



The Truth about the Earl (Whispers of the Ton #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: When writing society ondits under a fictitious name, Lady Essington becomes a target for a blackmailer.

After the untimely death of her aged husband, young Lady Norah Essington was given the opportunity to write a weekly piece for the local society newspaper, detailing news, scandals and secrets of the ton that surrounded her – and all under a fictitious name. Delighted with such an opportunity, she began to do so with relish, only for a falsehood about her to be printed under that very same fictitious name! Confused, Norah is horrified when letters begin to arrive at her door, demanding that she write what they tell her – or else suffer the consequences.

James, Earl of Yarmouth, is disgusted with what he reads in society papers, particularly when one such comment is made about himself! Determined to put things to rights, he tries to discover who is writing such lies, only to find himself thrown together with Lady Essington in what is swiftly becoming a much bigger mystery.

Will she be courageous enough to tell him everything? And what will James do when the truth finally comes out?

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Prologue

“I was very sorry to hear of the death of your husband.”

Lady Norah Essington gave the older lady a small smile, which she did not truly feel. “I thank you. You are very kind.” Her tone was dull but Norah had no particular concerns as regarded either how she sounded or how she appeared to the lady. She was, yet again, alone in the world, and as things stood, was uncertain as to what her future would be.

“You did not care for him, I think.”

Norah’s gaze returned to Lady Gillingham’s with such force, the lady blinked in surprise and leaned back a fraction in her chair.

“I mean no harm by such words, I assure you. I –”

“You have made an assumption, Lady Gillingham, and I would be glad if you should keep such notions to yourself.” Norah lifted her chin but heard her voice wobble. “I should prefer to mourn the loss of my husband without whispers or gossip chasing around after me.”

Lady Gillingham smiled, reached forward, and settled one hand over Norah’s. “But of course.”

Norah turned her head, trying to silently signal that the meeting was now at an end. She was not particularly well acquainted with the lady and, as such, would be glad of

her departure so that she might sit alone and in peace. Besides which, if Lady Gillingham had been as bold as to make such a claim as that directly to Norah herself, then what would she think to say to the ton ? Society might be suddenly full of whispers about Norah and her late husband—and then what would she do?

“I have upset you. Forgive me.”

Norah dared a glance at Lady Gillingham, taking in the gentle way her eyes searched Norah’s face and the small, soft smile on her lips. “I do not wish you to disparage my late husband, Lady Gillingham. Nor do I want to hear such rumors being spread in London – whenever it would be that I would have cause to return.”

“I quite understand, and I can assure you I do not have any intention of speaking of any such thing to anyone in society.”

“Then why state such a thing in my presence? My husband is only a sennight gone and, as I am sure you are aware, I am making plans to remove myself to his estate.”

“Provided you are still welcome there.”

Norah closed her eyes, a familiar pain flashing through her heart. “Indeed.” Suddenly, she wanted very much for Lady Gillingham to take her leave. This was not at all what she had thought would occur. The lady, she had assumed, would simply express her sympathies and take her leave.

“Again, I have injured you.” Lady Gillingham let out a long sigh and then shook her head. “Lady Essington, forgive me. I am speaking out of turn and with great thoughtlessness, which I must apologize for. The truth is, I come here out of genuine concern for you, given that I have been in the very same situation.”

Norah drew her eyebrows together. She was aware that Lady Gillingham was

widowed but did not know when such a thing had taken place.

“I was, at that time, given an opportunity which I grasped at with both hands. It is a paid position but done most discreetly.”

Blinking rapidly, Norah tried to understand what Lady Gillingham meant. “I am to be offered employment?” She shook her head. “Lady Gillingham, that is most kind of you but I assure you I will be quite well. My husband often assured me his brother is a kind, warm-hearted gentleman and I have every confidence that he will take care of me.” This was said with a confidence Norah did not truly feel but given the strangeness of this first meeting, she was doing so in an attempt to encourage Lady Gillingham to take her leave. Her late husband had, in fact, warned her about his brother on more than one occasion, telling her he was a selfish, arrogant sort who would not care a jot for anyone other than himself.

“I am very glad to hear of it, but should you find yourself in any difficulty, then I would beg of you to consider this. I have written for the paper for some time and find myself a little less able to do so nowadays. The truth is, Lady Essington, I am a little dull when it comes to society and very little takes place that could be of any real interest to anyone, I am sure.”

Growing a little frustrated, Norah spread her hands. “I do not understand you, Lady Gillingham. Perhaps this is not -”

“An opportunity to write, Lady Essington.” Lady Gillingham leaned forward in her chair, her eyes suddenly dark and yet sparkling at the same time. “To write about society! Do you understand what I mean?”

Norah shook her head but a small twist of interest flickered in her heart. “No, Lady Gillingham. I am afraid I do not.”

The lady smiled and her eyes held fast to Norah's. "The London Chronicle, as you know, has society pages. I am sure you have read them?"

Norah nodded slowly, recalling the times she and her mother had pored over the society pages in search of news as to which gentlemen might be worth considering when it came to her future. "I have found them very informative."

"Indeed, I am glad to hear so." Lady Gillingham smiled as if she had something to do with the pages themselves. "There is a rather large column within the society pages that mayhap you have avoided if you are averse to gossip and the like."

Norah shifted uncomfortably in her chair. The truth was, she had read them many times over and had been a little too eager to know of the gossip and rumors swirling through London society whilst, at the same time, refusing to speak of them to anyone else for fear of spreading further gossip.

"I can see you understand what it is I am speaking about. Well, Lady Essington, you must realize that someone writes such a column, I suppose?" She smiled and Norah nodded slowly. "I am that person."

Shock spread through Norah's heart and ice filled her chest. Not all of the gossip she had read had been pleasant – indeed, some of it had been so very unfavorable that reputations had been quite ruined.

"You are a little surprised but I must inform you I have set a great deal of trust in you by revealing this truth." Lady Gillingham's smile had quite faded and instead, Norah was left with a tight-lipped older lady looking back at her with steel in her dark eyes.

"I – I understand."

"Good." Lady Gillingham smiled but there was no lightness in her expression. "The

reason I speak to you so, Lady Essington, is to offer you the opportunity in the very same way that I was all those years ago.”

For some moments, Norah stared at Lady Gillingham with undisguised confusion. She had no notion as to what the lady meant nor what she wanted and, as such, could only shake her head.

Lady Gillingham sighed. “I am tired of writing my column, Lady Essington. As I have said, it is a paid position and all done very discreetly. I wish to return to my little house in the country and enjoy being away in the quiet countryside rather than the hubbub of London. The funds I have received for writing this particular column have been more than enough over the years and I have managed to save a good deal so that I might retire to the country in comfort.”

“I see.” Still a little confused, Norah twisted her lips to one side for a few moments. “And you wish for me to write this for you?”

“For yourself!” Lady Gillingham flung her hands in the air. “They want to continue the column, for it is very popular, and as such, they require someone to write it. I thought that, since you find yourself in much the same situation as I was some years ago, you might be willing to think on it.”

Blowing out a long, slow breath, Norah found herself nodding out but quickly stopped it from occurring. “I think I should like to consider it a little longer.”

“But of course. You have your mourning period, and thereafter, perhaps you might be willing to give me an answer?”

Norah frowned. “But that is a little over a year away.”

“Yes, I am well aware it is a long time, Lady Essington. But I shall finish writing for

this Season in the hope that you will take over thereafter. It is, as I am sure you have been able to tell, quite secretive and without any danger.”

Norah gave her a small smile, finding her heart flooding with a little relief. “Because you are Mrs. Fullerton,” she answered, as Lady Gillingham beamed at her. “You write as Mrs. Fullerton, I should say.”

“Indeed, I do. I must, for else society would not wish to have me join them in anything, and then where would I be?” A murmur of laughter broke from her lips as she got to her feet, bringing her prolonged visit to an end. “Consider what I have suggested, my dear. I do not know what your circumstances are at present and I am quite certain you will not be aware of them until you return to the late Lord Essington’s estate but I am quite sure you would do excellently. You may, of course, write to me whenever you wish with any questions or concerns that I could answer for you.”

“I very much appreciate your concern and your consideration, Lady Gillingham.” Rising to her feet, Norah gave the lady a small curtsy, which was returned. “I shall take the year to consider it.”

“Do.” Reaching out, Lady Gillingham grasped Norah’s hands and held them tightly, her eyes fixed on Norah’s. “Do not permit yourself to be pushed aside, Lady Essington. Certain characters might soon determine that you do not deserve what is written on Lord Essington’s will but be aware that it cannot be contested. Take what is yours and make certain you do all you can for your comfort. No one will take from you what is rightfully yours, I assure you.”

Norah’s smile slipped and she could only nod as Lady Gillingham squeezed her hands. She was rather fearful of returning to her late husband’s estate and being informed of her situation as regarded her husband’s death.

“And you must promise me that you will not speak of this to anyone.”

“Of course,” Norah promised without hesitation. “I shall not tell a soul, Lady Gillingham. Of that, you can be quite certain.”

“Good, I am glad.” With another warm smile, Lady Gillingham dropped Norah’s hands and made her way to the door. “Good afternoon, Miss Essington. I do hope your sorrow passes quickly.”

Norah nodded and smiled but did not respond. Did Lady Gillingham know Norah had never had a kind thought for her husband? That their marriage had been solely because of Lord Essington’s desire to have a young, pretty wife by his side rather than due to any real or genuine care or consideration for her? Telling herself silently that such a thing did not matter, Norah waited until Lady Gillingham had quit the room before flopping back into her chair and blowing out a long breath.

Most extraordinary. Biting her lip, Norah considered what Lady Gillingham had offered her. Was it something she would consider? Would she become the next writer of the London Chronicle society column? It was employment, but not something Norah could simply ignore.

“I might very well require some extra coin,” she murmured to herself, sighing heavily as another rap came at the door. Most likely, this would be another visitor coming to express their sympathy and sorrow. Whilst Norah did not begrudge them, she was finding herself rather weary.

I have a year to consider, she reminded herself, calling for the footman to come into the room. One year. And then I may very well find myself as the new Mrs. Fullerton.

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Chapter One

One year later.

Taking the hand of her coachman, Norah descended from the carriage and drew in a long breath.

I am back in London.

The strange awareness that she was quite alone – without companion or chaperone – rushed over her, rendering Norah a little uncomfortable. Wriggling her shoulders a little in an attempt to remove such feelings from herself, Norah put a smile on her face and began to walk through St James' Park, praying that Lady Gillingham would be waiting as she had promised.

The last year had been something of a dull one and it brought Norah a good deal of pleasure to be back in town. Society had been severely lacking and the only other people in the world she had enjoyed conversation with had been her lady's maid, Cherry, and the housekeeper. Both had seemed to recognize that Norah was a little lonely and as the months had passed, a semblance of friendship – albeit a strange one – had begun to flourish. However, upon her return to town, Norah had been forced to leave both the maid and the housekeeper behind, for she was no longer permitted to reside in the small estate that had been hers for the last year. Now, she was to find a way to settle in London and with an entirely new complement of staff.

“Ah, Lady Essington! I am so glad to see you again.”

Lady Gillingham rose quickly from where she had been seated on the small, wooden bench and, much to Norah's surprise, grasped her hands tightly whilst looking keenly into her eyes.

"I do hope you are well?"

Norah nodded, a prickling running down her spine. "I am quite well, I thank you."

"You have been looked after this past year?"

Opening her mouth to say that yes, she was quite satisfied, Norah slowly closed it again and saw the flicker of understanding in Lady Gillingham's eye.

"The newly titled Lord Essington did not wish for me to reside with him so I was sent to the dower house for the last few months," she explained, as Lady Gillingham's jaw tightened. "I believe that Lord Essington has spent the time attempting to find a way to remove from me what my late husband bequeathed but he has been unable to do so."

Lady Gillingham's eyes flared and a small smile touched the corner of her mouth. "I am very glad to hear it."

"I have a residence here in London and a small complement of staff." It was not quite the standard she was used to but Norah was determined to make the best of it. "I do not think I shall be able to purchase any new gowns - although it may be required of me somehow - but I am back in town, at the very least."

Lady Gillingham nodded, turned, and began to walk along the path, gesturing for Norah to fall into step with her. "You were given only a small yearly allowance?"

Norah shrugged one shoulder lightly. "It is more than enough to take care of my

needs, certainly.”

“But not enough to give you any real ease.”

Tilting her head, Norah considered what she said, then chose to push away her pride and nod.

“It is as you say.” There would be no additional expenses, no new gowns, gloves, or bonnets and she certainly could not eat extravagantly but at least she had a comfortable home. “The will stated that I was to have the furnished townhouse in London and that my brother-in-law is liable for all repairs to keep it to a specific standard for the rest of my remaining life and that, certainly, is a comfort.”

“I can see that it is, although might you consider marrying again?”

Norah hesitated. “It is not something I have given a good deal of thought to, Lady Gillingham. I have had a great deal of loss these last few years, with the passing of my mother shortly after my marriage and, thereafter, the passing of Lord Essington himself. To find myself now back in London without a parent or husband is a little strange, and I confess that I find it a trifle odd. However, for the moment, it is a freedom that I wish to explore rather than remove from myself in place of another marriage.”

Lady Gillingham laughed and the air around them seemed to brighten. “I quite understand. I, of course, never married again and there is not always a desire to do so, regardless. That is quite an understandable way of thinking and you must allow yourself time to become accustomed to your new situation.”

“Yes, I think you are right.”

Tilting her head slightly, Lady Gillingham looked sidelong at Norah. “And have you

given any consideration to my proposal?”

Norah hesitated, her stomach dropping. Until this moment, she had been quite determined that she would not do as Lady Gillingham had asked, whereas now she was no longer as certain. Realizing she would have to live a somewhat frugal life for the rest of her days or marry a gentleman with a good deal more fortune – which was, of course, somewhat unlikely since she was a widow – the idea of earning a little more coin was an attractive one.

“I – I was about to refuse until this moment. But now that I am back in your company, I feel quite changed.”

Lady Gillingham’s eyes lit up. “Truthfully?”

Letting out a slightly awkward laugh, Norah nodded. “Although I am not certain I shall have the same way with words as you. How do you find such interesting stories?”

The burst of laughter that came from Lady Gillingham astonished Norah to the point that her steps slowed significantly.

“Oh, forgive me, Lady Essington! It is clear you have not plunged the depths of society as I have.”

A slow flush of heat crept up Norah’s cheeks. “It is true that I was very well protected from any belligerent gentlemen and the like. My mother was most fastidious.”

“As she ought.” Lady Gillingham attempted to hide her smile but it fought to remain on her lips. “But you shall find society a very different beast now, Lady Essington!”

Norah shivered, not certain that she liked that particular remark.

“You are a widowed lady, free to do as you please and act as you wish. You will find that both the gentlemen and ladies of the ton will treat you very differently now and that, Lady Essington, is where you will find all manner of stories being brought to your ears.”

“I see.”

A small frown pulled at Lady Gillingham’s brow. “However, I made certain any stories I wrote had a basis in fact. I do not like to spread rumors unnecessarily. I stayed far from stories that would bring grave injury to certain parties.”

Norah nodded slowly, seeing the frown and realizing just how seriously Lady Gillingham had taken her employment.

“There is a severe responsibility that must be considered before you take this on, Lady Essington. You must be aware that whatever you write will have consequences.”

Pressing her lips together tightly, Norah thought about this for a few moments. “I recall that my mother and I used to read the society papers very carefully indeed, to make certain we would not keep company with any gentlemen who were considered poorly by the ton.”

Lady Gillingham nodded. “Indeed, that is precisely what I mean. If a lady had been taken advantage of, then I would never write about her for fear of what that might entail. However, I would make mention of the gentleman in question, in some vague, yet disparaging, way that made certain to keep the rest of the debutantes away from him.”

“I understand.”

“We may not be well acquainted, Lady Essington, but I have been told of your kind and sweet nature by others. I believe they thought very well of your mother and, in turn, of you.”

Norah put her hand to her heart, an ache in her throat. “I thank you.”

Lady Gillingham smiled softly. “So what say you, Lady Essington? Will you do as I have long hoped?”

“Will I write under the name of Mrs. Fullerton?” A slow, soft smile pulled at her lips as she saw Lady Gillingham nod. “And when would they wish their first piece?”

Lady Gillingham shrugged. “I write every week about what I have discovered. Sometimes the article is rather long and sometimes it is very short. The amount you write does not matter. It is what it contains that is of interest. They will pay you the same amount, regardless.”

“They?” Norah pricked up her ears at the mention of money. “And might I ask how much is being offered?”

Norah’s eyes widened as Lady Gillingham told her of the very large amount that would be given to her for every piece written. That would allow me to purchase one new gown at the very least!

“And it is the man in charge of the London Chronicle that has asked me for this weekly contribution. In time, you will be introduced to him. But that is only if you are willing to take on the role?”

Taking in a deep breath, Norah let it out slowly and closed her eyes for a moment. “Yes, I think I shall.”

Lady Gillingham clapped her hands together in delight, startling a nearby blackbird. “How wonderful! I shall, of course, be glad to assist you with your first article. Thereafter, I fully intend to return to my house in the countryside and remain far away from all that London society has to offer.” Her smile faded as she spoke, sending a stab of worry into Norah’s heart. Could it be that after years of writing such articles, of being in amongst society and seeing all that went on, Lady Gillingham was weary of the ton ? Norah swallowed hard and tried to push her doubts away. This was to bring her a little more coin and, therefore, a little more ease. After all that she had endured these last few years, that would be of the greatest comfort to her.

“So, when are you next to go into society?”

Norah looked at Lady Gillingham. “I have only just come to London. I believe I have an invitation to Lord Henderson’s ball tomorrow evening, however.”

“As have I.” Lady Gillingham looped her arm through Norah’s, as though they were suddenly great friends. “We shall attend together and I will help you find not only what you are to write about but I shall also introduce you to various gentlemen and ladies that you might wish to befriend.”

A little confused, Norah frowned. “For what purpose?”

“Oh, some gentlemen, in particular, will have excellent potential when it comes to your writings. You do not have to like them – indeed, it is best if you do not, for your conscience’s sake.”

Norah’s spirits dropped low. Was this truly the right thing for her to be doing? She did not want to injure gentlemen and ladies unnecessarily, nor did she want to have guilt on her conscience. But the money would be so very helpful.

“I can choose what I write, yes?”

Lady Gillingham glanced over at her sharply. “Yes, of course.”

“And the newspaper will not require me to write any falsehoods?”

Lady Gillingham shook her head. “No, indeed not.”

Norah set her shoulders. “Then I shall do as you have done and write what I think is only best for society to know, in order to protect debutantes and the like from any uncouth gentlemen.”

“That is fair.” Lady Gillingham smiled and Norah took in a long breath, allowing herself to smile as she settled the matter with her conscience. “I am sure you shall do very well indeed, Lady Essington.”

Norah tilted her head up toward the sky for a moment as a sense of freedom burst over her once again. “I must hope so, Lady Gillingham. The ball will be a very interesting evening indeed, I am sure.”

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Chapter Two

“Good evening, Lord Yardley.”

James took in the beautiful Lady Maude as he bowed, thinking silently to himself that her beauty had improved all the more since last Season. Her elegant eyebrows were gently lifted over dark, flashing blue eyes that held fast to his. Her red lips curved gently, her alabaster skin holding no hint of color.

Evidently, Lady Maude was well used to a gentleman's perusal for she did not either blush or demurely drop her gaze.

“Good evening, Lady Maude.” Rising from his bow, James smiled as warmly as he could, wondering if this evening, he would have an opportunity to dance with the lady. Having been in London for a fortnight already, he had not yet had a chance to do so and was eager to step out with her. “I do hope you will not have as full a dance card as the last time we were in company together?” One lift of his eyebrow made her smile and, after a moment, she lifted her dance card from her wrist and handed it to him.

“How wonderful.” The satisfaction was only momentary, however, for a glance at the dance card told him he only had two choices remaining – the country waltz and the quadrille. That was not what he had been hoping for. After all, it felt as though the ball had only just begun!

“You have both the first waltz and the supper dance taken already, I see.” Struggling to contain his frustration, James tried to force a smile as he glanced up at Lady

Maude. “How very unfortunate.”

“Indeed.” Lady Maude did not seem at all concerned by James’ evident irritation, turning her head away as if she were bored by his frustrations. “I believe two dances are remaining, Lord Yardley. Do either of them not satisfy you?”

James grimaced and put his name down for the quadrille. “But of course, Lady Maude.” It is as if she wishes me to be grateful that I have any dance with her at all – although, mayhap that is precisely as I ought to be. “The quadrille shall suit me very well.”

Her cool smile did nothing to calm his irritation. “Thank you, Lord Yardley. I am sure that my dear friend, Miss Patterson, would be glad of your interest also.”

James’ eyes flicked toward the lady she gestured to, seeing the somewhat pale-faced young lady conversing with another gentleman, although her eyes caught his for a moment.

“But of course,” he murmured, having a great reluctance to even converse with Miss Patterson, whom he had previously been introduced to and found to be something of a bore. “Once she is finished her conversation with another, I shall be glad to speak with her also. I have taken the second to last of your dances, however, and I –”

“And may I have the very last?”

James turned in surprise, just as one Lord Huntsford approached, bowing toward Lady Maude as he came to a stop beside James. “I overheard you speaking to Lord Yardley and must beg for the second dance to become my own.”

“How very kind of you, Lord Huntsford.”

Much to James' surprise, Lady Maude's response was no longer the cool, somewhat dull tone with which she had spoken to him. Rather, it was a little brighter and the warmth in her eyes seemed to sparkle as she gazed at Lord Huntsford.

Envy coiled in his belly.

"Wonderful." Quickly signing his name, Lord Huntsford cleared his throat, smiled, and elbowed James in the side in the most discreet manner.

James' jaw tightened.

"We shall excuse ourselves now, Lady Maude, so that others might be permitted to enjoy your company also." Lord Huntsford bowed, turned and James had no other choice but to follow him.

"You are the most irritating gentleman."

Lord Huntsford chuckled, his eyes dancing. "Ah, but I am also your very dearest friend and therefore you must know that I seek only the best for you."

James rolled his eyes. "Dancing with Lady Maude has been my sole intention these last two weeks and when I finally am able to do so – having spoken to her only a mere half-hour since the ball began – I find that the waltz and the supper dance are both already stolen by others!"

Lord Huntsford snorted. "They are hardly stolen."

"I am determined to have a waltz with her."

His friend lifted his eyebrow. "To what end? You have no intention to wed."

“Ah, but I might be prevailed upon to do so if she would consider me. I think her the most beautiful of all ladies.” His heart quickened at the thought of her standing beside him in church, only for it then to drop to the floor as he recalled how dismissive she had been toward him. “Alas, I fear she is not to be as eager for my company as I am for hers.”

Grinning, Lord Huntsford chuckled and James’ irritation grew. “I have had nothing but delightful conversation and the like from her. I do not know why you appear to be so displeased.”

“Mayhap that is because you are able to have her smile upon you with only a few words whereas my flattering compliments gain me nothing but the smallest of smiles and only a hint of interest.”

“Ah, so you are envious! Well, you need not be so for I have no intention whatsoever to court Lady Maude, no matter how eager she may be for my company.”

This did nothing to satisfy James’ frustrations and he looked away, his shoulders slumping. Lady Maude was the perfect young lady, as far as he was concerned. Her father was also an earl, just as he was, and she was both elegant and genteel, offering him everything that a lady ought to be. James was quite certain that Lady Maude would make the most excellent wife and to have her on his arm was a dream he continually clung to. And yet, it seemed she did not have any of the same interest in pursuing such a dream, for her lack of delight in his company was rather telling.

