aunt Honoria onto the boat with letters to Duke’s mother and father.

Then they’d been free. Free to decide their future.

Their first stop had been Paris where they found Madeline and Damien Northcutt in

the thick of Parisian society. After an initial awkwardness born of a brotherly protective streak, Duke and Damien had become fast friends. And finally in Madeline, Prue had found a kindred spirit in science. They spent much of their time hosting salons for other like-minded ladies.

As for Prue and Duke, they had engaged in quick rough sex against the walls and slow gentle sex in candlelight. She couldn't get enough of him. In between, they had talked about everything from the mundane to the philosophical.

But after a month in Paris, Duke had suggested they travel to Egypt. It was an amazing feeling to know she was free to decide. And an even better feeling to have a companion who was enthusiastic as she was to experience the world at her side.

Under the vast skies of the desert with stars twinkling overhead, Duke had professed his love and devotion. They made love in a luxurious tent with the warm breeze caressing their bare skin. It had been perfect.

They had been traveling for two weeks to return to France. They were exhausted, but desperate for solitude.

He dropped her on the side of the bed.

She propped herself up on her elbows to enjoy the sight of him stripping off his jacket, waistcoat, and shirt. His muscular chest had become familiar but was no less arousing. She had traced every inch with her fingers and most with her lips.

He pushed her skirts to her waist and pulled her bottom to the edge of the mattress. Eagerly, she wrapped her legs around his hips as he made quick work with his breeches. He was hard, and she was wet.

He thrust inside her with a groan of relief. Grinding his hips to get even deeper, he propped himself over her on his hands, gazing into her eyes.

“How do you feel now?” he asked in a rough voice.

“Like I’m home.” The thought popped out without examining it, but it felt truer than anything she had ever felt. It didn’t matter she was thousands of miles from where she had been raised. No matter where she was, as long as he was with her, she would be home.

His eyes flared in surprise, but a slow smile crested his lips. “Yes. Home. Wherever we are, you are my home.”

Did you miss the beginning of the Laws of Attraction series? **THE COURTSHIP CALCULATION** , kicks off the series. It takes place in the Spies and Lovers world, but it focuses on three ladies who are penpals and share an interest in science and the natural world. It is fun and sexy!

Damien Northcutt is a gambler, a rake, a bastard, and... bored. Madeline Barnes is a botanist, a lady, an innocent, and... curious.

When Damien accidentally plays knight-errant and rescues Madeline from the clutches of her scheming relatives, he discovers she might be the key to getting what he’s always wanted—revenge.

Even though Damien has warned her repeatedly he is no gentleman, Madeline is sure deep down underneath his rakish demeanor he is a hero. Why else would he secret her out of a ball to safety?