“There must be a way that I can garner her interest!”

Lord Huntsford laughed and shook his head. “Mayhap you ought to show a distinct lack of interest in the lady.”

“Whatever can you mean?” James threw a hard look toward his friend, thinking him

ridiculous.

“Well, if you have tried to catch her interest and have failed, then why not attempt to do something quite the opposite?” Lord Huntsford shrugged. “If you dance with her but show very little interest in her company, then perhaps she will notice that and her thoughts, thereafter, will linger on you. Or, as I hope, you will realize there is no worth in pursuing the lady.”

James’s frown grew but he did not respond immediately, choosing to ignore the latter part of Lord Huntsford’s advice. Nor did he refute such an idea. Instead, he allowed it to wrap around his mind and allowed himself to consider what might happen should he behave in such a way.

“She might be glad of my disinterest.” Rubbing one hand over his forehead, he let out a long sigh. “And what then?”

Lord Huntsford let out a long sigh and rolled his eyes. “If you are determined to pursue her, then you will have to return to your present state of behavior, which is to seek her out at every opportunity so that she cannot forget your face.”

Letting out another long sigh, James shrugged. “If I become a little more desperate in my attempts to have her consider me, then I will return to your idea and see what will occur. But I am not ready to give up my pursuit of her in my own way quite yet.”

“Very well, although as I have said, I think it a foolish endeavor and the lady is not worth your attention.” Lord Huntsford did not seem at all concerned or offended at James’ outright refusal to do as he suggested instantly but merely shrugged. “Mayhap you ought to dance with as many other young ladies as you can this evening. That will help to put Lady Maude from your mind, I am sure.”

James gave him a half-smile, choosing to ignore the fact that Lord Huntsford

continually attempted to encourage him to forget Lady Maude entirely. “That, at least, is an idea that I would find most enjoyable, whom shall we approach next?” Lord Huntsford looked around, smiling to himself as he took in the many young ladies and their companions or chaperones. “My, my. There are many new faces in London this evening, it seems! A good many beautiful debutantes that I am certain would be glad to make your acquaintance.”

“Now you are attempting to flatter me so that I will not think of Lady Maude and allow my spirits to become despondent.”

Chuckling, Lord Huntsford shook his head. “Or mayhap I seek only to find other dance partners for myself this evening and wish that you would not speak with such melancholy so that we might instead enjoy the evening, hmm?” One eyebrow arched, and James grinned.

“Very well, I shall do as you have suggested.” Letting his gaze rove around the room, he spotted a very striking young lady standing by another. His heart lifted for a moment, for the young lady was quite lovely – although not in comparison to Lady Maude at all, of course. She was standing near to a group of gentlemen and ladies and as James watched, he saw the older lady gesture toward them before pushing the younger lady forward.

Clearly, that is either her mother or her chaperone.

“And who is that fine beauty?” Pointing openly, he waited until Lord Huntsford’s eyes had traveled in her direction while his gaze lingered on her. The lady in question was tall with generous curves that he could not help but notice. Her oval face held a slim, delicate nose, rosebud lips, and eyes he longed to know the color of. Her fair hair was threaded with gold from the candlelight and her curls bounced lightly when she laughed.

Lord Huntsford cleared his throat and there was no smile on his face. “Are you unaware of Lady Essington?”

James shot a quick look toward him. “She is already married?”

“She was. I believe she will have finished her year of mourning only recently.”

“Oh.” That did not dissuade James in any way but his interest in her was a little diminished. “Then it is highly unlikely she would consider matrimony.”

“But then again, neither are you considering such a thing,” Lord Huntsford reminded him, “save for Lady Maude. Recall that this is solely for your pleasure this evening. You talk and dance with whomever you wish in the hope that we might find a little enjoyment!”

And mayhap Lady Maude will see I am entertaining and in the very best of company and if I am a little distant with her, she may begin to think of me.

“Very well. If you are acquainted with her, then please do introduce me.” Clearing his throat, James puffed out his chest a little, held his head high, and smiled at Lord Huntsford. “As soon as possible.”

They walked over to Lady Essington’s group and Lord Huntsford caught her attention. Lord Huntsford cleared his throat, smiled, and then gestured to James. “Lady Essington, might I have the honor of presenting my friend to you?”

She nodded. “But of course.”

Her smile sought to push all thought of Lady Maude from his mind. She was even more beautiful standing so close to him and her eyes glittered like emeralds. “Lady Essington, I am delighted to make your acquaintance.”

“And might I now present Lady Gillingham?” Lady Essington made further introductions and James was forced to wait a little longer before he could fall into further conversation with her. “Lady Gillingham is soon to return to the country, however.”

“Indeed, this is my final social event of the Season,” came the reply. “I am to make my way to my manor house in Wiltshire tomorrow afternoon.”

Wondering if the lady was feeling unwell, James gave her a small, sympathetic smile. “I am truly sorry. I hope you will not miss London too much.”

Lady Gillingham laughed, making Lady Essington smile, although she tried to hide it behind her fan.

“Oh, you quite mistake me, Lord Yardley. I am choosing to return to my manor house rather than remain in London. There is no disappointment in my heart about leaving town. Instead, I am quite looking forward to returning home.”

“I see. Forgive me for making an assumption.”

“There is no apology required, I assure you.” The older lady smiled and James allowed himself to return it, a little embarrassed over his mistake.

“It is not your final event of the Season I hope, Lady Essington?”

James turned his head to his friend, a little surprised at Lord Huntsford’s boldness and at the question itself. Was he also caught up with Lady Essington’s beauty?

Lady Essington regarded Lord Huntsford carefully for a moment or two, then smiled and shook her head.

“No, Lord Huntsford, it is not. I have only recently returned to London and have every intention of remaining in London for the entire duration of the Season.”

“That is good. I am very glad to hear it.” Lord Huntsford smiled, cleared his throat, and then held out one hand toward Lady Essington, leaving James to stand by and watch rather than speak to the lady himself. “I do hope you intend to dance this evening?”

Noting how the young lady exchanged a look with Lady Gillingham, James was forced simply to observe as she smiled and then handed her dance card to Lord Huntsford. For whatever reason, he found himself a little frustrated at his friend’s behavior, although he had no real reason to be. Lord Huntsford was behaving just as a gentleman ought, although James had wanted – and indeed, expected – that it would be he who would be the one to seek her dance card and the like, given that he had been the one to ask Lord Huntsford for an introduction!

“I thank you.” A glittering glance was sent James’ way as Lady Essington accepted the dance card back from Lord Huntsford and James was ready in a moment.

“I should be most obliged if you would favor me also, Lady Essington.”

Her lips lifted in a gentle smile as she handed him her dance card whereas James’ brows knotted together.

The scoundrel! He has taken her waltz!

Why this should frustrate him so very much, James did not know but for whatever reason, the fact that Lord Huntsford would be standing up with Lady Essington was of the greatest irritation.

“The country dance and the cotillion, I think.” Yes, he could have taken the supper

dance but that was not the done thing, given that they had only just become introduced. Had he known her a little better or furthered their acquaintance somewhat, then he might well have been able to take it.

“Two dances? That is very kind of you, Lord Yardley.”

James smiled as he gave the dance card back to the lady. “But of course.”

“And, alas, we must take our leave. Lord Yardley may have forgotten but he is to dance the quadrille, which is soon to begin.”

James, a little reluctant to leave, bowed and then turned away, falling into step with Lord Huntsford.

“And now you are introduced!” Lord Huntsford threw a satisfied smile toward James, who did not return it.

“You took her waltz.”

His friend’s smile faded. “But of course. Why would I not?”

James did not know how to reply. To say simply, ‘Because I wanted to do so’ would sound very childish indeed, and thus, he chose to shrug, telling himself that he was being foolish.

“She is very handsome, is she not? I have always thought so, even when she was being courted by Lord Essington.”

“Indeed.”

“You shall have to find more young ladies to dance with once you have stepped out

with Lady Essington, however. To have only two is somewhat embarrassing!”

James rolled his eyes at his friend’s jesting, just as Lady Maude came into view. She was, once again, in the company of her friend, Miss Patterson, whom James silently considered showed Lady Maude in an even better light, given that the lady herself was pale, constantly sorrowful, and always kept her head low.

“Although, no doubt you feel that Lady Essington’s beauty is diminished in light of Lady Maude!”

Barely hearing his friend, James made his way toward the lady, bowing low as his heart quickened.

Mayhap you should show a distinct lack of interest in the lady.

The suggestion from Lord Huntsford entered his mind and would not be easily dismissed. Bowing low, James threw away his smile as he looked toward Lady Maude. “We are to dance the quadrille, Lady Maude.”

“Yes, of course.” Her lips did not lift into a smile and her eyes fixed themselves to his as if he were holding a great secret within his heart that she wanted to find out. When he offered her his arm, she took it without hesitation, turning her head away and breaking their connection. James opened his mouth to say something, only to find he had nothing of interest to say.

“Was that Lady Essington I saw you speaking with, Lord Yardley?”

A little surprised, James glanced down at Lady Maude and then nodded. “Yes, Lady Maude. It was.”

“I see.” Her lips were pinched as she looked up at him before stepping back into her

place. "I did not know she had returned from her mourning period."

James nodded. "It seems she is so, Lady Maude." A slight frown crossed his brow but he dismissed it. Surely Lady Maude could not be envious of his conversation with Lady Essington!

"And she is to dance this evening?"

Blinking in confusion, James nodded but said nothing. It was very strange for Lady Maude to be so interested in his conversation with another and indeed, James was not quite certain how he ought to respond.

"You are to dance with her, Lord Yardley?"

"Yes, Lady Maude. I have taken the cotillion and the country dance."

That sent sparks into her eyes as she narrowed them gently, her pinched lips turning white as she shot a hard look toward him. It was as if he had done something wrong and was quite unaware of it.

Or mayhap she is envious of the fact that you have taken two dances with Lady Essington but only one with her. Giving himself a slight shake, James cleared his throat. You are being ridiculous. Lady Maude disliked that I was disappointed with only the two dances she had remaining. It is not as though she wanted me to take them both!

The dance began, and without saying another word, James stepped forward and took Lady Maude's hand.

"Mayhap at the next ball, you will have a better opportunity to dance with me, Lord Yardley."

A little confused at her meaning, James frowned as he stepped back. “I am grateful for every dance, Lady Maude. It is difficult to make certain that I have even one with you!”

Her smile was tight, her eyes glittering. “Then perhaps you ought to try a little harder, Lord Yardley, for it is not as though I can refuse any gentleman that comes to greet me simply because you are seeking me out.”

James cleared his throat as he stepped back, going through the steps of the dance carefully. “Yes, of course, Lady Maude.” Is she encouraging me to pursue her with a little more eagerness? Does she wish me to prove myself? A surge of hope lifted his heart and he managed to smile. “I shall make sure to do precisely that.”

Chapter Three

“We shall have to make our way after them, Lady Essington. Do be careful.”

“Norah, please.” Swallowing against the tightness in her throat, she tried to smile as Lady Gillingham looked over at her. “If we are to be in such a situation, I would think that familiarity is expected!”

Lady Gillingham smiled, which knocked hard against the anxiety that currently flooded Norah’s frame. “But of course. Come. You need not look so fearful! All we are doing is stepping out into the gardens and seeing precisely what Lord Jennings is attempting, given that he has walked out with Miss Longford without her chaperone.”

Norah frowned. “We do not want to ruin the young lady’s reputation, however, surely?”

“No, indeed not! Oftentimes, a young lady will behave foolishly and I am certainly reluctant to place all such blame on a gentleman’s shoulders but, in this case, Lord Jennings is well known to be a gentleman eager to steal affection from whatever young lady he can!”

Norah’s stomach knotted. “I see.”

“Therefore, we will walk out discreetly and make certain that Miss Longford is quite safe and given every opportunity to escape his company without any grave difficulty.” Putting one hand on Norah’s arm, Lady Gillingham looked into her face, a seriousness pulling her brows low over her eyes. “In all things, you must be

discreet. Yes, I have been writing such news with a false name but that does not mean I have not had to be careful. If I was not, then someone might easily have connected what I wrote about with my presence there on a particular occasion.”

Nodding, Norah tried to smile but her nerves were stretched so thin, it was an impossibility. “I understand.”

“Good. Then come.”

Following after Lady Gillingham, she held one hand pressed lightly to her stomach in an attempt to push away some of her swirling anxiety. Noticing how Lady Gillingham walked quickly while at the same time keeping as close to the shadows in the room as she possibly could, Norah attempted to do the same. Yes, she garnered one or two glances from two particular gentlemen who were standing nearby but neither of them let their gazes linger for long. Their looks merely brushed over her and were gone, telling Norah she would not be remembered by either of them come the morning.

Stepping out into the gardens, Norah let the cool evening air brush against her hot cheeks as she took in a long breath. Lady Gillingham walked with the confidence of someone who had done such a thing many times before whilst Norah was busy looking in all directions, a little afraid that she would be noticed.

“I should return to my mother.”

The plaintive voice of someone Norah presumed to be Miss Longford reached Norah’s ears and, in an instant, her anxiety and fears shattered, being chased away by the horrifying realization that the young lady was being kept away from the ball by Lord Jennings.

Norah’s brows drew together as she followed after Lady Gillingham, who was

beckoning her to the left. The garden path became hidden in the darkness of the evening, although Norah could just make out the great wall of roses that stood just before them.

“There is no need, Miss Longford! Why do you look so frightened?”

Her stomach twisted and she made to step forward, only for Lady Gillingham to catch her hand and shake her head. A little confused as to why they would not intervene immediately, Norah forcibly held herself back, trusting Lady Gillingham’s judgment.

“I wish you to release my hand, Lord Jennings.” Miss Longford’s voice was wobbling. “I should not have allowed you to lead me out of doors.”

Lord Jennings laughed and Norah’s hand curled up tightly. “But now that you are outside with me, Miss Longford, why do we not take advantage of the solitude?”

“Because I do not wish to!” Miss Longford exclaimed aloud and Norah stepped forward, just as Lady Gillingham grabbed her wrist, tugging her back toward herself a little more. Anger piled into Norah’s veins but Lady Gillingham shook her head firmly, looped one arm through Norah’s, and then spoke in a loud voice.

“I am sure the roses were over here somewhere. I believe I can smell them!”

Norah blinked, confused by Lady Gillingham’s actions.

“Can you not smell them? They must be nearby. Oh, if only we had a lantern, then I am certain we would enjoy the sight of them as well as the smell.” Tugging Norah closer for a moment, Lady Gillingham whispered into her ear, helping her to understand.

“We cannot simply make ourselves known. It is a little too risky, for then Miss

Longford would be afraid that we would ruin her, and Lord Jennings would know of our faces. It is best he does not know he has been overheard.”

“But Miss Longford –”

“Will have returned to the ballroom, I am sure. Lord Jennings will have been startled and allowed her free. We can go to make certain very soon.”

A little more satisfied, Norah, nodded. Walking a little more quickly alongside Lady Gillingham, she let out a quiet exclamation of satisfaction.

“Ah, here we are.”

“Of course. How lovely they must be in the daylight.”

They continued in this vein for a few more moments before Lady Gillingham suggested that they walk back to the ball. Norah tried not to hurry her steps as they returned, letting out a breath of relief as she saw Miss Longford now standing by her mother – although her mother was speaking rapidly and with fierce anger in her eyes that could not be mistaken for anything else. Evidently, she had been upset with her daughter’s absence.

“Well done, Norah. You have done very well.”

“I am only sorry that we did not say anything to Lord Jennings. I am sure he would have been most embarrassed.”

Lady Gillingham laughed softly and shook her head. “You are mistaken in that, I am afraid. He would have merely laughed and then continued with whichever young lady he considered to be of interest to him next! However, with our article, the ton will know of his actions and will be very wary when it comes to permitting him

conversation and company with their daughters or sisters.”

This sent a warm wave of satisfaction over Norah’s heart and she smiled. “I find myself a good deal of contentment with that, Lady Gillingham.”

“And we do not need to inform anyone of the young lady’s name nor her part in all of this.”

Norah nodded. “I quite agree. Miss Longford was a little foolish to depart with him as she did but I do not think she thought he would lead her out of doors.”

“And once one is out-of-doors, it can be very difficult to return. Without a chaperone or companion, eyebrows could be raised or even a lady walking alone could be easily noticed. This is the best way for us to make certain that Lord Jennings does not continue to behave in such a manner again.”

With a newfound sense of resolve, Norah drew in a long breath, set her shoulders, and spread her hands. “Then I must ask when we are to write this piece, Lady Gillingham, for I find myself very eager indeed!”

Lady Gillingham laughed, although her eyes were bright with both happiness and hope. “Tomorrow?” she asked, as Norah smiled her agreement. “I shall call upon you as early as is convenient.”

“As early as you wish, Lady Gillingham,” Norah replied, firmly. “I find myself very eager to write of this just as soon as we are able.”

Lady Gillingham smiled. “I am very glad to hear it,” she answered warmly. “Then I shall come tomorrow to write with you, as early as I can manage.”

Looking down at the paper, Norah smiled, sighed, and set her quill down. “There. It

is done.”

She tried to ignore the four other scrunched-up pieces of paper that she had thrown across her writing desk as Lady Gillingham laughed and shook her head at Norah’s determination to write both distinctly and with as much clarity as she could manage.

“You have done very well, Norah. I think this is an excellent piece.”

Norah wrinkled her nose as she read over it again one final time. “I am certain I shall become a little more adept with every piece I write.”

“This is quite perfect, just as it is, I assure you.” Lady Gillingham’s hand settled on Norah’s arm. “For whatever reason, I could tell that you were the right person to take over this from me. I think this has proven to me that I was quite correct!”

Norah smiled, pulling her eyes away from the paper for if she read it again, she was quite sure she would find something to be displeased about and would attempt to write it out for what would be the fifth time! “I thank you.”

“Now, you are to fold it up and seal it just as you usually would, although I would not press your seal into the wax.”

“Oh?”

“It is to make certain that no one can identify your letter,” Lady Gillingham explained. “If it is known that you are sending special letters to the newspaper, then the ton would be most intrigued and then greatly displeased, I should think. I would also advise sending a different boy with your letter each time or paying one of the ragamuffins on the street to take it for you. They are easily trusted so long as you withhold the coin until after they have returned from their errand.”

Norah took careful note of each of these suggestions in her mind so that she would not forget them. The severity of what it would mean should she be discovered suddenly thrust itself upon her shoulders and she caught her breath, looking down at the letter as though for the first time.

“Are you quite all right?”

The memory of Lord Jennings coercing the young lady to stay with him rather than returning her to the ballroom as she had requested burned in Norah’s mind.

“Yes, I am quite all right.” Setting her jaw, she folded up the letter and then dripped a little hot wax onto the fold. “Thank you for all of your advice, Lady Gillingham. I do hope I can do just as well as you have done.”

“I am sure you will do even better,” came the reply. “Come, let us have your letter sent, and come the morrow, you will find your first article written in the London Chronicle Society pages – and all of London will know that Lord Jennings is not a gentleman to be trusted.”

Norah set her shoulders and rose to her feet, making her way across the room so that she might ring the bell. “Indeed,” she replied, emphatically. “This is for a good purpose and I am very glad indeed to have been given the opportunity to do so.”

Walking through the park, Norah took in a deep breath and smiled to herself. After her confusion over whether or not she ought to take on the task of writing as Mrs. Fullerton, she was now much more at peace. Her first article had been printed in the newspaper only yesterday, and she was very pleased with it. Whether or not the ton would find it so enjoyable was quite another thing, however, but as yet, Norah had not had an opportunity to speak to anyone.

Keeping her face tilted away from the sun, Norah smiled and nodded at two older

ladies who walked past her, arm in arm. They did not stop to converse given that they were already deep in conversation but Norah did not mind. She was quite contented to walk alone.

There is such freedom in walking so. The thought made her smile all the more. When she had been in London as a debutante, there had barely been a moment when she was allowed to be alone – and she certainly never would have been permitted to walk in the park without a chaperone! Her mother had been the very best of ladies, making certain that Norah was always presented properly and that there was never anything to be questioned about her. That had been just as Norah had expected but there had come with it a sense of restriction that she had sometimes struggled against. Her whole life had been set out for her. Her father had decided she was to wed his old friend, Lord Essington, and despite Norah's protests – and her mother's upset – the marriage had gone ahead. She had never really had an opportunity to build friendships with other young ladies, to be courted by the various gentlemen of the ton nor found any real enjoyment from the Season. It had all been outside of her control.

But now, there was nothing to prevent her from doing what she wished whenever she wished to do it! The smile on her face broadened as she tipped her head back toward the sunshine, heedless as to the effect it might have on her skin or the dangers of freckles appearing. No longer did she have to worry about keeping her skin pale and without blemish! Now all that concerned her was whether or not she would have enough coin to keep her in comfort for the remainder of the year – but with her writings for the newspaper, Norah had very little to concern herself in that regard any longer.

“Good afternoon, Lady Essington! You look to be in fine spirits this morning.”

Norah stopped abruptly, having been so lost in thought that she had not noticed a lady and her two daughters approaching. Quickly trying to recall their names having only been introduced to them last evening, Norah smiled brightly whilst her mind flung

itself around in an attempt to remember who they were.

“Good afternoon. Yes, you find me in excellent spirits this morning, Lady Woodley.” A flood of relief coursed through her veins, letting her smile grow all the more. Now all I need to do is recall the names of her daughters!

“I am very glad. My two girls are a little fatigued after last evening but I have warned them that a thing is to be expected!”

“Indeed it is.” Norah gave them both a warm smile and the two young ladies smiled back at her, although she did note the light blue smudges under their eyes. “I always think that if one can look back on an evening with delight then it is worth the weariness that comes the following morning!”

The two girls exchanged a glance and then let out a giggle which made their mother smile.

“You are very good to say so, Lady Essington. Although did you hear the news about Lord Jennings?” Her smile faded and her eyes rounded as she leaned closer to Norah, as if she were to impart a very great secret. “It was in the society pages this morning.”

Norah, who obviously knew everything that had been said of Lord Jennings given that she had been the only one to witness it, kept her face impassive. “Is there something wrong?”

“Oh yes, indeed, Lady Essington! I have told both my girls that they are to stay far from him and I would beg for you to do the same. There is no saying which sort of young lady he might pursue next – and a widowed lady of the ton such as yourself might well be a consideration!”

Reminding herself that she was to pretend she did not know anything to do with Lord

Jennings, Norah widened her eyes slightly. “Is Lord Jennings not a respectable gentleman, then?”

“He attempted to ruin the reputation of...some young lady. I do not know her name but the writer was very clear in what she stated about the gentleman.”

“Goodness!” Norah pressed one hand to her heart and Lady Woodley shook her head in the most solemn fashion. “And can such a writer be trusted?” This was her opportunity to make certain that ‘Mrs. Fullerton’ had a trustworthy reputation and from the way Lady Woodley was nodding fervently, it seemed that it was so.

“Mrs. Fullerton – whoever she may be, for there is no such lady in society – has written time and again about such things and has always been proven correct. I said to both my girls that they are not to speak to Lord Jennings and certainly should never accept a dance from him. I am horrified to hear he would not let that young lady free so she might return to her chaperone, just as she ought! What sort of despicable gentleman must he be?”

Norah nodded fervently, seeing the two young ladies now glancing at each other. There was a slight paleness to their cheeks which she had not noticed before, but now Norah wondered if it came from the fierceness of their mother’s determination for them not to go near to Lord Jennings.

“I am sure you will both stay far from Lord Jennings.” Smiling as warmly as she could, Norah almost dropped with relief when their title flew into her mind. “Miss Steepleton and Miss Steepleton,” she looked at them each in turn, “you must be on your guard. It is a little disheartening to hear, certainly, but there are more gentlemen of Lord Jennings’s ilk within London. You must be always very careful indeed.”

They both promised they would do so as they nodded, their eyes a little wider than before. Norah did not regret speaking so bluntly. It would be good for them to think

about what she had said and take it to heart.

“Make sure you heed Lady Essington.” Lady Woodley’s finger waggled up and down and both her daughters nodded fervently again. “Thank you, Lady Essington. You have been very helpful.”

In more ways than you could know. Norah thanked them and took her leave, her smile even brighter than before. To know she had done some good in writing her article brought her a great sense of purpose and joy and for that, she was very grateful indeed. With this newfound freedom and intention, Norah considered that the remainder of the Season would go very well indeed.

Chapter Four

“Did you hear the news about Lord Jennings?”

James looked up from his newspaper as Lord Huntsford strode into his study, unannounced and uninvited. “Good morning, Huntsford,” he replied, mildly. “Is there a reason you have come striding in like this? Is there something of great importance that I have missed thus far?”

“If you are reading the newspaper, then I am astonished that you seem to have no awareness as to what I am speaking of!”

James lifted one eyebrow. “In case you had forgotten, I am not a gentleman inclined toward reading the society papers.”

Lord Huntsford rolled his eyes and sat down heavily in a chair. “But how will you know the goings-on in the ton if you do not read them?”

“Perhaps I do not need to know the ‘goings-on’, as you say,” James replied, folding up the newspaper and setting it down in a most pointed manner. “It is not as though they are of any benefit to me.”

Shaking his head, Lord Huntsford lifted his chin. “In that regard, you are quite mistaken. They are of great benefit.”

James sighed and spread out his hands on either side. “I do not need to know what rumors the gossip mongers are spreading throughout London. I consider the writer of

such things to be the very worst of such people.”

“Ah, but again, you are mistaken! Mrs. Fullerton – for that is the name of the person writing the society column – has only ever written the truth.”

“I find that very difficult to believe.”

Lord Huntsford held up one hand, ticking off his fingers with the other. “Lord Newgate was found to be gambling away almost every penny he had, Lord and Lady Highforth were pushed from society after the news of their thefts was revealed in that society column. Lord Quinsley’s penchant for stealing young ladies away and then threatening them thereafter so that they remained silent was also revealed in the paper, as was Lord Heseltine’s less than gentlemanly behavior toward a recently married young lady.”

Grimacing, James tilted his head, trying to find something to argue with in response to all that Lord Huntsford had said but found that there was nothing he could say.

“And now we hear about Lord Jennings!”

Trying to recall the gentleman, it took James a moment to respond. “Lord Jennings has done something, I presume? Something that has been written about in the society papers?”

Lord Huntsford nodded gravely, rose from his chair, and went to pour himself a brandy. “Indeed. It seems that he was seen leading a reluctant young lady out of doors during the most recent ball – and when the lady requested to be returned to her mother, the gentleman refused and attempted to press his affections onto her.”

A ball of anger began to roll around in James’ stomach and he tensed his jaw. “Then he is no gentleman at all.”

“I would quite agree.”

“And does the writer identify the lady in question?”

Lord Huntsford shook his head and then took a sip of his brandy. “The lady does not tend to inform the ton of those who have been ill-used by the hands of others.”

“That is good, I suppose,” James replied, begrudgingly. “Regardless, I do not care to read the society papers. It would only disgust me further, I am sure. I do not have any wish to hear of how inappropriately in society others have chosen to behave.”

“But it should inform you, should it not?” Lord Huntsford’s brows lowered over his eyes. “It is important now that we do not seek out Lord Jennings’s acquaintance and be sure to turn from him should he wish to engage us in conversation!”

James shrugged. “But given that you are so eager to read such things, I have no need to do so for you will guide me through it all, I am sure.”

Lord Huntsford opened his mouth and then closed it again, his mouth tugging to one side. “I find you very strange indeed, old boy.”

“That is quite all right,” James replied, easily. “You like to delve into the whispers and the gossip of society, whereas I do not. In that regard we are different but that suits me very well indeed.”

“Hmph.” Lord Huntsford took a sip of his brandy, drew in a long breath, and then changed the subject entirely. “And how was your dance with Lady Maude? You have not spoken of it to me as yet.”

“It was....” James frowned. “It was a little strange, I confess.”

“Strange?”

He nodded. “Lady Maude asked me about Lady Essington. I believe she saw us conversing.”

Lord Huntsford’s eyes rounded. “Indeed. That is interesting.”

“I have wondered if your idea of showing her a little less interest than I have been at present is a wise idea.” Seeing the smile begin to pull at Lord Huntsford’s mouth, James waved a hand. “Yes, you may applaud yourself for such a suggestion, I will confess it may well turn out to be a very good idea.”

Chuckling, Lord Huntsford shrugged. “You are very welcome. So you say that she disliked your interest in Lady Essington?”

“It appeared to be so. I saw a flash in her eyes when she discovered I was to dance with the lady twice.”

Lord Huntsford tilted his head. “And you do not think that you might find Lady Essington equally as lovely as Lady Maude?”

Hesitating, James considered this for a few moments. Lady Essington was a very beautiful creature but his intention was still toward Lady Maude. “I confess I am still caught up with Lady Maude.”

“That is only because you are frustrated that she has failed to show you even the slightest bit of interest. It is your pride that encourages you to draw closer to the lady, rather than your heart.”

James snorted, ignoring the stab of conscience that came with his friend’s words. “That is nonsense. I think very highly of Lady Maude. There have been times I have

thought of her on my arm, as my wife, as well you know.”

“Again, that is simply due to your pride!” Lord Huntsford flung up his hands and James blinked in surprise at the fierceness in his friend’s expression. “In thinking of her as your wife, you consider only what it might be to have such a pretty lady on your arm, what the ton would think of you both, and just how favored you would seem. You never mention anything of her wit, her charm, her laughter or conversation.”

“I have offered plenty of compliments –”

“All to do with her beauty,” his friend interrupted. “Tell me, what make you of her conversation? What are some of her interests?”

James took a moment to try and reply, aware of the heat that rose in his chest and began to creep up into his neck and face. Lord Huntsford was quite right, it seemed, but James did not want to admit it, not even to himself.

“I have not had an opportunity to speak to her at length about any of her particular interests or the like, so it is not at all a fair question.”

Lord Huntsford shook his head. “You are my friend and have been for some time. I saw this interest in Lady Maude at the end of last Season but did not think it would be renewed with such fervency this Season also.”

“It has only been a few weeks!” James protested, his stomach twisting as he fought against the awareness that what his friend had said held a good deal of truth. “I have struggled to converse with her, given that she is so often surrounded by practically every other gentleman in London, and –”

“And yet you wish to be the one she looks to,” Lord Huntsford interrupted. “Is that

not so? You want to be the gentleman that finally secures her interest. You may tell me she is beautiful, that she is the most perfect creature you have ever seen and you may state that you would even consider matrimony but that, my dear fellow, comes only from your own injured pride that, as yet, she has not shown you any particular favor. It would make you stand out from the other titled gentlemen of the ton if she chose you, would it not? But you have very little knowledge of her character and speak only of her beauty.”

Sweat broke out across James’ forehead. He had never once heard Lord Huntsford speak with such vehemence before, not when it came to Lady Maude but the truth of his words could not be ignored. James swallowed hard against the tightness in his throat, still silently rebelling against all that Lord Huntsford had said. He did care about more than Lady Maude’s beauty and certainly was not attracted to her only by his pride...wasn’t he? I have never considered myself an arrogant gentleman but that does not mean my pride cannot still take a hold of me.

“Forgive me, old friend.”

Lord Huntsford rubbed one hand over his face and then threw back the remains of what was now his second brandy. “I have spoken a little too harshly, I think.”

James rose from his seat as Lord Huntsford made his way toward the door. “You need not leave. I am not insulted nor angry.”

Lord Huntsford’s smile was thin. “That is very good of you given the tirade that I have only just unleashed but I think it best I take my leave.”

More than a little confused, James bid his friend farewell and, as the door was closed behind him, sat back down hard on his chair.

“Good gracious.”

His words echoed around the room and he rose suddenly, making his way across the room and toward the window. Seeing Lord Huntsford walk out onto the street, James' brows rose in surprise as Lord Huntsford waved one hand toward his coachman and then began to stride down the street. Evidently, he had decided not to take his carriage but was, for whatever reason, walking back to his townhouse.

James dropped his shoulders, frowning hard as he did so. He had never seen Lord Huntsford behave in such a manner and the fact that he had been somewhat critical of James' behavior meant that he had a good deal to think on.

"It is true that ever since I saw Lady Maude, I have wanted to pursue her," he mumbled to himself, wandering back to his study desk and sitting down heavily on the chair beside it. "But there can be nothing wrong with my desire to...."

My desire for what?

His frown grew and he rubbed at the spot between his eyebrows as tension began to grow there. He had always said that he would consider matrimony when it came to Lady Maude, but was that the truth of it? Would he really offer her his hand should she begin to look on him with interest?

A scratch at the door caught his attention and James called for the servant to enter, although his dark expression still lingered.

"My lord, will you require the carriage this afternoon?"

Blinking, James looked back at his butler. "This afternoon?"

His man nodded, although his face remained impassive. "Yes, my lord. You stated last evening that you wished to make afternoon calls and would require the carriage."

“Oh.” James’ frown grew, attempting to recall such a conversation and finding that he struggled to remember what he had said. “Afternoon calls.”

“Yes, my lord. I will send the men to get the carriage prepared for you at once, should you wish it?”

He sighed and rubbed at his forehead. “Yes, I should like the carriage. I will be making some afternoon calls.” A sudden flare of memory reminded him that after he had come home last evening, he had declared to his somewhat fatigued butler that his intentions last was to call on Lady Maude during the following afternoon - but now, after his discussion with Lord Huntsford, he suddenly felt uncertain and unsure. “Within the hour, if you please.”

The butler nodded and withdrew, leaving James in a state of confusion. It would not be wrong for him to call upon Lady Maude but it might not be wise, not until he had considered at length what Lord Huntsford had said.

But she might be waiting for you, a small voice said, as James grimaced. Did you tell her that you would call on her today? If you did, then she will wonder why you have not appeared.

Given that he could not remember whether or not he had said such a thing, James considered it best to call on her regardless. Yes, Lord Huntsford’s words held a good deal of weight but he would allow himself time to consider them later.

Lady Maude would be waiting.

“Good afternoon, Lord Yardley.”

Lady Maude rose from her chair and curtsied beautifully, elegance and grace intertwining around her.

“Good afternoon, Lady Maude.” James bowed but had to raise his voice to be heard over the conversations of three other gentlemen who were present in the room. “Forgive me, I do not mean to intrude.”

She smiled and waved a dismissive hand. “I am afraid, Lord Yardley, that you will simply have to endure the presence of other gentlemen who have come to call. There are so many of them eager to spend a few minutes in my company that I simply must entertain them for a short while.”

“I see.” James’ spirits sank to his toes as he glanced around the room, taking in the expressions of the other gentlemen and seeing that there was not a smile on a single face. Two of them were talking to each other with the third now in conversation with Lady Burnley, who was mother to Lady Maude. James had greeted her first when he entered the room but had thought it a little strange to be shown in to see the lady when she already had other callers.

The reason for such now became apparent. Evidently, Lady Maude had a good many gentlemen callers and she wanted to make certain that none were sent away from her company. In granting them all an opportunity to converse with her for a short time – only for a few seconds, it appeared – Lady Maude seemed to be of the opinion that it would send every gentleman back to his abode most contented.

James was not to be one such gentleman.

“I think I shall return to call another afternoon, Lady Maude.” He gave her a small, tight smile. “I shall not be able to converse with you at all, I fear and should not like to interrupt any of your other callers.”

Lady Maude’s expression changed, her eyes narrowing slightly. “Come now, Lord Yardley, there is no need for that.”

“You must understand, Lady Maude, that I came to call in the hope of speaking with you without the interruption of any other, as there always is someone around on other occasions.” The desire to be alone in her company was a strong one and James allowed himself to acknowledge it whilst, at the same time, expressing it to Lady Maude. Perhaps then, she might become aware of his eagerness and understand there was a deeper desire for her company than what any other gentleman might offer.

A line grew between Lady Maude’s eyes as her eyebrows drew together. “It seems that you are a gentleman who is most ungrateful, Lord Yardley. You appeared to be in a similar frame when you came to seek out my dance card at the ball. Are you now expressing a similar discontent?”

A flush of shame began to rise in James’ chest but he pushed it down hard as he lifted his chin slightly.

“I do not think there is anything wrong in expressing a desire to be your singular companion for a short while, Lady Maude.”

She let out a sparkling laugh as though the idea itself was ridiculous but James’ jaw tightened, his gut twisting hard.

“That is a somewhat fanciful desire, Lord Yardley.” She spread her hands. “Can you not see that I am a little overcome with gentlemen callers? To set aside time for each one individually would take more time than I am blessed with at present.”

Recalling all that Lord Huntsford had said, James took in a slow breath and allowed himself a few moments consideration. “You are quite correct,” he stated firmly, seeing how Lady Maude’s smile began to fade. “That is a fanciful notion and, therefore, I should mayhap take my leave.”

The lady’s eyes widened. “Take your leave?”

He nodded. "If I cannot have some time with you in conversation without the presence of others, then it would be best for me to make my other calls without further delay. I am sure you will have many other gentlemen to command your attention. Good afternoon, Lady Maude. I bid you farewell."

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Chapter Five

“It seems as though Lord Jennings is quite absent from London.”

Norah gave her acquaintance a small smile. “That is a relief, I suppose.”

“Oh, a very great relief!” Lady Adlay replied, looping her arm through Norah’s as they walked through Lord Baxter’s drawing room and made their way to the door. “Lord Jennings is a gentleman who is entirely disinclined toward decent behavior and I have always been loath to remain in his company. I am only glad now that the ton sees the truth of his character.”

Norah smiled to herself, a swell of satisfaction in her heart. That was only her first article and yet the secret she had revealed had brought great relief to many. That was precisely what she intended to do for her next piece, although what it was to be, Norah did not yet know.

“There is Lady Maude.” A slight intonation in Lady Adlay’s voice caught Norah’s attention and she looked at her friend in surprise. Lady Adlay smiled back at her, catching her look. “You have not been introduced to her, then?”

“No, I have not.”

Lady Adlay opened her mouth, then closed it again with a snap, shaking her head as she did so. “I shall introduce you rather than say anything about the lady in question. You may make up your mind about her, I think.”

Willing to accept this, Norah walked alongside Lady Adlay to where the young lady stood. Her first impression was that Lady Maude was a willowy young lady who had a striking appearance. Her figure was shapely, her rosebud lips, alabaster skin, and fine eyes sure to capture the attention of almost every London gentleman. She was, of course, a diamond of the first water and from the slightly cool smile on her lips, Norah was quite certain that the lady was all too aware of just how well she appeared.

“Lady Maude, good afternoon.” Lady Adlay turned to Norah. “Permit me to introduce Lady Essington to you. Lady Essington, Lady Maude, daughter to the Earl of Burnley.”

“Very pleased to make your acquaintance.” Norah dropped into a curtsy and was a little surprised when the young lady only bobbed a very hasty curtsy in return, her eyes drifting away from Norah’s after only a few seconds.

“And yours, of course.” She waved a hand. “And my dear friend, Miss Patterson.” Lady Maude’s disinterest appeared more than evident, particularly when she made no attempt to further the conversation. Once Norah had greeted Miss Patterson – who remained silent and with a slightly bowed head as though she were in the presence of royalty and did not want to speak until she was spoken to – a silence grew between Norah and Lady Maude. Astonishment gave way to frustration at the lady’s lack of consideration and Norah threw a glance toward Lady Adlay, who merely arched one eyebrow in return.

“And are you enjoying the Season?” Struggling to find something to say that might encourage conversation, Norah waited for Lady Maude to respond, only for her to turn a little more to her left, opening her fan and fluttering it gently in front of her eyes.

“Good afternoon, Lady Maude.”

Norah turned a little more, taking in that there were not one but three gentlemen taking turns to bow toward the lady. Her eyes traveled back to the lady in question and saw, much to her surprise, that there was a warm smile on her lips and that her eyes had brightened considerably.

“Evidently, we are unworthy of Lady Maude’s attention,” Lady Adlay murmured in her ear and Norah rolled her eyes, turning back to her friend as Lady Maude began to converse with the first of the three gentlemen in a much more animated fashion than how she had spoken briefly to Norah. “The lady is inclined only toward gentlemen.”

That is something I could write on, is it not?

The moment the thought entered her mind, Norah frowned hard and shook it away. Whilst she might want to write about Lady Maude’s lack of consideration and appalling lack of gentility, that was not something that would be of any use to the ton. It would only bring shame to Lady Maude and perhaps a little mockery which, whilst she might do a great deal to improve the lady’s character, was not the purpose of the newspaper articles. Besides, Norah reasoned, she would do so only because she had been injured by the lady’s poor behavior rather than for any other reason and that was no good at all.

“You look as I feel.”

Norah laughed as Lady Adlay smiled. “I confess I was very much surprised by her manner toward me.”

“Ah, but it is so very different when there are gentlemen close by,” came the reply. “My husband does not think well of her nor her mother at all, I confess it, and I quite understand his reasoning.”

Norah nodded, giving her friend a wry smile. “I do not think that I will seek out her

again.”

“That would be most wise.” Laughing ruefully, Lady Adlay smiled up at her friend. “Come, there must be plenty of others that we can converse with.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Norah noticed two ladies in deep conversation, with one of them looking directly across toward a gentleman that, as yet, Norah did not know. Her interest piqued, she turned her steps deftly toward them but did so in as nonchalant a manner as she could so that Lady Adlay would not notice.

“You must promise me that anyone you introduce me to next will not speak to me as Lady Maude has done!”

Lady Adlay laughed and, much to Norah’s relief, gestured to the very gentleman the two ladies were looking at with such distinct glances. “Come.”

Norah smiled and allowed Lady Adlay not only to interrupt the gentleman’s conversation but to then introduce her first to him and then to the lady and gentleman he had been conversing with. All the while, however, she tried to overhear what was being said just over her shoulder.

“I do apologize for interrupting your conversation, Lord Rutledge. It was quite my fault for I have begged Lady Adlay to introduce me to some new acquaintances since I am now returned to London.”

“But of course.” Lord Rutledge was a well-looking gentleman, with sharp eyes that glinted in a somewhat dangerous fashion whenever he smiled. Norah had no doubt that many young ladies of the ton would think him very handsome indeed! “And tell me, Lady Essington, is your time in London thus far all as you hoped it would be?”

She smiled. “It has been much more so, I confess. I was not certain of what my time

in London would be given that I am now a widowed lady but thus far, I have found myself accepted by the ton and have had a very enjoyable fortnight.”

“And you will be spending the remaining months in London also?” the lady asked, and Norah nodded. Lady Adlay began to speak then and the conversation began to flow, allowing Norah to take a small step backward, turning slightly.

“Why will he not look at me? He knows I am here but he will not entertain my company!”

The other lady murmured something Norah could not make out, straining to hear what was said.

“I am so very troubled.”

The second lady spoke with a little more firmness now. “If he asked for your hand, then you are engaged.”

A cold hand grasped Norah’s heart. Was it Lord Rutledge that they spoke of?

“He did that very thing only a sennight ago but since then, I have seen him in company with many and he has not announced it to either the ton or even to my father!”

“Has he asked you to keep it secret?”

Again, there came a murmur that Norah did not understand, only to catch the end of the first lady’s sentence. “I ought not to have told you but I could not help –”

“I am sure many gentlemen will be glad to make your acquaintance, Lady Essington. You will not lack for partners when it comes to the next ball!”

Being tugged back into the conversation, Norah forced a laugh, hoping that her response would make sense given that she had not been listening to what they had said. “I must hope I remember how to dance all the steps, Lord Rutledge!” Thankfully, he laughed in response and she let out a slow breath of relief.

“I would be glad to step out with you, Lady Essington.”

“Oh, that is most kind.” She smiled warmly. “So long as I do not pull you from anyone of importance, that is.”

For a moment, Lord Rutledge frowned, only for his expression to clear as he understood what she meant.

“Oh, indeed, you would not be doing so. I have no particular connections at present.”

From behind her, Norah heard a sudden gasp but she forced herself not to turn around, keeping her smile pinned. “Thank you, Lord Rutledge. I am looking forward to the next ball already.”

“Good evening, Lady Essington.”

Norah curtsied. “Good evening, Lord Yardley.” Glad she had remembered his name, she smiled at him and received a broad one in return.

“I do hope you are inclined toward dancing this evening, Lady Essington?”

“I am indeed.” Slipping off her dance card, she handed it to him, looking about at the crowd of people as she did so. “Your friend is not with you this evening, then?”

He glanced up at her. “Lord Huntsford? Yes, he should be arriving presently. Perhaps he is a little tardy.” His jaw worked for a moment as his gaze drifted back down to

her dance card. "I believe he is a little upset after what was in the society papers yesterday."

The smile began to fade from Norah's face as she cleared her throat, wondering what it was that he meant. The article she had written some three days ago had only been in the newspaper this morning but why Lord Huntsford should be upset by it, she did not know.

"I am sorry to hear that."

"You have, no doubt, read the piece?" His eyes shifted to hers once more as he returned her dance card. "I am not inclined to do so for I find such articles to be somewhat distasteful, but in this case, it is all the more so, since what is written is nothing more than a lie."

A heavy weight dropped into Norah's stomach and she froze, looking back at him with slightly widened eyes. "Are you quite certain, Lord Yardley?"

"Certain? I am more than certain. That gentleman was not engaged. Lord Huntsford is a very close friend and would have known if such a thing was true. All that has occurred is that a gentleman of good character has now had his reputation severely damaged by the lies of some cruel creature who, for his or her reasons, sought to injure Lord Rutledge."

Norah blinked rapidly, not quite certain what to say in response to this. Her heart was beating madly, suddenly afraid she had made a grave mistake.

"But there is no need for me to linger on the subject, Lady Essington. Forgive me." His smile was present but lacking any real warmth. "Will the country dance and cotillion suffice?"

She nodded, trying to match her smile with his. “But of course, Lord Yardley, I thank you. I do hope that Lord Huntsford is not kept too long.” Seeing a young lady turning her head to look toward both herself and Lord Yardley, Norah gave him a slightly wry smile. “It seems that you have an eager young lady searching for your attention, Lord Yardley.” Seeing the lady’s flickering glance again, Norah’s heart suddenly twisted as she realized it was none other than Lady Maude. “I should not keep you.”

Lord Yardley looked over his shoulder and then, much to Norah’s surprise, grimaced.

“I believe that Lady Maude already has more than enough company at present,” he told her, turning his back toward her a little more, and instead fixing his gaze directly on Norah. “I am more than contented to talk with you.”

A sudden swirl of warmth ran through Norah’s frame, her breath hitching as she looked into Lord Yardley’s eyes. Have they always been so very blue? Norah had only seen the sea once in her life but the storm in his eyes reminded her of that day. His dark hair was swept back to one side and he was impeccably dressed, but until this moment, Norah had only considered him to be just as any other gentlemen of the ton . Now, however, something in her had shifted dramatically, to the point that her hands were a little clammy, her heart was beating a good deal more quickly and she was finding it very difficult indeed to know what was best now to say. After only one introduction to Lady Maude, Norah had known her to be a diamond of the first water and had fully expected almost every gentleman in London to pursue her. But now for Lord Yardley to seek out her company when Lady Maude was so clearly eager for his attention was quite remarkable and, if she were honest, made her rather gratified.

“And now that I have said so, it seems we are to struggle in conversation, Lady Essington.” An easy smile pulled at Lord Yardley’s lips and Norah could not help but laugh, which, in turn, removed some of the tension that had flooded her.

“Indeed. I apologize. I confess I am a little surprised!”

“Why should you be surprised? You surely could not think that I would simply turn from you to speak to another?”

His words brought another flush of warmth to Norah’s heart and this time, it heated her cheeks also and made her blush. “You are very kind to say such a thing, Lord Yardley. I have only just been introduced to Lady Maude and I am all too aware of her standing in society compared to my own!”

Lord Yardley did not laugh but instead, his lips tugged to one side and his eyes darted away as he clasped his hands behind his back as though he were a little uncomfortable with what she had said. A little nonplussed, Norah tried to think of what she might say next to bring them back into an easy conversation, only for someone to whirl past, coming to stand just a little in front of her as though they had not seen her at all.

“It is true!”

The words were uttered explosively and Norah saw Lord Yardley reel back, his eyes wide.

“I cannot believe it!”

Norah cleared her throat delicately and the other gentleman turned at once, his eyes wide.

“Good gracious.” Squeezing his eyes closed, he threw himself into a bow which Norah returned with a curtsy. “I must beg your apology, Lady Essington. I have heard something which has quite taken my attention and I thought –”

“Is this regarding Lord Rutledge?” she asked, as Lord Huntsford’s eyes widened. “Lord Yardley has been informing of what was in the society papers today. He stated

that you were a little distressed upon reading such a thing.” A faint hope began to burn in her heart that she had not made a grave mistake, looking at Lord Huntsford carefully.

“If I am to be blunt, Lady Essington, I was upset because I believed it to be untrue. However, it now seems that Lord Rutledge did propose to a young lady of the ton – although we do not know her name for it was not included – and now must decide what he is to do by way of making amends.”

Relief sank into Norah’s heart and she let out a sigh, passing one hand over her eyes. “Goodness.”

“I do apologize for interrupting you, however.”

When Norah dropped her hand, she saw Lord Yardley shaking his head. “It seems I was mistaken, although I find that very difficult indeed to accept,” he murmured. Norah studied him closely, seeing the faint darkness begin to spread across his expression. “I must say I am surprised – and disappointed.”

Norah spread her hands. “But it is good that the young lady in question will not continue to be ill-treated,” she stated as Lord Yardley and Lord Huntsford nodded gravely. “I am sorry you are upset about your friend, however. That is trying, indeed.”

Lord Huntsford smiled tightly but stepped back. “But of course. I should not have interrupted you, however, and I thank you for being so very gracious. Please, do continue with your conversation.”

The announcement of the next dance came just as Norah was about to state she did not need him to depart and that there was no requirement for him to do so. Lord Yardley cleared his throat, bowed, and then extended a hand.

“Our dance, Lady Essington,” he said, although his smile was not as warm as she might have hoped. “Come. Let us take to the floor and forget this despondency! I am certain that the moment the music begins, we shall quite forget all of it.”

And I have every certainty that I will be entirely unable to do so, Norah thought to herself, before accepting his hand and allowing him to lead her onto the floor.

Chapter Six

Lady Essington is rather lovely.

The thought came unbidden and James started in surprise, jerking his eyes away from the lady in question and turning them to the opposite side of the room. What am I doing?

It had been around a month since he had first been introduced to Lady Essington and his opinion of her had only grown since that first meeting. Whilst being very fair of face, he found her conversation appealing and her laughter always made him smile. When they danced, he found he thought of nothing and nobody else – although, at other times, Lady Maude still clung to his mind.

James frowned hard and rubbed the spot between his eyebrows. He was not a man inclined toward confusion but yet he was, at present, utterly astonished at his thoughts and considerations. On the one hand, he was still very much drawn to Lady Maude, but on the other, he found himself interested in lingering in Lady Essington's company. The former, however, also had the added confusion of Lord Huntsford's remarks which, even some weeks later, still had not left James. Lady Maude had not often been in his company of late, but that was not for a lack of trying on James' part. She was, as she always seemed to be, caught up with the company of many other gentlemen who were all vying for her attention.

And yet I still find myself eager to be the sole object of her attention.

Sighing, James dropped his hand to his side and shook his head to himself. He was

being quite ridiculous.

“You look perturbed, my dear friend.”

“And that is no thanks to you,” James replied, as Lord Huntsford’s brows shot up. “I am once again thinking of Lady Maude and wondering whether or not things are as you have suggested.”

Lord Huntsford grinned. “That is interesting, certainly. I always considered that you would ignore such remarks from me.”

James lifted one eyebrow, his mouth pulling to one side. “How could I forget the fervency with which you last spoke?” he asked, as Lord Huntsford’s gaze suddenly dropped to the floor. “I have never heard you speak in such a way and the words have lingered long with me.”

“Ah.” Lord Huntsford cleared his throat and looked away from James for a moment. “I did speak rather forcefully, I suppose, but that is only because my frustrations have grown to the point that I could not contain myself any further.”

“Frustrations? I always thought you understood my eagerness for Lady Maude’s company?”

“I do understand it – possibly more than you might be aware of it,” came the reply. “That is why I expressed myself in such a way because I believe that it is solely your pride that seeks Lady Maude’s company. There would be a great accolade, would it not, to be the gentleman that she decides upon?” He held out one hand as though he knew the protest that James would make. “And even if you were eager to wed her, you would do so solely for that purpose rather than because you had any genuine affection for her. I believe, Yardley, you see her only in her perfection because she is a diamond of the first water, rather than allowing yourself to see any of her flaws.”

“In short, you believe I am obsessed with her beauty rather than her character.”

“And what it would feel like for you to have her so near to you.”

Nodding slowly, James chewed on his bottom lip. “I understand your meaning. I have not been as eager in my attempts to converse with her or praying for an opportunity to dance of late although that does not mean she has left my thoughts.”

Lord Huntsford tapped his chin with one finger, his eyes thoughtful. “Might I ask if you have taken notice of any other lady in the meantime?”

James opened his mouth to say that no, he had not, only for Lady Essington’s face to flood his mind. Closing it again with a snap, he cleared his throat. “I could not say.” By the knowing look and a broad grin that immediately stretched across his face, it was clear that Lord Huntsford did not truly believe him.

“Well, if you find yourself in mind of another, you would do well to ask yourself whether or not you think only of her beauty or if there is more to her character that you find yourself considering.”

Grimacing, James looked away, knowing he could answer that question already. Had he not only just been considering Lady Essington’s conversation and the way her laugh always made him smile?

“You do not wish to discuss the matter any further and I quite understand.” Lord Huntsford turned slightly and gestured to the large crowd of guests who seemed to take over almost the entire room. “This ball is a little overwhelming, is it not?”

“It is, for I am certain that almost every gentleman and lady in London have been invited,” James replied, relieved his friend had changed the subject. “That is why Lord Charleston decided to host it in these rooms rather than his townhouse, I

presume.”

Lord Huntsford nodded. “Although I doubt we shall see Miss Harding this evening,” he replied, speaking of Lord Charleston’s niece. “From what I understand, she has already left for Scotland.”

James looked at his friend, astonished. “Scotland?”

“To elope, yes,” came the reply. “The news was in the society pages this morning.”

“Good gracious.”

Lord Huntsford shook his head. “I believe it is a most imprudent match. I only hope they can catch the girl in time.”

James’ lips twisted. He disliked the practically constant referencing to the society pages but given that Lord Huntsford devoured them every time the newspaper was published, it was very hard indeed to avoid it. “I am surprised such a thing was put in the society pages at all.”

“I believe it was done in the hope that the elopement could be prevented. Even now, I believe the girl’s father has gone after her.”

“Then I hope they are successful.” James did not ask for any further details, silently dismissing the matter. No matter just how helpful the society pages were in revealing certain things, he would never appreciate them. His eyes floated vaguely across the room, only to linger on Lady Essington once more. She was laughing at something another gentleman had said and James was surprised at the twist of envy that suddenly pulled at his heart.

“I think I shall.....” Seeing Lord Huntsford’s lifted eyebrows, James threw him a wry

smile. "Excuse me. I am going to ask Lady Essington if she wishes to dance."

"You have danced with her at every society ball, have you not?" Lord Huntsford's hand rested on James' shoulder for a moment and James nodded, a little unwilling to admit to his friend that he had an interest in Lady Essington despite his obvious actions. "I see. Then I shall not hinder you."

James smiled and took his leave, walking across the room toward the lady. The gentleman she was speaking to took his leave just as he bowed and James felt his good fortune, coming to stand a little in front of her as he bowed.

"Good evening, Lady Essington. I must hope that you are dancing this evening?"

Her smile was ever ready, lighting her emerald eyes. "I am inclined to dance, yes." Slipping her dance card from her wrist, she made to hold it out to him, only for a figure to come to stand directly in front of the lady, looking up at James with sharp, flashing eyes.

"Good evening."

Such was James' shock at being so rudely interrupted that he took a moment or two to reply. "Good – good evening, Lady Maude." Taking a step to the side so that he might see Lady Essington again, he saw the color drain from her face as her smile shattered completely. Annoyance tightened his frame and he cleared his throat. "You may be unaware, Lady Maude, but I was just in conversation with Lady Essington. Do excuse me." He stepped to one side and reached for Lady Essington's dance card for what was the second time, only for Lady Maude to catch his hand. His eyes caught Miss Patterson standing only two steps away, her eyes watching Lady Maude although James could not tell whether she was pleased about what the lady had done or was embarrassed by her friend. His attention was pulled back to Lady Maude as she smiled brightly at him, hauling his interest back toward her.

“I thought it best to offer you my dance card, Lord Yardley, given that you have so often come in search of it and been denied, given how many gentlemen wish to dance with me.” Her eyes shifted to Lady Essington’s for a moment, her lips lifting into a smile that did nothing to further her beauty.

James was nonplussed. What was Lady Maude attempting to do? He did not want to appear rude but how Lady Maude was behaving was, to his mind, terribly ill-mannered. And yet, a part of him wanted to take hold of Lady Maude’s dance card and write his name in whatever dance he could take.

“I have not yet a partner for the waltz.”

Her voice was soft and James’ heart lurched at the look in her eyes. Her lips were curved gently as he looked back at her, blood roaring in his ears. She was offering him the opportunity to dance the waltz, to have her pulled close to him, and to feel her gentle breath brush his cheek as they moved together across the floor. It would be the fulfillment of a long-held hope which, thereafter, might lead to a furthering of their acquaintance which he had long been eager for.

‘You see her only in her perfection because she is a diamond of the first water, rather than allowing yourself to see any of her flaws.’

His friend’s words came back to him so forcefully that James caught his breath. That was what he was doing at this very moment, was it not? He was forgetting about Lady Maude’s disrespect toward Lady Essington simply because of what she was offering him. He was seeing only her beauty rather than considering her flaws.

“If you would but wait a moment, Lady Maude.” Turning his head from her, he made to speak to Lady Essington, only to see her walking away from him, melting into the crowd. His heart slammed hard in his chest, shame billowing over him. “Lady Essington?” Calling her name and heedless as to the attention he was garnering from

others, he hurried after her, eventually catching her arm. She turned sharply and he was astonished to see the flicker of pain in her eyes and the blooming color in her cheeks.

“Lady Essington, I must beg your forgiveness.”

She did not smile but looked up at him steadily. “I do not think that you have much to apologize for, Lord Yardley. Lady Maude was the one to interrupt our conversation.”

“Yes, but I did not act nor speak as decisively as I ought to have done.”

The corners of her mouth dropped. “No, I suppose you did not.”

“I have asked Lady Maude to wait for it is only right that I sign your dance card first.”

Her eyes widened. “Is that so?” Tilting her head to one side, she looked past him, evidently trying to see Lady Maude standing somewhere behind him. “Good gracious, it is as you say.” These last words were spoken as if to herself and James had to bite his lip hard to keep himself from turning around.

“As I have said, I did not think it right that Lady Maude interrupts us as she did but I ought to have acted and spoken with a good deal more decisiveness than I did. Pray forgive me, Lady Essington.”

A tiny light grew in her eyes and after a moment, she smiled. “You are quite forgiven, Lord Yardley.”

“And might I sign your dance card?”

Without hesitation, she slipped it from her wrist and handed it to him. “You may. I

must say, Lord Yardley, you flatter me terribly.”

Taking it from her and seeing the gleam in her eye, he looked at her steadily rather than writing his name down and then hurrying away. “Oh?”

“To be pursued and spoken to first over Lady Maude, whose beauty is beyond compare in all of London, is certainly flattering.” A gentle pink blew across her cheeks but her eyes remained quite steady. “I am very appreciative, Lord Yardley.”

“She may have a great deal of beauty, Lady Essington, but that does not require me to put her first above all others. I confess that I hope I am a little better than that.”

A stab of guilt plunged itself firmly into his heart but James did not flinch. Yes, he had been distracted and overcome by Lady Maude’s presence and her willingness to offer him the waltz but good manners had taken a hold of his actions soon after. When Lady Essington smiled, he felt his heart swell, finding relief and a gladness lingering there. He had managed to make amends, had managed to show to her that he was not about to be a very foolish, unkind gentleman who cared nothing for her and would be willing to go to another simply because she held a little more beauty.

Although had not Lord Huntsford spoken to me of such a thing recently, then I might very well have behaved very poorly indeed.

Wincing inwardly, James turned his attention to the dance card and wrote his name down for the cotillion. Biting his lip, his hand hovered over the waltz. He had never danced the waltz with Lady Essington but Lady Maude had promised him that her waltz was free, had she not?

But I have stepped away from her and, no doubt, when I return the waltz will be gone.

“Lord Yardley?” There was a hint of confusion in Lady Essington’s voice and James quickly wrote down his name before he could change his mind. Smiling, he lifted his head and returned the dance card to her.

“I thought two dances again would suit very well,” he told her, seeing the way her eyes drifted down to her dance card. “That is only if you are contented with them, of course.”

She smiled and her green eyes seemed to alight. “I am most contented, Lord Yardley. I thank you.” Her smile crumpled as her gaze drifted over his shoulder. “However, I shall step away for the time being. Good evening, Lord Yardley.”

A sense of dread began to rush through his veins, making his stomach twist wildly and his throat constrict. Turning, he saw that Lady Maude was no longer standing alone. Three gentlemen were near to her but she had angled herself so that she might still look directly at James. When he turned, her eyes immediately fastened themselves to his, her lip curving gently but not in a way that sent any pleasure into James’ heart.

I must now go to her. I must continue our conversation, as I said I would. A little surprised at his reluctance, James made his way back toward Lady Maude and the three gentlemen, standing a little to one side with his hands clasped behind his back.

Lady Maude ignored him and for some minutes, James merely stood there, waiting without making any sort of interruption. One gentleman glanced at him and a rush of embarrassment began to heat his core but still, he stood. Lady Maude had been very improper indeed by interrupting his conversation with Lady Essington but he was not about to do the same. Besides which, she knew very well that he was waiting to speak to her. If she wished to ignore him for a time, then so be it. He would be patient.

Eventually, Lady Maude glanced at him, twirling her hand toward him in a

dismissive gesture. “Yes, Lord Yardley? You have returned from your other conversation, I see?”

James did not smile. “I made certain that Lady Essington’s dance card was signed, given that to do so was my intention.” His voice was steady and he continually kept his gaze toward her.

I am quite able to see her flaws now. A scowl played around his mouth but he forced it away. I just wish I had been able to see her as she truly is before now. It was as if a veil had suddenly been lifted from his eyes and he could now see Lady Maude as she truly was. Yes, he had been a little distracted when she had offered him her waltz but he had managed to overcome that and find Lady Essington instead. In a way, James was rather proud of himself.

“And now you have returned, expecting to have my dance card also?” She sent a sharp look toward the other gentlemen who all laughed as though James were being quite ridiculous.

“I am doing as I said, Lady Maude,” James put in, ignoring the laughter and refusing to respond to it. “If you wish me to depart without being allowed the opportunity to sign your dance card, then I shall go.” This was said without any vehemence or any obvious anger, for James held no frustration nor fury in his heart toward the lady. He waited, seeing Lady Maude turn toward him a little more so that she might study him more closely. Her blue eyes flashed and her confident smile faded away as he looked back at her without flinching. It was as if she had been able to see into his heart and realized now that he did not have the same consideration for her as he had once done – and that evidently displeased her.

“My dance card, Lord Yardley.” She handed it to him with a flourish. “You will see that there are still some dances remaining.” Her lip curved upwards again as her chin lifted.

“Ah, I can see that Lord Guthrie is to take your waltz, Lady Maude.”

“Yes, indeed.” Her smile grew but it lacked any warmth. “He was very eager to do so and I could not help but grant him.”

James nodded, a new curl of dislike beginning to form in his belly. “That is quite understandable, Lady Maude, and indeed, I am glad that he did so.” Scribbling his name down for the polka, he handed her back the card with a broad smile. Lady Maude’s eyes flashed and her smile flattened.

“You are glad that he has taken my waltz, Lord Yardley?” she responded, sounding quite disbelieving. “How very gracious of you.” The irony in her voice reached out to slap James across the cheek but he merely smiled.

“Indeed, it is just as well, Lady Maude, for I have already signed Lady Essington’s dance card for the waltz.” Seeing her smile shatter, he bowed low, not wanting to linger in her company any longer. After her behavior this evening, James had seen her in an entirely new light and it was not a light that brought her any favor, not in his eyes. “Good evening.” Stepping away, James let out a long, slow breath but felt his heart lift free of a weight that he had never really known it carried. In turning away from Lady Maude in favor of Lady Essington, he had allowed his heart to see the lady as she truly was. Her beauty had threatened to distract him, threatened to tear him away from what would have been the right and gentlemanly course of action. But thanks to Lord Huntsford’s previous words, James had been able to pursue Lady Essington and, in doing so, had seen Lady Maude’s true character – and it had not been one that pleased him.

In fact, I am rather irritated with myself that I have never seen such a thing before. That I have spent months pursuing a lady whose character is most displeasing. Taking in a deep breath, James set his shoulders. Lady Maude was displeased with him and had thought to set him in his place by giving her waltz to another, but for whatever

reason, he had suspected that she would have done such a thing. How glad he was that he had written his name for Lady Essington's waltz! That, he was certain, would be a very enjoyable dance indeed and he was already looking forward to stepping out with Lady Essington again.

Chapter Seven

“My lady, you have a caller.”

Norah blinked in surprise, looking up at the butler as he stood framed in the doorway.

“Come in, Clarke, and tell me who has called.” Disliking the way the butler stood in the doorway rather than coming in and closing it behind him, Norah beckoned him in.

“It is very early for a caller, is it not?”

The butler nodded. “Yes, my lady. I would say it is.”

“I have only just broken my fast!” Norah exclaimed, shaking her head as she stretched one hand out toward the dining table. “Who has decided to call at this hour?”

Handing her a card, the butler cleared his throat and put his hands behind his back. “She did state that it was urgent, my lady.”

Norah’s smile faded as she looked down at Lady Adlay’s name. “Is that so?” Biting her lip, she set the card down. “Please do show her in.”

“Into the dining room?”

“Yes, Clarke. And send for a fresh pot of tea. I will remove to the other end of the table.”

“As you wish.” The butler hurried from the room and Norah rose quickly, brushing her fingers down her skirts to make certain that there were no lingering crumbs. Wondering why Lady Adlay had decided to call so early and what could possibly be so very urgent, Norah stood by her chair and waited for her friend to enter.

“Lady Essington.” Lady Adlay hurried in, her face a little pale and her eyes wide. She grasped Norah’s hands and looked directly into her eyes. “I do hope that you are quite well.”

“I am very well, Lady Adlay. Why, whatever is the matter?”

Her friend’s eyes rounded all the more, her fingers tightening on Norah’s. “You have not read it, then?”

A wave of anxiety crashed over Norah given the look in her friend’s eyes. “Read what?”

Lady Adlay closed her eyes. “It is only a suggestion and I am certain that the ton will acknowledge it to be as such but it is still there, regardless.”

A little frustrated that she had no knowledge of what Lady Adlay spoke, Norah took in a deep breath and tried to remain calm in both her heart and her mind despite both wishing desperately to begin to fill themselves with worry. “Let us sit down and you can explain it all to me,” she said softly, trying to smile as Lady Adlay finally released her hands. “I am sure it cannot be anything too severe, else surely I would have heard of it before now.”

“Oh, but it has only just been printed!” Lady Adlay exclaimed, as Norah’s stomach twisted hard. “The society papers had the usual column from Mrs. Fullerton, whoever she may be, but thereafter there was typed a small postscript, as though she had quite forgotten another matter.”

Norah, who had known very well what the article said – it spoke of Lord Butterstone’s penchant for gambling and how he continually refused to pay his debts regardless of how much he lost – was a little confused. She had not written any postscript! “And what does this postscript speak of?”

Lady Adlay’s eyes widened. “It speaks of you, Lady Essington!”

It took Norah a moment to understand what such a statement meant for her. Shock grasped at her heart and she struggled to take in air, seeing the dark shadow in her friend’s eyes. The question she had to ask forced itself into her mind, pushing itself forward but still, Norah could not bring herself to ask it.

“As I have said, it does not say anything with any great certainty but there will, unfortunately, be rumors that follow what has been said. I am quite sure that Mrs. Fullerton is mistaken and I confess myself surprised that she has written of this at all, given that she has never written anything untrue before. Indeed, she has always made certain that whatever is said is quite true and cannot be questioned.”

Norah closed her eyes, steeling herself inwardly. “I shall have to ask what it is that has been said, I suppose,” she murmured, reluctantly. “Pray, do be honest with me, Lady Adlay.”

“Sophia, please.”

Norah drew in a deep breath, opened her eyes, and tried to smile, appreciating Lady Adlay’s attempts to draw a closer friendship between them. “Only if you will call me Norah.” Seeing her nod, she spread her hands. “Sophia, pray tell me what was written about me.”

Her friend pressed her lips flat together for a moment, then nodded. “It stated that a lady, who appeared much like Lady Essington, had been seen leaving a gentleman’s

townhouse in the early hours of the morning.”

A cold wind seemed to blow about her and Norah shivered, her fingers twisting together in her lap. “Goodness.” Her voice was low but she kept her gaze trained on Lady Adlay but saw, much to her relief, no flicker of doubt in her eyes. “That is most confusing.”

“A terrible lie to spread, certainly,” Lady Adlay agreed. “Again, Mrs. Fullerton has taken great pains to present a picture of uncertainty but that does not mean that the ton will not spread rumors about you. I came at once to offer you my support, for I certainly do not believe it.”

A half-smile tugged at Norah’s lips but her mind was whirring furiously. “Thank you, Sophia. It is not true at all and I cannot imagine why someone would say such a thing!”

“And to have Mrs. Fullerton state such a thing is very confusing indeed!” Lady Adlay exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air, just as the door opened and the maid came in with a fresh pot of tea, followed by the butler. “That is not at all the sort of thing she writes about.”

Norah thanked the maid and then caught the butler’s eye. “Yes, Clarke?”

“My lady, you have had a flurry of invitations. Should I place them in the drawing room or at your writing desk in the parlor?”

“Invitations? So early?”

Lady Adlay shook her head. “There will be more interest in you now and thus, those who have soirees or the like in the next few days will wish for your presence so that it will be of a little more interest in those who attend.”

A flash of anger crossed Norah's brow. "You mean to say that their event will gain a little more prominence if I attend, simply due to my supposed notoriety?"

"That is it precisely."

"Then you may put them all on my writing desk, Clarke, so that I might leave them for some days until it is much too late to attend and I must beg off," Norah stated, firmly. "And if there are any further invitations, then you may do the same with them also."

The butler nodded and made to depart but Lady Adlay stopped him with a word.

"And you will make certain that none of the staff speak ill of Lady Essington, Clarke." She spoke with more authority than Norah had ever managed herself and she noted how the butler's eyes flared for a moment. "If they do, there will be dismissal."

The butler glanced toward Norah but she gave him only a nod which, after a murmur of agreement that he would do as he had been asked, quickly withdrew.

"I apologize for speaking so forwardly to your butler but in your shock, I feared you would not think to do so."

Norah shook her head. "I did not. Thank you for doing so."

"The worst rumors and gossip always come from the staff, unless one is quick to make certain that any attempts to whisper are squashed." Lady Adlay spoke with an air of confidence, as though she knew from experience that such a thing would occur if she had not spoken in such a way. "They will not yet be loyal to you."

"My brother-in-law insisted that I have a new complement of staff," she murmured, passing one hand over her eyes as she began to consider what it would be like for her

now to step out into society. “Good gracious, everyone will be looking at me!” The thought of going out into town was now a most unpleasant one and Norah shied away from the idea. It would be almost unbearable to have so many people stare at her, to know that they would be talking about her the moment she had her back to them.

“You must not hide away!” Lady Adlay thumped one hand down flat on the table, startling Norah. “To do so will make the ton believe that you are the lady that Mrs. Fullerton saw.”

“She did not see me. She could not have done.” Norah spoke without thinking and saw Lady Adlay’s eyes flare. The color began to drain from her face but Norah quickly leaned forward, reaching out to grasp her friend’s hand. “That is not what I meant. I did not stay at a gentleman’s townhouse.”

Lady Adlay blinked. “I – I see.”

Norah closed her eyes tightly and let out a long breath. She would have to tell Lady Adlay the truth. “Forgive me. I spoke hastily. This circumstance has confused me greatly and I have spoken without thinking.”

“Of course, I quite understand.” The way she blinked and looked away told Norah that she was still rather troubled by what Norah had said. Biting her lip, Norah hesitated and then squeezed Lady Adlay’s hand.

“I must beg of you to keep entirely to yourself what it is that I wish to tell you.”

Lady Adlay’s eyes widened but she nodded fervently.

“The reason I know that Mrs. Fullerton could not have written that about me is because....” Taking another long breath, she closed her eyes. This is very difficult indeed. “It is because I am the one who writes for the society pages.”

Silence filled the room and Norah fought the urge to say anything more, opening her eyes to see Lady Adlay's face suddenly very white. Releasing her hand, she sat back and waited for her to say something, while allowing the silence to continue to settle across them both.

"You – you are Mrs. Fullerton?" Lady Adlay's voice was hoarse with shock and Norah nodded.

"I have not been so for very long, however," she said, feeling the urge to make a further explanation. "I have recently taken on the responsibility."

"Good gracious." Lady Adlay's eyes widened as she stared suddenly at Norah, as though she had only just seen her. "But then who is....?"

"I could not say," Norah replied before Lady Adlay had asked the question. "But I am certain that it was not I who wrote such a thing!"

"That would make very little sense, I agree." A tiny smile began to push at Lady Adlay's lips, her shock seeming to dissipate somewhat. "Goodness, I would never have expected you to be the lady!"

Relieved that Lady Adlay was not about to explode with anger nor simply remove herself from Norah's presence over what had been revealed, Norah returned her friend's smile. "I am glad you are not furious with me."

"Why should I be? The articles have always revealed the truth about someone or some situation that is to the benefit of society. There has never been any untruths and certainly never anything cruel written."

"I am very glad you think so. I have been determined not to write anything that would cause upset or shame to those who do not deserve it."

“Except now,” Lady Adlay continued, her brows furrowing, “you have someone writing an additional piece about you without having any knowledge as to who that person might be.”

“Or how they went about it,” Norah added, her frown growing. “I always send the articles with the greatest care, so that they will not be intercepted and so that there is very little chance that I will be suspected.”

Lady Adlay nodded. “Perhaps someone has been waiting for a letter to arrive at the newspaper’s premises and, upon seeing it arrive, has taken it and added a little to the end.”

“That may be so. I shall have to be a good deal more careful.”

“What can you do?”

Norah nodded slowly to herself, an idea forming in her mind. “I could make certain that the person who delivers my letters gives them directly to one Mr. Gordon and have a note from him returned to me, to make certain that it is his hand that has taken the letter.”

“That would certainly prevent this from occurring again if that is what they have done. They might also merely be sending their own letter in the name of Mrs. Fullerton, adding in a little postscript.”

“Then I shall inform Mr. Gordon that I have never sent and never will send a postscript. He will have to be informed that this was not my work.”

Lady Adlay reached to pour the tea, settling into their discussion. “One must wonder why someone has done this to you. Why would they attempt to injure you?”

A sudden fear grasped Norah's heart. "Mayhap they have learned that it is I who writes such articles."

"I highly doubt that to be the case," Lady Adlay returned at once, softening Norah's fears as she handed her a cup of tea and pushed the milk toward her. "I believe they will have simply done one of the two scenarios we have already considered. If you take steps to make certain they cannot do so again, then we must hope the matter is resolved."

Norah nodded, lifted her teacup, and took a sip in the hope it would settle her stomach somewhat. "Although I must still face the ton over what has been written of me."

"Then you must not allow it to shame you," came the firm reply. "The ton will be looking to you, wanting to see your reaction to such gossip. If you remain steadfast and just as you have been before, then the rumors will soon die away. There will, no doubt, soon be something of greater importance for society to talk about!"

A sudden thought hit her and Norah's chest tightened as she set down her tea with a rather loud clink onto the china saucer.

"Norah?"

"I – I was...." Giving herself a slight shake, Norah tried to smile. "Forgive me, Sophia. The thought of facing the ton has given me a good deal of trepidation."

Lady Adlay nodded, although her eyes narrowed just a fraction around the corners. "Is there someone in particular that you now are more anxious to face?"

Lord Yardley.

She did not speak his name aloud but instead merely shrugged one shoulder in a most indelicate fashion, turning her head away from Lady Adlay's for fear that she would somehow see his name written in her eyes.

"If there is, then I will say I am certain they will quickly ignore such nonsense, given they are already acquainted with you as I am."

"Ah, but they may lack your trust and faith in my character," Norah pointed out, a little sadly. "I may drop a good deal in their estimation."

Lady Adlay sighed and nodded. "That may well be the case, I suppose. I should not like to be dishonest and pretend otherwise."

The sudden, sharp pain that came into her heart at those words rendered Norah unable to speak for a few minutes. In her mind's eye, she saw Lord Yardley turn away from her, no longer willing to have her in his company. He would not dance with her again, would not wish to speak to her again – she would be quiet without him.

And why does that matter so greatly to you?

Norah shook her head to herself and once more lifted her teacup to take a sip. At the last ball, she had been first offended by Lady Maude pushing herself into the fore and ignoring the fact that Lord Yardley had been in conversation with Norah rather than with her. She had then found her spirits sinking as Lord Yardley had seemed to be rather caught up with the lady but had told herself that it was quite understandable, given that the young lady was a diamond of the first water. Having turned away, she had never expected Lord Yardley to hurry after her but the sheer swell of joy in her heart when he had done so had been a little overwhelming. She had felt significant, had seen herself so in his eyes, even with Lady Maude glaring furiously at him from behind. Even when she had drawn attention to the lady, he had not looked back but had focused all of his attention on her.

What would he think of her now? Despite Lady Adlay's assurances that the news would soon pass and that the ton would find something else to discuss, Norah's heart began to beat a little more quickly as fear took hold. If Lord Yardley was to remove his connection from her entirely, Norah knew that there would come both upset and frustration – and she wanted to endure neither.

She could only hope that he knew her well enough not to allow himself to believe it. Yes, she could speak of it to him if he would permit her, mayhap laugh at the very notion in the hope that he would think it just as ridiculous as she, but there was always the chance that he would think it was true. And what would she do then?

Chapter Eight

The moment Lord Huntsford walked into the room, James held up one hand, silencing him in an instant.

“Before you say anything, yes, I have heard the news. I have even gone so far as to read it.”

“Most extraordinary!”

James shook his head. “It is nonsense, of course.”

Lord Huntsford began to walk up and down the room, his eyes gleaming. “Is that so? How can you be so certain?”

James set back his quill and sanded the note. “Because I am well aware of the lady’s character. This is, no doubt, some ridiculous lie that has been spread in the hope of smearing her reputation.”

Lord Huntsford tilted his head. “And why would anyone do such a thing?”

“Well, the women of this ton are often very protective of their status and standing in society and mayhap one or two of them feel that Lady Essington is....pushing them aside somehow.” He had thought of this in the time before Lord Huntsford’s arrival when he had first learned of what had been said of Lady Essington. His first reaction had been one of horror, only to allow himself some time to consider not only what had been written but the lady herself. Now, he had come up with what he considered

to be a very reasonable explanation as to why someone might have written such an untruth about her.

The frown on Lord Huntington's face told him he did not outright agree. "You believe that the debutantes are jealous of the widowed Lady Essington?"

"In case you have not noticed, she is remarkably pretty and has gained the interest of many a gentleman."

"I am well aware of that fact, but that would not make the young ladies of London envious of her, for there are some remarkably pretty creatures amongst them at present."

James shrugged. "That is true. But all the same, I would not be surprised if some of the young ladies did not like the fact that a widowed, independent young lady was garnering more interest from gentlemen of the ton than they."

Lord Huntsford's brows lifted. "You mean to say that those who might soon be drawing close to spinsterhood could seek to damage her reputation, in the hope that they might be more in favor?"

"Precisely."

"So, you do not believe a word of it."

"Certainly, I do not. Besides which, this 'Mrs. Fullerton' wrote only that it was someone who looked like Lady Essington. Which, in truth, surprised me somewhat given that you assured me she only ever wrote the truth in all of her articles. This postscript did not seem to fit with such a particular determination."

"On that, I shall agree with you." Lord Huntsford grimaced and shook his head.

“There is no easy explanation for her change in tone, I grant you. I do hope that she will not say such things again unless it can be proven to be true.”

James shook his head. This was yet another reason he disliked the society pages. The articles contained within were not worth his reading. Yes, they could be of aid to some, but this recent piece about Lady Essington had proven to him that they were not worth his conjecture or his time. “I must hope that Lady Essington does not shrink away from society because of what has been written about her.”

“We shall have to wait and see, I suppose.” Lord Huntsford cast a sharp eye toward James. “Are you quite ready? You do not appear to be.”

“In that regard, you are certainly mistaken!” Pulling the white cover from the neck of the shirt carefully, he flung it down onto the desk table as he rose to his feet. It had protected his crisp white shirt from any flying drops of ink that might have danced away from his quill. “I shall need my cravat and then will be quite ready.”

Lord Huntsford groaned and threw back his head, making James grin. “Come now, it shall not take me long.”

“You forget that I am far too aware of your penchant for fine cravats and the intricacy with which they must be folded,” Lord Huntsford muttered, as James rang the bell for his valet. “I shall depart in my carriage in ten minutes, and if you are not ready, then you will have to take your own!”

“Then I shall make certain to be ready,” James answered, grinning across at his friend. “Have no fear, we shall not be tardy for Lord Edgell’s dinner! I will make sure of it.”

“Good evening, Lady Edgell. Thank you for your kind invitation.”

James bowed low over the lady's hand, knowing that it was important that he show genuine appreciation for the invitation. The Marquess of Edgell and his wife did not often host dinner parties and to be invited to one spoke of a great distinction that James was grateful for.

"You are most welcome, Lord Huntsford. I am glad you could join us."

The greetings at an end, James moved away from Lord and Lady Edgell and walked further into the drawing room, Lord Huntsford behind him finishing his greetings to their hosts. Smiling to himself, James took in the other guests – only for a young lady to turn and look directly at him.

Lady Maude.

How strange it was that his heart did not lift suddenly with delight. When he had returned to London for the start of the Season, he had done nothing but think of her, becoming all the more desperate to push himself to the fore so that she might notice him. Now, however, he no longer felt that way. There was no eagerness for her company, no happiness that she was now smiling at him. Instead, James began to hope for some sort of distraction so that he would not have to linger long in conversation with her.

After how she treated Lady Essington, I find that my heart has changed toward her.

"Lady Maude is clearly eager for your company."

"And yet, I am not eager for hers." James turned his gaze to Lord Huntsford and saw his friend's eyes widen in evident surprise. "You need not look so surprised. I have taken what you said into consideration."

Lord Huntsford frowned. "You mean to ignore her?"

“No, that is not what I mean. You stated that I saw only her beauty rather than her flaws and you were quite correct. That is precisely what I have been doing. However, I am no longer of that mind and am grateful to you for your words of wisdom.”

The small lift of Lord Huntsford’s eyebrow as well as the gentle narrowing of his eyes told James that he did not believe that he was being entirely genuine.

“I am quite serious, I assure you!” James grinned as Lord Huntsford shrugged. “There was an incident at the most recent ball where I was both astonished at Lady Maude’s lack of consideration and then frustrated with my actions thereafter. Thankfully, it was put to rights but it certainly made me all too aware of my own...foolishness.”

“I am a little surprised, I confess it, but I am relieved that you are no longer in pursuit of the lady. I do not think her character would suit you in any way whatsoever.”

James laughed somewhat ruefully. “I quite agree,” he stated, as Lord Huntsford’s eyebrows rose all the more. “However, I –”

The dinner gong sounded and James smiled, somewhat relieved that he would not have to speak to Lady Maude before dinner.

“I shall leave the remainder of our conversation until another time, Huntsford. Only to say that you shall not find me eager to speak to Lady Maude for any great length of time this evening. I am quite content to remain at a distance!”

This is not what I anticipated.

Clearing his throat, James sat down, aware that every muscle in his body was tense. The fact that he had been seated next to Lady Maude had brought a wide, mirthful grin to Lord Huntsford’s face, whilst James himself felt deeply frustrated. It seemed

as though fate wished to push them together, even though he had already decided he did not want to be in company with her.

“Good evening, Lady Maude.”

Her blue eyes were gentle as she smiled at him. “Good evening, Lord Yardley. How wonderful that we are seated together this evening!”

It was not something James could agree with and thus, he chose only to remain silent, giving her a brief smile. Thankfully, their host began to address all of his guests together, stating that he hoped they would all enjoy the evening and how glad he was to be in such good company. Then the first course of soup was served and James joined the other guests in making murmurs of delight over just how delicious the food was.

“Lord Yardley, what make you of the London Season thus far?”

James turned his head to his other side, speaking now to Lady Humphries. She was an older lady whose daughter was seated opposite her. With small, narrowed eyes that flashed brilliantly, James found her earnest expression a little unsettling, fearful that she would somehow be able to see everything he was thinking. “Thus far, I have found it most enjoyable,” he replied with as warm a smile as he could manage. “There has been dancing, good conversation, and many new acquaintances – I do not think that I could ask for anything more!”

Lady Humphries nodded but did not smile. “I have, myself, been a little disappointed, I confess. My daughter was much inclined toward the company of Lord Jennings and indeed, both my husband and I thought him a good match for her, only until we read what was in the society pages! I could hardly believe the words written there about him and prayed earnestly that it would not be true.”

“But alas, it was as it was said,” James murmured, sympathetically. “I do hope your daughter is not too disappointed.”

“She is not, much to my relief,” came the reply. “It has, I think, shown her that there is a good deal of merit to considering one’s acquaintances and connections very carefully indeed.”

“That is wise, certainly.” He took in a long breath and smiled. “Now, shall we –”

“You will be disappointed, then to hear of Lady Essington’s current predicament, then?”

Lady Maude’s cool voice reached James’ ears and a cold stream of water ran down James’ spine. He turned to her, one eyebrow lifting gently. “Lady Maude, good evening. Lady Humphries and I were just now talking about Lord Jennings, rather than anyone else.” He turned away, meaning to end the conversation there but Lady Maude was not yet finished.

“But you have just now stated that it is wise to be careful of one’s acquaintances and connections. Given what we have learned about Lady Essington, it would seem fair, therefore, that we judge our connection with her most carefully.”

Lady Humphries coughed quietly, her eyes darting toward Lady Maude but then fixing themselves to James’. “I believe in Lady Essington’s case, however, there has been nothing proven. Her name is only vaguely attached to the circumstance.”

“Indeed, I quite agree,” James replied warmly, making Lady Humphries smile lightly. “I am a little surprised that Mrs. Fullerton has written a piece about the lady where nothing can be proven and, indeed, that the person she is writing about has only a vague similarity to Lady Essington. It could be a good many people and it must be very distressing indeed for Lady Essington to be singled out in such a way.”

“She has my sympathy,” Lady Humphries added but as James glanced toward Lady Maude, he saw she had already returned to finishing her plate of soup, seemingly disinterested in the rest of the conversation. His gut twisted. Lady Maude was not the lovely creature he had once thought her to be. She seemed to delight in the stories of others and their difficulties and had no thought as to how they might feel at any given moment, given their difficult circumstance. She was just as beautiful as ever and James was certain that, should he look deeply into her eyes, he would find his breath hitching, but there was no desire for him to do any such thing, not any longer.

And it may be that Lady Essington has a bigger part to play in my change of heart than I first realized.

A small smile crept toward the corners of his mouth as he thought of Lady Essington and the astonishment in her expression when he had come to seek her out rather than continue with Lady Maude. She had feared herself so small in his eyes that she would be quickly forgotten, whilst James was beginning to realize that quite the opposite was true.

“I do wonder who that gentleman was, however.”

Setting his spoon in his bowl at the correct angle, James settled his hands onto his lap so that the footmen would know he was finished with his first course. “I do not know what you mean, Lady Maude.” He did not want to engage her but could not simply leave the remark hanging in the air between them.

“Whether it was Lady Essington or not, I do wonder which gentleman it was that the lady called upon so very late – or so very early, depending on how one looks at things.”

A ripple of unease ran over James’ frame and his jaw tightened. “I think that a very small matter, Lady Maude.”

“But if we knew the gentleman involved, then we might have an inkling as to whether or not it was Lady Essington there that day.”

James bristled, his jaw jutting forward. “I do not think there is any need to do any such investigation, Lady Maude.” His voice was low, his words clipped. “I do not believe that it was Lady Essington present. I find it very strange indeed that Mrs. Fullerton, whoever she or he may be, chose to write something so very inappropriate, knowing the damage it would do to the lady’s reputation when, according to Lord Huntsford, she has always been very careful to write nothing but the truth in previous articles.”

“Then you do not have the smallest curiosity? The tiniest doubt?”

When James looked into her eyes, he saw the glint in her eye and felt his stomach twist. She had been, in his eyes, so very beautiful whereas now, he saw her as she truly was – cruel, manipulative, and seeking only flattery and adulation from those around her. “I have no doubts whatsoever, Lady Maude.” His voice was firm, his jaw tight. “And I am certain that Lady Essington is naught but a highly regarded lady who deserves our respect and consideration given all that she has endured.”

“Endured?” There was a hint of laughter in Lady Maude’s voice. “What has she endured?”

James shook his head to himself before turning his attention back to the lady. “Lady Essington is a widow. To lose one’s spouse must be very difficult indeed.”

Lady Maude’s lips bunched but her eyes then turned to Lady Humphries, evidently seeing something there that encouraged her thereafter to remain silent. Turning her head away, she returned her attention to the gentleman on her other side and began a conversation there, leaving James to his thoughts. A little surprised at the tension that still flooded him, James did not speak to Lady Humphries nor any other for some

time. Instead, he ate silently and did not catch the eye of anyone, finding himself deeply frustrated and upset at how Lady Maude had spoken. Her obvious eagerness to think poorly of Lady Essington and, indeed, to find some sort of humor in it was deeply sorrowing and James felt his heart turn away from the lady completely.

And instead, turn all the more toward Lady Essington herself.

Chapter Nine

Norah's eyes caught the swift movement of one gentleman's hand, seeing how it snaked around Miss Patterson's wrist. Her eyes narrowed as he began to pull her toward the shadows, leaving Miss Patterson with only two choices. One, she could go with him without making any sort of complaint, or two, she could remove his hand from her arm but, in doing so, garner a good deal of attention which might very well lead to a good deal of embarrassment but also a good deal of gossip.

Miss Patterson chose the former.

Keeping her smile fixed in place, Norah nodded and finished her conversation with Lady Geraldine and her mother, excusing herself and then quietly stepping away in the same direction as Miss Patterson had gone.

The shadowy corridor did not give any helpful illumination and Norah was forced to move slowly, wondering where Miss Patterson had been taken. She did not know the lady particularly well, given that she had only been introduced to her once by Lady Maude and they had not even had a single conversation. But that did not mean that she would not go in search of the lady to do what she could to help her.

"Lord Bearsden, please!"

Her breath hitched as she heard the exclamation come from nearby, albeit sounding rather muffled. Turning, she took a few steps toward a closed door and heard the laugh again. Her hand went to her heart, aware of just how hard it was pounding. There was a danger in what she was doing, for she could be discovered and her

presence questioned, even though she was a widow and could, for the most part, go where she pleased. Given that rumors about her were still gently swirling some weeks after that article had been written, Norah knew she had to be careful.

A dark laugh caught her attention and Norah's stomach turned over. Lord Bearsden was clearly doing whatever he pleased and Miss Patterson was unable to stop him. Silently, she wondered firstly, where Lady Maude was, only to realize that the lady would not care a trice if her friend had disappeared for a few moments. The second was to wonder if the lady had a chaperone or parent who would be looking for her. If she was discovered to be missing, then the lady's reputation could be quite ruined – and all at the hands of a gentleman who took what he pleased without consequence.

The sound of footsteps had Norah drawing back, only to see a footman coming down the hallway, a tray of food in his hand. Hurrying toward him, she came a little away from the door, keeping her voice low.

“I require your assistance.”

He jerked visibly in surprise, his eyes narrowing slightly as he sought to make her out. “Yes, of course.” The tray of food remained in his hand as he bowed his head. “What is it you require?”

“I require you to go in there .” Norah gestured to the small room to her left.

“The parlor?”

Norah nodded. “If that is what it is, then yes.”

He glanced toward it, then nodded. “But of course. And what is it you require from there?”

Hesitating, Norah spread her hands. "I do not require anything from there. However, I do require you to walk into the parlor and make certain all is well."

The confusion on the footman's face was more than apparent but Norah did not care. It was just as well that she could not be seen particularly clearly given the lack of candles else the footman might have been able to identify her when he discussed the matter with others, as he was sure to do. It was best for Norah to remain as anonymous as she could, while making certain that Miss Patterson was taken care of.

"But of course." The footman, the tray of food still in one hand, walked toward the door and, rapping loudly on it, made to turn the handle.

Norah melted away into the shadows, before swiftly turning around and making her way back toward the drawing-room. Entering it, she hurriedly put a smile on her lips and, after only a few moments, found another lady to converse with. Making certain to keep the door to the drawing room in view while she attempted to converse with Lady Gardiner, Norah let out a breath of relief when Miss Patterson suddenly reappeared. The girl was even paler than usual and her eyes were wide with fright, but she seemed otherwise uninjured. She was careful as she came into the room, staying back to the edges of the room and moving with great slowness as though she had no particular urgency about being in anyone's company. Norah kept her gaze fixed to her as Lady Gardiner continued to remark about the very fine weather they had been enjoying, relieved when Miss Patterson finally reached Lady Maude once more. Lady Maude threw not even the smallest glance toward her friend but Norah was not surprised. The lady did not care for anyone other than herself.

Taking in a deep breath, Norah smiled and began to agree wholeheartedly with Lady Gardiner about the weather being very fine indeed. Lady Maude had ignored Norah entirely ever since that particular rumor had been printed about her in the society papers, but Norah did not have any great trouble over such a thing. Lady Maude was not the sort of person she wished to have as an acquaintance and she certainly did not

envy Miss Patterson for being in her company!

Another glance told her that Lord Bearsden had returned to the drawing room, looking a little angry. Norah's smile spread across her face as a swirl of satisfaction ran through her veins. Lord Bearsden would find his behavior known to all of the ton very soon indeed, and Norah had no doubt he would deserve every single last modicum of anger and upset sent his way.

"And you have been taking greater precautions?"

Norah nodded as she poured the tea. "Yes, indeed. I have become a good deal more careful as to who receives my articles so that there can be no opportunity for interception."

Lady Adlay nodded. "It seems to have done the trick, for the last four articles have been quite without any falsehoods whatsoever."

Norah smiled. "Indeed, they have."

Lady Adlay's eyes fixed to hers. "Lord Bearsden has returned to his estate."

"I am glad to hear it."

Her friend's lips bunched, pulling to one side. "I am a little surprised at him, I confess."

Norah's eyebrows rose. "Surprised?"

"Yes, indeed. He is, on all accounts, a respectable gentleman who has very little by way of flaws and the like. To know that he would be willing to treat Miss Patterson in such a way has quite astonished me."

“And yet, he did.” Norah shook her head. “Mayhap he did so, knowing that she was the least inclined out of all the young ladies in society, to say a single word about his behavior. She is, after all, a quiet and somewhat timid creature, I think.”

A small sigh pulled from Lady Adlay’s lips. “I suppose that may well be true. I do not know Miss Patterson particularly well but that is certainly the impression that she gives.”

Norah nodded. “I did not like to see her so poorly treated.”

“That is admirable.” Lady Adlay gave her a small smile. “And might I ask if society has continued to treat you with respect?”

Considering this question, Norah tilted her head to one side, her gaze drifting across the room for a moment. “There are certain people in my acquaintance who certainly do not converse with me with the same ease they once did, but on the whole, I have found myself to be quite satisfied.”

“That is good.” Lady Adlay smiled and picked up her teacup. “And might I ask if Lord Yardley has continued with his.....interest?”

Norah laughed and waved a hand. “He does not have any particular interest, I am sure,” she replied, albeit with a slight blush. “I will confess that his eagerness to be in my company has been a great encouragement, however. I am sure that it has encouraged those who might be inclined toward absenting themselves from my company have decided to do otherwise. I have seen some of the ton watching our interactions and, thereafter, coming to converse with me.” A soft smile pulled at her mouth as she thought of Lord Yardley. He had made it quite plain that he did not believe a single word of the rumor for, in the days following what had been printed in society papers about her, he had seemingly been quite determined to be in her company at almost every opportunity. Indeed, it had felt as though he was

deliberately seeking her out and Norah had very much appreciated his company.

“I believe he is a good man.”

“Yes, I consider him to be so.” Norah agreed but ignored Lady Adlay’s questioning look. “I have another article to write this afternoon or tomorrow but I wish to be quite certain of the facts before I do so. It has been almost a sennight since my article on Miss Patterson – although, of course, I did not write her name in the article itself – and I must have something new for the society papers come the morrow.”

Lady Adlay leaned forward, her eyes suddenly wide with eager expectation. “And what should this new article say?”

Norah laughed. “That, I cannot tell you, for I am sure that – ” A quiet scratch at the door alerted her to the footman’s presence, ending their conversation for the moment. Calling for them to come in, she accepted the note from the footman’s hand, then bade him to remain for a few moments to see if there was to be an immediate reply.

The wax seal was unbranded and Norah broke it quickly, turning it around as she unfolded it.

A cold sweat broke out across her forehead, her fingers tightening on the letter as her stomach began to swirl. Swallowing hard, she closed her eyes, then looked up at the waiting footman.

“Who brought this note?” Her voice was tight and a little breathless, making Lady Adlay’s eyes widen with alarm. “Who brought it to the house?”

The footman spread his hands. “It was a young boy, my lady,” he replied, suddenly looking a little afraid. “One of the rascals from the street.”

She closed her eyes. "I see."

"I could go and see if I could find him, my lady?"

Shaking her head, Norah waved her hand, dismissing him. "No, there is no reason to do so. I do not think that you would find him but I appreciate your willingness to be of assistance." Setting her shoulders, she shook her head. "You may return to your duties."

"Wait."

Lady Adlay turned her head, catching the footman's attention. "You shall inform the butler that Lady Essington requests that should such a child bring a note like this again, that they are to be taken into the house immediately. Lady Essington will need to know where such a note has been brought from."

Norah nodded, her lips flat together as the footman promised he would go to the butler at once, to inform him of such a thing. Evidently, Lady Adlay could see that this was of great seriousness. Waiting until the door closed, she shook her head to herself, panic trying to grasp a hold of her heart.

"Whatever is the matter, Norah?"

"The note." Norah handed it to her friend, a little surprised at the tremble in her frame as she did so. "Whatever am I to do?"

Lady Adlay took the note from her but read it aloud. "'Mrs. Fullerton – for yes, I know that is who you are, - you shall write that Miss Geraldine Pottinger has been seen alone in the company of one Lord Umbridge. If you do not, then there will be consequences that shall not only fall upon your head but on those of your friends.'" Wide-eyed, Lady Adlay looked back at Norah, color draining from her cheeks.

“Good heavens!”

“Consequences?” Norah repeated, her eyebrows lifting to her hair. “What could such consequences be?”

“More important is the question how did this person know who you were? That you are Lady Fullerton?”

Norah closed her eyes, fright running through her veins. Lady Gillingham had done this for years and had never once been caught out. She had been doing so for only a few weeks and now, it seemed, had found herself in the midst of great difficulty with the threat of being revealed to the entirety of the ton ! Her heart began to hammer hard against her chest and she took in great gulps of air in an attempt to slow down her racing heart.

“You need not become upset.” Rising, Lady Adlay came to sit near to Norah, reaching across to put a comforting hand on her arm. “I am certain that we will be able to discover who such a person is.”

“I am not certain we shall.” Norah hated that her voice trembled but forced herself to lift her chin. “And now I am uncertain as to what is best to do.” Taking the letter from Lady Adlay, she looked down at it, her eyes a little dull. “I am afraid of what such consequences might be.”

Lady Adlay waved a hand. “I am certain that they mean nothing,” she said, with more confidence than Norah felt. “It is naught but a threat without any real strength behind it. What consequences could they bring?”

“They could inform the ton that I am Mrs. Fullerton.”

Shaking her head, Lady Adlay smiled. “They cannot, for they have no proof! It would

simply be the word of one lady or gentleman against yours. They cannot show anything that would evidence you being the lady in question, I am sure.”

This did not bring Norah any confidence. Her mind swirled, her stomach twisting this way and that as her hands clenched tightly into fists. She did not know what was best to do.

“I think you ought to ignore this letter, write your article as you planned, and then send it to the paper without delay.” The firmness in Lady Adlay’s voice helped encourage Norah a little, and she took in a long, shaky breath. “Show this person that you are not to be intimidated. If you do as they wish, then they will simply write you another note and demand that you do the very same again.”

Norah swallowed against the growing tightness in her throat. “But if I do not, then I risk the consequences,” she said quietly, as Lady Adlay nodded. “I am afraid – not for myself, but for you. For others of my acquaintance that I am close to.”

Lady Adlay smiled, a glint of determination in her eyes. “You need have no fear for me,” she stated, firmly. “I am quite determined that you should not give in. To do so would only prompt them to do the very same thing again and what should you do then?”

Norah nodded slowly, taking in a deep breath and trying to steady herself. Lady Adlay was quite correct. If she gave in now, then the person responsible for this note in the first place would expect her to obey again and again. Her stomach cramped, however, as she looked into Lady Adlay’s eyes and began to fear what would occur should she ignore the note entirely.

“What other choice do I have?” she murmured aloud as Lady Adlay rose and moved back to her seat, ready to pick up her teacup again. “I only pray that nothing untoward occurs, else I shall have to bear the weight of such a thing on my conscience.”

“We will be quite safe, I am certain,” Lady Adlay replied. “Now, let us call for some more tea and perhaps a few more honey cakes?” Her gently lifted eyebrow made Norah laugh as she nodded, rising to her feet and going to ring the bell. Perhaps Lady Adlay was correct. Perhaps all would be well and this would be nothing more than a brief, dark moment that would pass without further repercussion. Norah could only hope that it would be so.

Chapter Ten

James shrugged his shoulders. "I would not say that I have any particular inclination toward Lady Essington." His conscience burned but he did not refute his previous remark, choosing instead just to look steadily back at Lord Huntsford without further comment.

"You are jesting, I am certain of it!"

"I am not jesting." James cleared his throat, a little uncertain as to why he did not want his friend to know the truth. "Lady Essington is a delightful lady but –"

"But she is a widow and you believe she is not at all eager to marry again?"

James cleared his throat and looked away.

"Why is it you will not admit the truth?"

"Perhaps I do not wish to!" James threw up his hands, a little exasperated. "There is, mayhap, a great deal of confusion on my part!"

His friend frowned. "Confusion?"

Given that I have already spoken a little truth to him, I may as well explain further.

Sighing, James dropped his head. "I was greatly enamored with Lady Maude, was I not?"

“Yes, you were.”

“And you then, very helpfully, I might add, showed me that my consideration of the lady was based not only on her outward beauty but also with the hope that I might, somehow, be blessed with a little favor. My pride was eager for her to turn her attention toward me so I might be considered all the more favorably by the ton . I wanted the status, I suppose.”

Lord Huntsford’s eyebrows drew together even more. “And what has this to do with your consideration of Lady Essington?”

James spread his hands. “What if I am doing the very same thing again?”

He watched as Lord Huntsford’s eyes widened and his lips pulled into a wide grin.

“Good gracious, man! There is not even the smallest similarity between the two ladies! Lady Essington is quite lovely, I agree, but there is nothing of the arrogance nor selfishness that you now see displayed in Lady Maude’s character.”

Chewing on his lip, James considered this. “That is true.”

“Tell me, what think you of Lady Essington’s conversation?”

A smile began to pull at James’ lips. “I find her conversation most pleasing,” he began, as Lord Huntsford nodded. “We are easily able to converse on a number of topics and I find that we often share a little mirth during our times of conversation.” His smile grew. “She is quite delightful, I think.”

“And her character?”

Musing for a moment, James rubbed at his chin, his gaze drifting toward the corner of

Whites'. "Her character is one of gentleness, although there is a strength within her that I believe comes from the loss that she has endured. I see her continually watching those around her as though she is interested in their comings and goings but, at the same time, shows no inclination toward gossiping or spreading rumors."

"Something that you find most pleasing, I assume?"

"Indeed." James grinned as his friend chuckled. "You know I have great difficulty with such things. It is all the more delightful that Lady Essington does not engage with such a thing either."

Lord Huntsford spread out one hand, the other holding his glass of whiskey. "Then might I suggest you are drawn to Lady Essington in a way that you never truly were with Lady Maude. I say such a thing because you know of her character, you delight in her conversation and, while she is quite lovely, you do not find yourself speaking only of her outward appearance. In short, my dear fellow, I do not consider that you need to have any concern when it comes to the lady. You are clearly a good deal more considered when it comes to her."

James let out a long breath – a breath that he had not known he had been holding – and found himself smiling. "I find that I am somewhat relieved," he stated, as his friend laughed. "Forgive me for attempting to keep such a thing to myself. You know now why I tried to do so."

"I do, but you need not fear speaking honestly with me." Lord Huntsford waved his empty glass toward a passing footman, who came immediately to collect it. "And now, alas, I fear that our time here has come to an end and we must now make our way to the evening assembly."

Smiling, James found himself rather looking forward to the evening now, having been a little reluctant before. Perhaps, in sorting out his true feelings as regarded

Lady Essington, he was now able to enjoy her company with clear intention. “We should not want to be too tardy, I grant you.”

“Lord Guthrie will not mind, I am certain,” Lord Huntsford replied, with a grin. “He will already be in his cups, I am quite sure of it!”

Chuckling, James rose and followed after his friend. He was eager now to see Lady Essington again, eager to be back in conversation with her, eager to allow his heart every gentle stirring, every flicker of deeper emotion that, thus far, he had been unwilling to identify fully. This was, mayhap, going to be a somewhat illuminating evening and he found himself growing more impatient with every step he took.

Good evening, Lady Essington.” James bowed low, lifting his gaze back to the lady almost the very first moment he could. She was dressed in a deep green gown which brought his attention fully to the color of her eyes. Allowing his gaze to fasten itself to hers, James became all too aware of the quickening of his heart, the way he caught his breath, and the growing appreciation of her that built in his heart.

“Good evening, Lord Yardley. I do hope that you have found the evening pleasant thus far?”

James smiled. “It is all the more pleasant, Lady Essington, since I am now in company with you.” He watched as his words took hold, seeing how a dusky pink entered her cheeks and the corner of her mouth lifted. Her eyes darted away from his for a few seconds, before returning to his, searching them intently as if she wanted to be quite certain that he spoke truthfully.

“There is to be dancing this evening, I think.” He lifted one eyebrow gently, looking steadily at her. “And will you be stepping out with anyone?”

She smiled, the color on her face growing all the more. “I would be inclined to do so

if one would ask me.”

“Then I shall make certain to ask you when the time comes.” Warmth spread out across James’ heart and his smile stretched even further. For some moments, they stood in silence together, simply looking at one another without feeling the urge to make any sort of conversation.

“Ah, Lady Essington.” Lady Adlay came to join them, looking up at James with bright eyes. “And Lord Yardley! Good evening.”

“Good evening.” He bowed, catching the look that was shared between Lady Adlay and Lady Essington, silently wondering what that meant. “Is your husband present this evening? It has been some time since I have spoken with him.”

Lady Adlay laughed, waving a hand as though James ought to already know what the answer would be. “My dear husband is already in the card room, Lord Yardley. He has never been a man inclined toward conversation and dancing and the like! It is just as well that he enjoys conversing with me, else I do not think I should ever have been eager for his company!”

“Then I shall make certain to come and dance with you this evening also, Lady Adlay if you are inclined.”

Her eyes twinkled. “That would be most kind, Lord Yardley, although I would not want to take away any opportunity from any other particular lady!”

A small flush burned in his chest and neck but he did not react other than to smile. The music began at that very moment as if it knew that he was waiting for an opportunity – and he instantly turned his attention back to Lady Essington.

“The cotillion, I believe.” One hand stretched out toward her and without even the

slightest hesitation, Lady Essington reached out and took it with a firm grasp. Her decisiveness delighted James' heart and he beamed at her, turning them both toward the center of the room where the dancing was soon to begin.

"I do not think I have ever danced so much!" Lady Essington exclaimed, an excitement sending a brightness into her eyes. "At every ball, I have had the opportunity to dance at least once and have made so many acquaintances that I feel so very blessed."

James considered her as they stood opposite each other, waiting for the dance to begin. "Did you not have a Season as a debutante?"

"I did," came the reply, "but I was soon engaged. My father's eagerness for a good marriage overtook any thought of my considerations." Her smile dimmed for a moment and she looked away. "That is not to say that I am ungrateful. I –"

"I have never thought you so, Lady Essington," James cut in, not wishing her to feel any concern or doubt. "But I am glad that you find yourself in such a position now. There is much enjoyment to be found in the London Season and a good many acquaintances to be made."

"I find myself greatly enamored with my present acquaintance, Lord Yardley."

The music began and it took James a moment to step forward, his breath hitching, his chest tight as the blood roared in his ears. That comment was, he was sure, a compliment toward him but mayhap it meant a little more than just her enjoyment of their acquaintance such as it was? Might it be that she had more than just a friendly consideration of him? His heart launched itself hard against his chest as their hands joined, their eyes locking together as they turned.

A little overwhelmed with the sheer amount of feeling in his heart as he danced with

Lady Essington, James blinked hard, forcing himself to concentrate on the dance. The minutes passed quickly, their time together seeming all too fleeting and when the time came for him to bow, James wanted nothing more than to step forward, catch her hands in his, and begin the dance all over again.

“I thank you, Lord Yardley.” The flush of pink in Lady Essington’s cheek enamored James toward her all the more, but he could not find anything to say that would express that. Clearing his throat, he smiled and offered his arm instead of making any actual conversation. His tongue felt a little too large for his mouth, his fingers itching to reach across and press to her hand as it rested on his arm, simply for the sheer enjoyment of being a little closer to her.

I want to court this lady.

The thought was a swift and urgent one and James found himself turning toward her at once, the force of his desire growing steadily. Having stopped walking with her, James turned his head and made to speak, seeing her eyes widen slightly as she looked up into his face.

“Lady Essington.” His words were rushed and hurried, tripping over themselves as he spoke. “I have been wondering if I might —”

A sudden scream caught both of their attention, making Lady Essington jump visibly. Her head turned, her eyes roving across the room.

“Whatever was that?”

James hurried forward, Lady Essington beside him as a small crowd gathered. Frantic whispers were being spread in all directions and James craned his neck, trying to see what had happened.

“Might I ask what has occurred?” Lady Essington spoke to another lady who stood nearby.

“I cannot tell you exactly, came the reply, “but it seems that Lady Adlay has had a fall.”

A small exclamation lodged in James’ throat as Lady Essington’s hand grasped his arm tightly. Reaching across, he pressed her hand gently, turning to see her pale face looking up at him.

“I must go to her.”

“I think we cannot at present,” James murmured, understanding Lady Essington’s need to go straight to her friend. “There is already a great crowd and I am sure –”

“Do excuse me. Clear a path! Lady Adlay must rest.”

Before James could say anything further, Lady Essington had dropped her hand and pressed forward, practically forcing her way through the crowd until she could reach her friend. Even though he desired to go after her, James gritted his teeth and remained where he was. It would be best for him to remain a little further back and allow the lady and whoever was with her to make their way to another room so that she might be adequately cared for. Whatever had occurred, James could only hope that Lady Adlay would soon recover and that Lady Essington would not be too distressed.

A little frustrated that he could do nothing more, James heaved a great sigh and turned away. He would write to both the ladies come the morning.

Chapter Eleven

Norah paced back and forth in her drawing room, one finger caught between her teeth as she worried. She had written to Lady Adlay earlier that morning but, as yet, had received no response. It was now the early afternoon and still, nothing had come. After what she had seen yesterday, Norah feared for her friend.

Her eyes closed as she put one hand on the mantelpiece, forcing herself to remain still. As much as she might tell herself that this was not her doing, her guilt rose to such a clamor that it was impossible to ignore. She had ignored the warning from whoever had written that first letter, demanding that she place something particular in the articles she wrote for the society pages. Lady Adlay had insisted that she do so and despite her fear, Norah had agreed. But now, she was quite certain that whatever had happened to her friend was entirely because of that one action.

She looked so very pale.

Her eyes squeezed harder closed, an ache beginning to build in her throat as hot tears burned. Drawing in a shaking breath, Norah let it out slowly and forced herself to open her eyes, pushing back the tears. She had not had an opportunity to discover what had happened to Lady Adlay, for despite managing to draw near to her friend, it had only been to grasp her hand for a few moments and then release it. Lady Adlay had been pale-faced, limping terribly and leaning heavily on a gentleman that Norah did not know. She had heard that Lord Adlay had practically raced from the card room the moment he had been informed and had immediately ordered his carriage so that he might bring her home. Norah could only pray that her dear friend was not grievously injured.

A knock at the door startled her and she let out an involuntary yelp of surprise, which the footman took to be his call to enter. Stepping inside, he walked toward her, a note on a silver tray.

“My lady.”

Norah stared at it for a moment before snatching it up, grasping it with eager fingers. Without looking, she broke the wax seal and unfolded the page, ready to read Lady Adlay’s response. The footman melted away, aware that his mistress was much too caught up with her letter to inform him to either remain or take his leave, and within a few seconds, Norah was quite alone again.

“Please say that you are to recover soon.”

Her eyes roved over the words on the page, hurrying over them in her haste to read Lady Adlay’s response. It was not until some moments later, however, that Norah began to realize that what she held was not, in fact, a letter from Lady Adlay. Instead, it was a note from the person who had written to her at first, stating that she write what they demanded. The words were cold, written by an icy hand and as she read the words with understanding, a chill stole over Norah’s, sending gooseflesh all over her skin.

She shivered, reading the note for the second time. It was direct confirmation that what had happened to Lady Adlay last evening had been a consequence of Norah’s direct inaction as directed in the previous letter.

‘ Furthermore,’ the letter read, ‘ you are to state in your next piece that Lord Yardley has been seen in the company of Miss Henstridge and that you have been informed that he was recently caught departing from her private quarters last evening after the performance. Any thought not to do so will bring further consequences – to Lady Adlay, Lord Adlay, Lord Yardley himself, or mayhap even to Lady Gillingham. I am

aware she is returned to her estate but that does not mean that she cannot be injured most grievously. There are more ways than one to cause pain and suffering.'

She dropped her head and pressed her hands to her eyes as the letter fluttered to the floor. Her breathing was ragged, her mind whirling as she struggled with what had been asked of her.

Lord Yardley? I am to write ill of him?

She could not do it. Not when she felt so much for him, not when she knew that he was such a kind, amiable gentleman who did not deserve such censure.

A sudden thought flew into her head and she rose hurriedly, almost running across the room in her haste to ring the bell. Thereafter, she began to pace again as she waited for the footman to arrive.

He did so in only a matter of seconds.

"My lady?"

"You received a note."

He nodded. "Yes, my lady."

"Who brought it?"

The footman's brows furrowed. "A street boy, my lady."

Closing her eyes, Norah put out one hand to him. "And pray, did you remember to keep him in the house? I was certain that —"

“Yes, my lady.” The footman’s face flushed red as Norah looked at him sharply, perhaps embarrassed that he had interrupted her. “I beg your pardon. That is only to say that the boy is in the kitchens. I believe the cook is feeding him.”

Norah let out a long breath, one hand pressing lightly against her stomach as she took in what the footman had said. “Very good, very good,” she breathed, softly. “I will go to him at once.”

The footman’s eyes widened. “I am sure, my lady, that we can bring the boy here.”

There was no time to be wasted and Norah shook her head, marching past the astonished footman and hurrying toward the servant's stairs. She did not see the wide-eyed looks of the maids, nor hear the gasp of the housekeeper as she made her way past them, her mind and thoughts centered on only one thing.

Hurrying into the kitchen, she saw a small boy sitting at the table, stuffing food into his mouth with both hands. Her stomach dropped, compassion pouring into her heart for him despite her circumstances.

“My lady!” The cook’s eyes widened and she stepped back from the pot she had been stirring, but Norah smiled somewhat tightly and waved one hand toward her, encouraging her back to her work.

“I thought to come and speak to this child,” she said softly, as the cook remained where she was despite Norah’s encouragement. “Thank you for feeding him.”

The cook’s eyes drifted toward the small boy, who was still eating as though nothing had changed, having no interest in Norah’s presence. “I do not think I have seen one so thin,” she murmured, as Norah closed her eyes for a moment. “Half-starved, that one.”

“Then I will keep him here with us,” Norah said, firmly, making her way to sit down at the table opposite the small boy. “Should you like that?” The boy looked back at her, his eyes seeming too large for his small face. “Would you like to stay here? You will have hot food and a warm bed and while you will have errands to run and the like, you will not need to go searching for food any longer.”

The boy’s eyes widened all the more. “Do you mean it?”

“I do.” Norah was not quite certain that her monies, such as they were, would accommodate another servant but she supposed that he was quite small and would not cost a great deal to keep. “If you wish to stay?”

The boy nodded fervently before picking up another piece of bread and shoving it into his mouth. Norah gave him a small smile, glancing up at the cook so that she would not whisper to the boy to behave with more propriety.

“And what is your name?”

Swallowing hard, the boy spoke out of the side of his mouth. “Joseph, miss.”

“Well, Joseph, I shall have the butler look after you although you must promise to do as he says.”

Again, the boy nodded and Norah smiled.

“You took a note for me today, I think,” she continued, trying to keep her tone calm and steady. “That might be one of your duties here if you can do it well?”

“I can, yes, I can!”

“That is good. Tell me, who gave you that note?”

Joseph nodded again. "It was a lady."

"A lady?"

"She wasn't the one to give me the note, though. She just stood a little bit away and made sure that I got given it by one of her men."

A little confused, Norah frowned. "I do not understand."

The boy picked up a bit of cheese. "A man came out and gave me the note and told me to take it to his house. I got a coin and everything!" He grinned at her and Norah tried to smile, her mind taking in everything that Joseph was saying. "But when I looked back, I saw the man make his way back to this big carriage and in the window was a lady watching me."

"And you think this lady sent the note?"

"Yes, I do."

"Because she was watching you so carefully?"

Joseph frowned, biting his lip. "She was watching me very carefully. I think she wanted to make sure I would come back."

"You're to go back?"

"Meant to get my second coin, ain't I? But I won't go back. Sometimes when you go to get your second coin, there's nothing there for you. They just want to make sure that you've done what they asked. And she looked like the sort of lady who wouldn't have that second coin." His lips pulled tight and he scowled, making Norah nod in understanding.

“I see. And can you tell me what the lady looked like?”

Joseph shook his head. “She was just like one of them posh ladies. Like you.”

Norah’s stomach twisted. “I see.”

“I know she had a big carriage but she was wearing a bonnet and sitting behind the window, wasn’t she? So I didn’t see her very well. But I know that note was from her.”

Norah wanted to put her head in her hands and let out a scream of frustration but instead, she forced a smile, rose, and stood by the table.

“Thank you, Joseph, you’ve been very helpful. I am sure you will do very well here.”

He grinned at her and the delight in his smile made Norah’s heart lift. At least, in all of this, she had been able to bring a little happiness and relief to Joseph. “Thank you, miss.”

“My lady,” the cook hissed, and Joseph’s eyes widened.

“Thank you, my lady,” he said and Norah smiled, turning back toward the cook.

“I will speak to the butler about the boy and he will make all the arrangements.” The cook nodded and Norah turned quickly, making her way back upstairs without a further word to anyone. When she returned to the drawing room, Norah rang the bell in the hope that the butler would appear but, as she waited for him, the strength went from her limbs and she was forced into a chair, her legs trembling with fright as she thought about what she must now do.

“My lady?”

Norah looked up, seeing the butler framed in the doorway.

“Tea, if you please.” She closed her eyes, trying to push away the fright that seemed now to wrap around each of her limbs, pulling her tightly into herself. “And Joseph is to be looked after. He will work as an errand boy or whatever it is that you think would be of most benefit.”

“Joseph, my lady?”

Her eyes opened. “The small boy in the kitchen,” she said, by way of explanation. “And pray, has there been any word from Lady Adlay? Anything at all?”

The butler hesitated, then shook his head. “I am sorry, my lady, there has been none.”

Norah nodded, dropped her head, and waited until she heard the soft click of the door as it closed. Only once was she entirely alone that she dropped her head into her hands and let out a small, muffled sob that soon gave way to a good many others. Tears ran down her face, her shoulders shook and her chest grew tight and painful as she thought of what she must do next.

It seemed she had no other choice.

Chapter Twelve

James yawned, picked up his coffee cup, and took a small sip. The afternoon was quiet and he was rather enjoying the solitude. Last evening had been a very busy one indeed, for he had been first at another ball where he had, of course, made certain to dance with Lady Essington, and thereafter, he had gone to Whites to enjoy the company of a few friends – Lord Huntsford included. It had been very late indeed when he returned home. Indeed, the first light of dawn had already begun to stretch across the sky when he had finally retired but at least now, he was feeling a good deal more refreshed.

And I am looking forward to this evening when I can be in company with Lady Essington again.

A small smile on his lips began to fade as he remembered how silent she had been last evening. There had not been the usual smiles, the usual delight in her expression when she had looked up at him. James had twice asked her if she was quite all right but she had assured him that yes, she was doing very well indeed. James considered she was, most likely, distracted with news of her friend Lady Adlay and, thus, had chosen to simply dance and converse as he normally would, not questioning her quietness or lack of smiles any further.

And I am still to ask her if she would accept my court.

His smile returned in an instant, as well as a swirling nervousness that captured his core. He wanted very much to ask her to accept his court but there had not yet been an opportunity. Last evening he had thought it best to remain silent, given her

melancholy and distraction but perhaps this evening, if she was a little recovered, he might find the courage to do so. The desire to draw closer to her was growing steadily and the nearness of her to him as they danced had been intoxicating. The softness of her lips had cried out to be touched and he had, on two occasions, had to prevent himself from lowering his head any further for fear that he would give in and brush his lips across hers in the middle of a society ball! And then you would have found yourself engaged to her!

That thought did not bring any swirl of uncertainty with it, however. Much to James' surprise, he found himself rather pleased with the idea, as though it was something he would find quite pleasing. His smile spread all the more as he lifted his coffee to his lips for another sip.

"My lord?" The door flew open and the butler hurried in, his face a little pale and his eyes wide. "Lord Huntsford has just arrived."

James blinked, his smile dropping from his face. "Indeed. Then, pray, show him in."

The butler nodded and James frowned, wondering at the paleness of his butler's cheeks. Why ever should his butler appear so upset? There did not seem to be any reason for it unless Lord Huntsford was in some dreadful state that would require James' assistance.

"Yardley." Lord Huntsford strode into the room and James smiled, gesturing him toward one of the nearby chairs.

"Huntsford, do join me," he said easily. "Forgive me for choosing not to rise. My head is little painful this morning, although I am glad to say it does not ache terribly in the way it so often does after an evening at Whites!" Gazing up, his heart slammed hard against his ribs as he saw the way Lord Huntsford frowned. His friend planted his hands on his hips, his jaw working and his eyes a little narrowed.

“Good gracious, whatever is the matter?”

“I knew it.” Lord Huntsford closed his eyes. “I knew you would not have seen it. I told myself I would have to be the one to inform you of this.”

“Inform me of what?” James’ stomach began to tip this way and that as he shifted in his chair, wondering if he had done something to upset Lord Huntsford. “I do hope you are not angry with me?”

Lord Huntsford shook his head. “The paper.”

James blinked. “The paper?”

“Where is the paper?” Lord Huntsford strode around the drawing room as though he expected to see it at any moment. “I know you possess it, even if you do not read the society pages.”

Something heavy dropped into James’ stomach. “You do not mean to say that something is in there about you? Whatever have you done?”

Lord Huntsford’s eyes narrowed all the more as he turned back toward James. “No, it is not that there is anything written about me ,” he stated, meaningfully. “But there is something in those pages about you.”

James stared up at his friend, a cold wind seeming to blow about him, freezing his skin. For a moment, he wanted to laugh at the foolishness of the idea but one look into Lord Huntsford’s grave expression told him there was nothing to jest about.

“I know you did not do what is written there, given that you were in company with myself and the other gentlemen. Unless, of course, there was a late performance at the theatre and you chose –”

“Theatre?” James unfolded himself from the chair and got up, his coffee cup set aside. “Whatever do you mean? I was not at the theatre last evening or the evening before! Indeed, I have not been there for a little over a fortnight.”

Lord Huntsford nodded although his expression remained tight. He was not upset with James himself, James realized, but rather upset about what had been written and how it would now affect him. He closed his eyes. “The papers are in the dining room.”

“Then come. We must fetch them.”

James’ eyes flared. “That is why my butler appeared so pale-faced. He must have already known of this news.”

Lord Huntsford nodded sharply. “But of course. The servants always know of such things before the rest of us.”

James did not know how to respond. His mouth was dry, his skin burning and his eyes darting from one place to the next as he attempted to make sense of it all.

“I thought you said Mrs. Fullerton only ever wrote the truth?” he managed to say, as Lord Huntsford made his way to the door, throwing it open so they could walk out together. “This is clearly not the truth!”

“It is very strange, I confess it. This is the second time something has been added in which is most untrue. First, there came that note about Lady Essington – or someone who looked like her – emerging from a gentleman’s house in the early hours of the morning. That has been difficult for her, I am sure, but she has remained in society, determined to refute it. Now you must do the same.”

Shaking his head, James shoved one hand through his hair as they walked into the

dining room. His whole body was trembling as the slow-growing realization of how this would affect him began to take over. Invitations would be rescinded; ladies might give him the cut direct and the number of his acquaintances would surely shrink!

“Do not give way to panic.” Lord Huntsford’s voice boomed through the dining room as they entered, perhaps seeing the strain on James’ face. “You are beginning to be afraid and I have no wish for you to be so. You will not lose my friendship and I am certain the like of Lady Essington and Lady Adlay will not turn from you either.”

James tried to nod, still aware of the shaking in his limbs. Sitting down heavily at the dining room table, he reached for the papers and turned them open to the society papers.

His eyes found the words almost as soon as he had opened up the paper. He read the words aloud, his words low and muffled, reluctant to speak them. ““Lord Y is known as a gentleman of quality and yet he was seen exiting the personal rooms of one Miss Henstridge only yesterday evening after the theatre performance. Miss Henstridge currently works at the theatre and can often be found in a variety of roles.”” He frowned, reading the last sentence again. He had no knowledge of who this Miss Henstridge was but, evidently, she was not only a theatre performer but also a lady eager for a little additional company. Company that, apparently, he had been willing to give her.

“This is nothing but codswallop!”

“I am well aware of that,” Lord Huntsford replied, wandering around the room but flailing his hands in all directions at the same time. “But those in the ton will question it.”

“No doubt there will be a good many of them already gossiping about me,” James muttered, pressing one hand to his forehead and staring down at the words. “If I knew

who this Mrs. Fullerton was, I swear I should be tempted to call her out!”

Lord Huntsford’s smile was a little tight. “I understand the sentiment.” His hands settled on his waist, elbows akimbo. “There are, unfortunately, very few gentlemen with a last name beginning with the same letter as yours, and thus, I suspect the majority of the ton will be looking to you as the gentleman in question.”

Squeezing his eyes closed, James allowed the flare of anger in his heart to burn upwards, spreading heat through his chest. His hands curled tightly into fists and he slammed one down hard on the table, making the clean china cups and saucers rattle.

“This is utterly unfair! I have been thrown into a quagmire without having any reason to be there! The ton will whisper about me, the ladies will no longer be willing to speak with me, and whilst you state you believe Lady Essington will be glad of my company still, I fear it may not be so.” A deep curl of fear began to blossom in his heart and James caught his breath, struggling to think of such a thing without a worry. “Whatever am I to do?”

Lord Huntsford rubbed at his lips for a moment, his brows cutting a thick line between them. “I think we must refute it.”

“But how can we do so?”

Lord Huntsford pointed one hand out toward him. “You must ask quickly. You must write to the gentlemen that we were with and beg of them to come alongside you in solidarity. That they would speak openly about your presence with them last evening and that they would refuse any and all gossip that is spread about you.”

A tiny flickering hope began to grow in James’ chest. “Do you think that will be enough?”

“I think it will have to be,” came the reply. “What else can you do but try?”

James nodded, his heart still beating a good deal more quickly than before as he once more glanced down at the paper in front of him, having not realized his fingers had scrunched around it, as though he might bring out some of his ire upon the words themselves. “You are quite right.” He let out a long breath. “And I wish to make certain Lady Essington is informed also.”

Lord Huntsford’s eyebrows lifted. “You intend to write to her?”

James nodded. “I think I must. If I am to have her continued friendship – something I have been considering at great length – then I must speak to her. I must make certain she hears from me that this rumor is naught but that.”

“You care for her.”

“Of course, I care for her!” James exclaimed, throwing up his hands. “You know I do. For heaven’s sake, I was considering matrimony only earlier this afternoon before your arrival!” He saw his friend’s eyes flare wide but did not hesitate. “I do not know if she wishes to wed again but I have every intention of courting her if she will accept me. I do not know if she will, especially now with this rumor, but I can but hope. That is why I wish to write to her at once.”

“Then go and do so,” came the reply. “In fact, if you can spare me, I shall write to the gentlemen we were with last evening also, stating the very same to them as you shall write. With both of our letters, we must hope we shall have enough of an impact to encourage society to remain favorable toward you.”

Nodding slowly, a shining truth began to reveal itself to James, lingering there in his mind, opening quietly until he realized the full extent of it.

“I do not care about society,” he said slowly, going back on some of his previous statements. “I have been anxious that ladies will give me the cut direct, that my acquaintances will shrink. But the truth is, my only concern is that of Lady Essington.” His gaze lifted to Lord Huntsford, who was nodding, evidently aware of everything James was trying to say. “I care not whether society rejects me. I care only about her opinion of me, for if I lose her friendship and her companionship, then I fear I shall lose everything.”

“Then let us hope you do not.” Lord Huntsford made his way to the door, leaving James to follow after him. “Come. The sooner we can write these letters, the better it shall be for you. I am sure of that.”

Chapter Thirteen

“Sophia, I am so very glad to see you.”

Lady Adlay smiled as she took Norah's hands. “I did tell you in my letter not to be concerned, did I not? I assured you I would be out this evening.”

“Yes, you did, but there is something very relieving in seeing you for myself.” Norah squeezed her friend's hands and then released them. “I do hope you are not wearying yourself by coming out this evening?”

Lady Adlay laughed, her eyes twinkling. “No, I am quite all right. Lord Adlay would not have allowed me from the house had I not been fully recovered.”

“You did not tell me precisely what happened,” Norah said, looping her arm through Lady Adlay's. “I know there will be other guests who will wish to speak to you but let me steal you away for a few minutes.”

“I did not want to upset you,” Lady Adlay replied, softly. “I was injured, certainly, but I am sure it was an accident.”

“I am not at all convinced.” Norah shook her head but did not go into further detail.

Lady Adlay smiled softly. “You may not be, but all that occurred was a gentleman stumbled backward and trod not only on my gown but also on my foot. When I turned, my ankle twisted and I fell rather badly. It was not his fault I fell so nor that I hit my head on the floor. He was in his cups, certainly but that is the way of many in

society!”

A lump tore into Norah’s throat. “Alas, I have had another note.” It was time now to speak of what she had learned, waiting for the realization to flare in Lady Adlay’s eyes. “It stated the injury to you was precisely because I did not do as was asked of me.”

“Good gracious.” The sparkle left Lady Adlay’s eyes. “Are you quite certain?”

“I cannot see what else it could be.” Norah sighed heavily and dropped her head. Even the thought of seeing Lord Yardley again after what she had written was sending waves of nausea through her. “I was given further instruction.”

Lady Adlay blinked. “I have not had an opportunity to read the society papers. Is there something there?”

Norah nodded. “I had to write about Lord Yardley.”

Her friend’s eyes flared. “Lord Yardley?” She listened as Norah briefly explained what she had been forced to write, releasing Norah’s arm so she could turn to stare at her.

“And you wrote this?”

“I had no choice! After what happened to you, the threat of further pain was not something I could endure. I did not write Lord Yardley’s name in full but I am sure it will be plain to all of society.” Miserable, she lowered her gaze so she would not have to look into Lady Adlay’s eyes. “Pray forgive me.”

“I have nothing to forgive.” Lady Adlay stopped walking, turned, and grasped both of Norah’s hands in hers. “You must tell him.”

Norah caught her breath in a gasp. "I cannot!"

"You must. You cannot continue to form a close acquaintance with a gentleman who does not know the truth."

Her throat constricted, making it difficult to speak. "But if I do so, then he will turn from me for good." And we are so close to something wonderful.

"How else are you to find out who is forcing your hand? You cannot simply leave things as they are, else this person will continue to demand you write what they please!"

The thought had crossed Norah's mind but she had not come up with any particular conclusion as to how to move forward.

"I am quite certain the person responsible for this monstrous behavior is someone known to you. Someone who wishes to injure you as well as those they wish to write falsehoods about."

"But I have so many acquaintances! How can I possibly work out who such a person might be?"

Lady Adlay took in a deep breath. "By telling Lord Yardley of this. By discovering which of your shared acquaintances might hold something against him."

It was an idea Norah simply could not accept. "I am much too afraid to do so, Sophia."

"But there is no other choice," came the firm reply. "Consider it, my dear friend. In speaking the truth to him, you will gain an ally. An ally that might help remove you from this dreadful situation and permit you to be free from it entirely."

Norah made to say something more, only for another lady to come toward Lady Adlay, her expression one of concern. Stepping back, Norah smiled, covering her upset and worry, and stepped away. Lady Adlay would have a great many gentlemen and ladies coming to enquire of her health and Norah did not want to take up all of her time.

Will Lord Yardley even be present this evening? Her heart had ached terribly as she had written those words into her article, tears burning in her eyes as she had sealed up the letter. But the thought of further harm coming to Lady Adlay or even to Lord Yardley himself had been too much to bear and that was what had driven her to do as she had been directed. She had said as little as possible, had used only his initial, and prayed it would be enough to turn some of society in his favor.

“Good evening, Lady Essington.”

She looked up, her breath catching. “Lord Huntsford. Pray tell me Lord Yardley is present this evening?”

A small smile played about his mouth, a gentleness softening his eyes. “I am very glad to hear you ask of him in such a way, Lady Essington. Yes, indeed he is present. His invitation to this soiree was not rescinded as he feared.”

Norah closed her eyes and let out a long breath, relief pouring into her. “I am very glad to hear you say so, Lord Huntsford.”

“It is all quite false, you understand? I believe Lord Yardley himself sent you a letter this afternoon?”

Frowning, Norah’s lips twisted to one side for a moment. “I did not receive any note, but then I have not been at home for a good part of the day. But you need not fear, I have not thought of considering it to be true. I know all too well that such things can

be naught but a rumor that holds no basis in truth.”

“I am, again, relieved to hear you speak so. Lord Yardley is, at present, staying near to the edges of the room for fear of being so ill-considered that he would be made to feel unwelcome.”

“Then I shall go to him at once.” Looking all about her, Norah did not even beg her leave from Lord Huntsford but stepped away, making her way to one side of the room and then the other in search of him.

And then, her eyes found him.

Lord Yardley was leaning back against the wall, standing just behind two other gentlemen who had their backs to him. His eyes were darting from one side of the room to the other, never lingering in one place for any length of time. One hand clasped a glass of brandy whilst the other was clasped into a tight fist, held down tightly by his side. It was as though he were hiding, as though he were fearful of being seen by anyone.

Her heart tore.

I am the cause of this.

Lady Adlay’s words came back to her but Norah dismissed them immediately. She could not tell him the truth, not now! Not when he was in such distress, not when he was so very concerned. Norah took in a deep breath, lifted her chin, and made her way directly toward him. She might not be eager to tell him everything but, for the moment at least, she would do all she could to make sure both the ton and Lord Yardley knew she was not about to turn her back on him in any way whatsoever.

“Lord Yardley?” She spoke his name a little more loudly than usual, garnering the

attention of a few of the other guests. “Ah, Lord Yardley, there you are. How very good to see you.” Fixing a smile to her lips, she made her way toward him, seeing him look at her with a shadow flickering in his eyes. He did not smile but did push himself away from the wall a little, standing as tall as before.

“Lady Essington.” He breathed her name, a hint of the upset he felt lingering in his voice. “You do not have to come to greet me if you do not wish it.”

“Nonsense.” A little surprised at herself, Norah found her hand now clasping lightly to his arm, as though it had found its way there of its own accord. “You need not think you will receive any reprimand or coldness from me, Lord Yardley.”

His eyes were like dark pools. Norah shivered as his hand touched hers, suddenly grateful they were stood in a way that hid them from the other guests.

“You cannot know just how glad I am to see you standing before me in such a way.”

She smiled softly. “Why would I not do such a thing?”

“You have read the news, no doubt?”

“That does not mean I believe it,” she stated, firmly. “Lord Yardley, you need not think I am about to turn my back on you simply because a rumor has been spoken about you.”

Lord Yardley closed his eyes for a moment, letting it out slowly. The tension she saw etched in his features began to fade away, as though he had been waiting for a single word from her so that he might feel a little more at ease.

How can I tell him I am the cause of his distress?

“I know of your character, Lord Yardley. I know you are not the sort of gentleman who would do such a thing.”

Shaking his head fervently, Norah felt Lord Yardley’s hand squeeze hers gently. “I am not,” he said, with such a determination that Norah wanted to protest that she did not need to be convinced. “I have gentlemen who were with me that evening. We were at Whites. I was nowhere near the theatre.”

“I am already convinced of your innocence!” Norah glanced around, attempting to regulate her voice. “You need not say anything that will urge me to believe you. I already trust you, Lord Yardley. I am convinced you are the very best of gentlemen. I do not think I have ever found such contentment and enjoyment in any gentleman’s company before. I should hate to be separated from you and, therefore, have no intention to ever be so.”

She had not meant to speak with such vehemence nor give him such an insight into the depths of her feelings but the urge to encourage him, to give him an assurance of her commitment to their current connection was overwhelming. Lord Yardley’s eyes widened slightly but he did not say anything. Instead, he simply looked back into her eyes and Norah returned his gaze steadily, all too aware of the quickening of her heart. He was so very handsome and had such a wonderful character that Norah knew it was quite impossible for her heart not to be affected. The difficulty she had brought him by writing that particular piece was hard to see, however, and that knowledge brought Norah herself a good deal of pain.

“Lady Essington, I must speak my heart to you.”

Her eyes flared. “Now?”

Lord Yardley smiled, his expression brightening as though someone had lit a candle near to them both. “I think it must be now, Lady Essington. I confess I have long had

the intention of speaking to you about this matter but as yet, I have not found opportunity.”

Rather than feeling any delight and flare of hope over what he now sought to speak with her about, Norah’s heart dropped low to the ground, her struggling smile evidence of her inner turmoil. Whatever he was to ask her, Norah was quite certain it was to do with their present connection and, whilst she knew what her heart was beginning to yearn for, her mind would not allow her to even consider it. She could not! Not when she was the one who had written the article that now caused Lord Yardley so much difficulty.

“And you believe this is now the best opportunity?” she asked, trying to keep her voice light and her expression a little mirthful by lifting one eyebrow gently. “We may be interrupted at any moment!”

“Ah, but I am too much of a gentleman to ask you to step outside with me so that we might be a little more....in a private situation,” came the immediate reply. “Lady Essington, you must be aware that I have enjoyed your company of late. Indeed, I do not think there has been one single social occasion where I have not sought you out!”

Gentle happiness began to pull at Norah’s lips and she could not help but smile despite the warring in her soul. “That is true, Lord Yardley,” she agreed softly. “We have found something of a companionship with each other, I would agree.”

Something flickered in his eyes and he took a small step closer to her. Norah’s breath caught in her chest and the rest of the room began to fade. She did not hear the conversations of others any longer, did not even remember that they were there. Her eyes were fixed to Lord Yardley, caught by the depth of feeling that a simple look could invoke in her. She forgot about the article she had written, forgot completely about the threatening letter. There was nothing but Lord Yardley and the anticipation in her heart over what he was next to say.

“That companionship has become very dear to me, Lady Essington. I have been foolish not to speak to you of it sooner, I know, but I must confess the truth of my heart. There is more within it than you can possibly know and –”

“Lord Yardley!”

A high-pitched, rather loud voice came between them, forcing them back. Norah’s breathing was ragged, her anticipation so very high that it took her some moments to realize they were being interrupted. Lord Yardley’s eyes widened and he cleared his throat abruptly, the harsh sound bringing Norah back to herself. The heat in her stomach burned a fire up through her, her face warm as she turned to see who it was that had decided to interrupt them so.

“What is this I have read of you?”

Lady Maude.

Norah tried to smile, tried to appear amiable but the frustration at being interrupted by such a rude, disingenuous young lady was difficult to hide. Not that such a thing mattered, however, for Lady Maude did not so much as look at her but instead came to stand directly in front of her, facing Lord Yardley and pushing her back out of the conversation entirely. Norah found herself forced to stand next to Miss Patterson, the shy, quiet creature who seemed constantly to be in Lady Maude’s shadow.

“Good evening, Lady Maude.” Lord Yardley’s eyes caught Norah’s, silently begging her to forgive him. “If you are not aware, I was just now talking to Lady Essington and –”

“It must be quite untrue, I am sure of it,” Lady Maude interrupted. “You are not the sort of gentleman to do such a thing. Besides, did I not hear the Earl of Hull state you were in his company at the time of this supposed interaction? Were you not all at

Whites?”

“Yes, Lady Maude, I was.” Lord Yardley put his hands behind his back, pushing out his chest just a little. “I appreciate your consideration and your willingness to come and speak to me despite the rumors. None of what you have read of me is true.”

Lady Maude nodded, throwing a glance behind her – although it was not directed toward Norah but rather to Miss Patterson.

“You see?” she said, as Miss Patterson nodded quickly, her eyes a little wide as though she were afraid of what Lady Maude might say next. “I was quite certain it was naught but falsehood. I am sure the ton will see I am more than willing to be in your company and that they, in turn, will readily accept you again and allow such rumors to fade quickly.”

Norah lifted one eyebrow at the lady’s statement, then caught the smile on Lord Yardley’s face. Silently scolding herself for thinking so poorly of the lady when she had clearly brought a little relief to Lord Yardley, Norah turned her attention to Miss Patterson, thinking it best she try some sort of conversation with the lady rather than waiting for Lady Maude to step back and allow her to finish her conversation with the gentleman.

“Miss Patterson, is it not?”

The lady smiled but her gaze strayed low to the ground. “Indeed. Good afternoon, Lady Essington.”

Her voice was quiet, her expression demure. She was so very unlike Lady Maude that Norah silently questioned how such a friendship could have sprung up! Mayhap it was that both their fathers or mothers had been dear friends and thus, the expectation of friendship between their daughters had been quickly encouraged.

“And are you enjoying London?” Norah asked, struggling to think of what else to say and no suggestion of conversation came from Miss Patterson herself. “Is this your first Season?”

“My second, and yes, it is most enjoyable. My father is eager for me to remain close to Lady Maude and I have been particularly favored by her company.” Miss Patterson still did not look at Norah but, much to her frustration was quickly beckoned forward by Lady Maude. Without even a word of farewell, Miss Patterson hurried to stand next to Lady Maude, leaving Norah to stand entirely alone again. Anger began to boil in her veins, realizing that, for the second time, Lady Maude was attempting to force her out of the conversation with Lord Yardley – and succeeding too. Evidently, she had heard and perhaps seen Norah’s conversation with Miss Patterson and had decided to bring that to a swift end, perhaps to discourage Norah from lingering.

Heaving a sigh, Norah turned her head and made to walk away. Lady Maude, for the moment, had succeeded for Norah would not bring herself to interrupt in the same way the lady herself had done. That would be very rude indeed and would not be becoming of a lady.

“Lady Essington?”

The anger washed away in a moment at the sound of Lord Yardley’s voice.

“Lady Essington, forgive me for ending our conversation so abruptly.”

She turned back to face him, all too aware of the tight, angry expression that instantly captured Lady Maude’s face. Lord Yardley had made his way between both ladies, although Lady Maude looked as though she might attempt to grab his arm at any moment to keep him beside her.

“But of course, Lord Yardley, I quite understand,” she replied, softly. “You have

further acquaintances to speak to.” A sudden burst of mirth threatened to make her laugh at the sudden grimace and roll of his eyes that she knew was directed toward Lady Maude. “Please, do not worry.”

“Mayhap I might call on you soon?” The earnestness in his eyes and his voice made Norah smile, her heart swelling softly. “Or mayhap you might wish to take a walk in the park with me? We will be able to continue our discussion without interruption that way.”

I will have to tell him the truth.

Her heart sank and her smile faded. “Yes, Lord Yardley. I should like either of those suggestions very much.” That was the truth, of course, but there came with it the haunting awareness she might very soon be bringing such an upset to Lord Yardley’s heart that he would pull himself from her company forever.

“Capital.” His broad smile shone happiness into his eyes and Norah swallowed hard, knowing she would soon shatter that particular happiness.

“I look forward to receiving your note,” she stated, finding her heart did not speak of the same sentiment. “Good afternoon, Lord Yardley.”

He bowed toward her, his smile still lingering. “Good afternoon, Lady Essington.”

Chapter Fourteen

James let out a long breath, sanded the letter, and folded it. Sighing to himself, he warmed the wax and then sealed it up, knowing he was about to bring great displeasure to Lady Maude.

“Is there a reason you appear so melancholy?”

Looking up, James rolled his eyes at his friend. “And are you now simply deciding to walk into my house without any warning and announce yourself without even my butler’s awareness?” His grin took any bite from his words and Lord Huntsford only laughed.

“I thought to come and join you on your walk with Lady Essington this afternoon,” he said, as James’ smile shattered. “I think St James’ Park is very fine this time of day.”

“I hardly think –”

“And one Lady Josephine has told me that she too will be in the park this afternoon also, which is my only reason to accompany you,” Lord Huntsford finished, as James let out a long breath of relief, making his friend chuckle. “I have no intention of walking alongside you and hearing what you have to say to Lady Essington, have no fear. Although,” he continued, sitting down in one of the larger, more comfortable chairs, “I must ask how the ton have treated you these last few days?”

James considered, tilting his head to one side, his eyes roving around the ceiling as he

thought. “My first return to society was that soiree, where Lady Essington came to declare herself quite determined to remain in my company.”

“And, thereafter, Lady Maude.”

Sighing, James pinched the bridge of his nose, tension flooding him. “I am, just now, writing to Lady Maude.” He waved a hand, realizing he was changing the topic of conversation. “However, since then – which was only two days ago – I have found myself whispered about, talked about and certainly there have been a few more stares and two ladies, in particular, would not so much as look at me but, on the whole, I appear to have made my way out of society relatively unscathed!” Making his way across the room, he rang the bell. “I am sure there have been more rumors since that was written about me, however. That will have something to do with it?”

Lord Huntsford shook his head. “There has been nothing,” he replied, as James walked to the door to hand the letter to the waiting footman, telling him that it was to be delivered at once. When he turned back to his friend, Lord Huntsford was frowning hard. “Come to think of it, there has not been a single word from Mrs. Fullerton since the article that was written about you.”

James pursed his lips. “And is that unusual?”

“I should say so.”

Pouring himself a measure of brandy – feeling he needed it after writing his letter to Lady Maude – James poured another measure for Lord Huntsford and then handed it to him. “Perhaps something is wrong with Mrs. Fullerton.”

“Mayhap, although given that we do not know the true name of the lady – or the gentleman, for it might well be a gentleman writing also – then it is very difficult to say.” His eyes narrowed slightly as he looked at James. “Did you say you were

writing to Lady Maude?”

“Indeed.” James ran one hand over his eyes, shaking his head as he looked back at his friend. “Some weeks ago, it would have meant everything to me to have received such attention from her. Now, having unwittingly taken your advice of ignoring the lady and giving my attention to another, it seems she is quite determined to capture me!”

Lord Huntsford’s lips lifted on one side. “And you mean to say you are not at all interested?”

“I am not. Lady Essington is the sole keeper of my heart and I look back upon my fascination with Lady Maude and wish only to berate myself for my foolishness.”

“That would save me doing so, certainly,” Lord Huntsford quipped, making James chuckle. “And you say she wrote to you?”

“She did.” James shrugged one shoulder and tried to appear nonchalant. “I confess I found it a rather strange letter. It is as though she is most eager for my company having spent the first few weeks of the Season doing nothing whatsoever to encourage my attention!”

Lord Huntsford took a sip from his glass and then rested his head back against the chair. “Should you wish to hear my opinion on the lady, then I shall give it to you.”

“Please!” James spread out both hands wide, one still clutching his glass. “I have no affection for the lady any longer – if affection is what it was – and would be glad, therefore, to hear what you have to say.”

Grinning broadly, Lord Huntsford lifted his glass as though he were toasting James. “Lady Maude delights in the approval and the appreciation of others. She loves to be

considered, loves the eagerness of those around her in their desire to fawn over her. Indeed, I believe she enjoys nothing more than toying with the various gentlemen that surround her. You would not have been the first to have sought her consideration with such desperation, I am sure.”

A slight flush ran over James’ skin but he did not deny it. “That may well be so.”

“And thus, Lady Maude thought to play with you a little. Seeing your eagerness, she pushed you away and showed you very little interest, glad when that only increased your fervor all the more!”

James’ lips tightened but he nodded. Now that he had seen Lady Maude as she truly was, he saw the truth in Lord Huntsford’s words.

“However, now that your interest in Lady Essington has entirely removed Lady Maude from your thoughts, Lady Maude herself finds that situation untenable. She wants to be admired, wants to be revered by almost every gentleman in London! And the fact that you now think of another in place of her is most unsettling. Thus, she will now do all she can to set herself before you once more, encouraging your interest and practically demanding you forget about Lady Essington entirely.”

“But I shall not do so,” James replied, as Lord Huntsford smiled. “What I feel for Lady Essington is more profound than anything I have ever felt for Lady Maude. In fact, I find myself rather ashamed I was so caught up with appearance alone. Perhaps what you have said is correct. If Lady Maude seeks my interest merely so it is given to her rather than to Lady Essington, then I am afraid she shall not be successful.”

“No?”

“I intend to court Lady Essington if she will have me.” James’ heart lifted in a great swell of hope and happiness as he saw Lord Huntsford’s smile. “I am seriously

considering matrimony and the like. Lady Essington is all I might hope for in a bride and I shall not be drawn from her.”

“It is good she did not think poorly of you after the article in the society papers.”

“It speaks well of her character, and of the trust she has in me.”

Lord Huntsford lifted his glass again. “Then I do hope she accepts your court. Truth be told, I have very little doubt she will do, given the fervency with which she sought you out at the soiree!”

That remark warmed James’ heart all the more and he settled back into his chair with a sigh. He was looking forward to his afternoon with Lady Essington all the more.

“Thank you for joining me.”

“I am glad to.” Lady Essington smiled up at him, although there was a slight dullness to her eyes that James wondered at. “It is a fine day and I am very happy to see you again.”

“Then you find us both in the same mind, Lady Essington.” He offered her his arm and was surprised at the momentary hesitation she displayed. Her eyes caught his, her smile gone in a second. But then she gave herself a small shake, took his arm, and began to walk alongside him. Something began to pull at James’ heart, tugging it down toward the ground. Was this not to be as he had hoped? Would he find himself returning home in a state of disappointment?

“I had hoped we might continue our conversation that we began at the soiree some days ago,” he said, aware of the way his heart began to quicken. “That is only if you would wish for that to take place, however. I quite understand if you do not wish to.”

Her eyes lifted to his as she turned her head to look at him. “I have every desire to continue our conversation, Lord Yardley. I will make myself quite plain – I find myself drawn to you.”

There was no hesitation now and James’ heart slammed hard, making him catch his breath.

“I will say, however, that there is another matter we must discuss first. A matter, I fear, that will have you turning from me.”

James frowned, his steps slowing as he turned to face her, holding her gaze steadily. Lady Essington’s face had begun to pale, her eyes had widened at the corners and she was pressing her lips together tightly. His mind began to whirl with a thousand thoughts at once, suddenly afraid of what it was she was going to say – without having any real recognition of what such a thing might be.

“I am so afraid to tell you.”

Her whispered words spoke of pain and James lowered his head quickly, his other hand brushing across her chin, encouraging her to look up.

“Lady Essington, your words strike fear into my heart but I will hear them. Please do not be afraid to tell me.”

She closed her eyes, his fingers still holding her chin gently. “I will begin by stating I have never wanted to injure you in any way. My heart has such a deep affection for you that it has been so very difficult to do as I have been instructed.”

“Instructed?” None of what she said was of any comprehension to James and he simply stared at her, waiting for her to explain.

“Yes, instructed. Demanded. Forced upon me.” A long, heavy breath escaped her and James felt her tremble as his hand ran from her chin to her shoulder and down her arm until he caught her fingers with his own. He did not care if anyone else should see such a display, there was something gravely wrong and clearly, Lady Essington was most upset by it.

“Pray speak openly.”

Her eyes opened and she looked back into his face. “I am afraid to do so.”

“Why?”

“For fear you will step back from me, step away from me and return to your house without ever permitting me further explanation.” Her hand pressed his, her eyes darting all around his face as though she sought to find some hope in his expression. “Might you promise me you will wait until I have explained all before you decide what you will do thereafter?”

James nodded fervently. “But of course.” He wanted to say more, wanted to urge her to speak with as much openness as she could but remained silent, waiting. His stomach was churning, sweat was beading on his brow and his heart continued to clatter against his chest as he looked into her eyes.

She was close to tears.

“I – I am Mrs. Fullerton.”

For a moment, the name did not mean anything to him. Blinking, James sought to find the name somewhere in his memory, only for the truth to strike hard at him.

Mrs. Fullerton.

His eyes closed.

“It is not as you think, however.” Her words were hurried now, hasty as though she were in great pains to speak them. “You need not think that I –”

“The reason you trusted that the article was naught but a lie was because you wrote it.” Opening his eyes, he saw the pale-faced Lady Essington looking back at him. Her eyes were glistening, her mouth was opening and closing but she did not say anything in response.

“You wrote lies about me. Lies that would injure me severely.”

“I will not deny it, but it is not as it seems.”

A harsh laugh broke from his lips and Lady Essington closed her eyes. A single tear dripped onto her cheek.

“And here I was, believing you cared for me!”

“I do!” Her eyes flew open and her hand tightened on his, her other hand suddenly flat against his chest. “I do care for you, Lord Yardley. I have such a strong and growing affection that –”

“An affection that was so strong, it did not stand in your way when it came to writing such an untruth.” James knew his words held a great deal of irony and the harshness of them might very well injure Lady Essington in return, but he did not care. The shock was too great, overwhelming him with emotion that he simply could not keep in check. “Good gracious, I was only recently considering just how foolish I was when it came to Lady Maude, realizing I did not know her character – whereas now, it seems, I do not know your character very well either!”

“That is not so.” Her jaw worked but James stepped back, pulling his hand from hers. “You do know me. I am exactly as I appear, save for this one secret. A secret I have been forced to tell you because of the difficulties that have now been thrown at me.”

James did not care what such difficulties were. He wanted nothing more to do with the lady, not when he knew now that she was the one who had written those scandalous lies about him. “I think our walk together is at an end.”

“ Please , Lord Yardley!” Tears began to drip from her eyelashes but James was unmoved. “You promised me you would remain until I finished my explanation. There is so much more that you do not yet know and –”

“I believe I have heard all the explanations that I require.” He did not smile, did not even look at her but instead turned away, wanting to remove himself from her company just as quickly as he could. Without even bidding her farewell, James strode away down the path and further into the park, his breathing hard and fast, his body tense with anger.

How could she do such a thing? How could she pretend to be so eager for my company, so contented to converse with me, whilst having such an intention as that? He shook his head to himself, glowering down at the path by his feet. I have been a fool. I ought to have considered her a little more carefully.

“Do be careful, Yardley!”

A loud exclamation forced James to a stop. Lifting his gaze, he saw Lord Huntsford looking back at him with one lifted eyebrow, his arms folded across his chest.

“Is there a reason you are striding so forthrightly through the park whilst I am wandering carefully and slowly, waiting for Lady Josephine to arrive?” His mild tone clattered hard against James’ anger and he looked away.

“I am returning to my townhouse.”

“And where is Lady Essington?”

Scowling, James threw up his hands. “I care not! I do not care where the lady is nor what she is doing. Our acquaintance is at an end.”

“So soon?” Lord Huntsford’s eyes tore toward his hair. “But what has happened? This is not what was meant to happen. I thought I would find you with such a delighted heart and a broad smile on your face!”

James shook his head, his hands loosening from the tight fists he had held them in. “I had thought so also.” A heavy weariness seemed to tug at him, dropping his shoulders as his head lowered. “But it was not to be.”

“And why is that?”

Having no recourse but to tell his friend what had happened, James sighed and rubbed one hand over his eyes. “She is Mrs. Fullerton.” He waited for Lord Huntsford’s loud exclamation but, much to his surprise, it did not come. Instead, Lord Huntsford merely nodded, as though this had not come as much of a shock.

“I see.”

“I am deeply angry.”

“That is....understandable, although you must admit it is rather confusing.”

James blinked. “Confusing?”

“Recall that an additional piece was written about Lady Essington herself,” Lord

Huntsford reminded him, striking James with yet another shock as that came immediately to his mind. “Why would the lady write something so injurious about herself?”

You did not listen to her.

The slow, stabbing ache of his conscience drove itself into James’ heart and he looked away, letting out a hissing breath between his teeth.

“You did not ask her?”

Closing his eyes, James shook his head. “No, I did not.”

“Why ever not?”

“Because I was angry.” Throwing up his hands, James let out a loud groan, tipping his head back to the sunny skies. “She was so very afraid to tell me the truth and begged me to listen to all she had to say before making any sort of decision as to our continued acquaintance.”

Lord Huntsford’s lips pulled to one side but he did not say anything, a silent question evident in his eyes.

“No, I did not do as I had promised.” James gritted his teeth, angry now at his foolish, reactionary behavior. “I thought only of myself and my own upset and tore myself from her without permitting her to explain anything.”

“I see.”

“And now I am naught but a fool, as well I know.”

“There is much more for her to say,” came the quiet reply. “I would encourage you to return to her so she has the opportunity to do so.”

James nodded, shame building inside him until it threatened to shatter his heart into a thousand pieces. A large part of him wanted to return home and hide away, lost in his shame whilst the other part of him practically screamed at him to run and find her before it was too late.

“Go!” Lord Huntsford gave his shoulder a gentle shove, pulling him from his thoughts. “Lingering here and speaking to me will do nothing.”

Nodding, James turned and hurried away, back to where he had left Lady Essington. His breathing was ragged as he walked with quickened footsteps, his hands clenching and unclenching as he sought desperately to find her.

I am sorry. I am sorry I did not listen to you, Lady Essington. The quiet pleadings in his heart echoed what it was he wanted to say to the lady when he finally found her. What is the full explanation? What is it that has caused you to write such things about me, about yourself? That last question had his brow furrowing all the more, realizing now just how confusing that part was. Why had she written something so damning about herself? If she was Mrs. Fullerton, what reason could there possibly be to injure herself so in front of all society?

His mind whirring, James made his way back toward the spot where he had left Lady Essington, but she was nowhere to be seen. He turned to the left and then to the right, his eyes on the path in the hope she would be walking there, but he could not make her out. His heart sank. He was too late.

Chapter Fifteen

“ Y ou must dry your eyes.”

Norah sniffed, pressing the handkerchief to her eyes once more. “You did not see his expression, Sophia.”

“But I know you well enough to know you will find a way through this predicament,” came the firm reply. “You might consider writing him a letter, or simply going to speak to him again. He – ”

“He has made it quite clear he does not want to speak to me again.” Norah’s voice cracked with emotion but she swallowed her tears and tried to continue. “If he wishes to ask me anything more about the matter, then he will have to come to speak to me.”

Lady Adlay reached over and pressed Norah’s hand, her eyes sympathetic. “My dear friend, you did what was right. You should be glad you found the courage to tell him the truth.”

“I know.” The pain did not lessen, however, and Norah took in another gulping breath. “I was so very afraid. I knew what he wanted to say. I could tell what he wanted to offer for me and, as much as I wanted to accept him, I could not have done so without him being aware of the truth.” She closed her eyes, forcing back any further tears. “It was very difficult indeed but I did not think he would turn from me in that forceful manner. I believed he would listen to me, that he would let me explain it all before choosing how he would react to such news. But he did not.”

Lady Adlay's fingers tightened gently. "I am sure he will realize there is more to be said. Perhaps he needs a little time."

Norah nodded but did not allow even a single flare of hope to ignite in her heart. Lady Adlay had not seen Lord Yardley's expression when she had told him, had not heard the words he had flung back at her. There was such anger and disappointment there that Norah had no expectation of him ever being in her company again.

"Come now." Lady Adlay rose and made her way to the bell pull. "We shall have more tea and cakes and improve your spirits in time for this evening."

Norah shook her head. "I do not think I can take part in any joviality tonight. I shall remain at home."

"No, you shall not," Lady Adlay stated, quite firmly. "You shall attend the evening ball as you planned and I shall be with you. If Lord Yardley is there, then we shall consider what to do at the time. You may find his reaction surprises you."

Norah did not have the heart to refuse. Lady Adlay was doing all she could to encourage her but Norah wanted only to remain at home and perhaps retire early. It seemed, however, that she was still to attend the ball, although there was naught but reluctance when it came to the thought of seeing Lord Yardley again.

"Goodness, that was very quick!" A scratch at the door sounded and Norah called for the maid to come in, expecting to either instruct her about bringing a fresh tea tray or that the servant had already anticipated her needs and had brought one already.

"My lady, you have a note."

Norah blinked in surprise, a sudden thrill racing up her spine and sending her heart into all manner of clamorings. "Thank you." Dismissing the footman, she looked up

sharply as Lady Adlay clapped her hands.

“You see? That will certainly be from Lord Yardley, apologizing for what he has said and done and, instead, begging you for another opportunity to talk about the matter.”

Norah shook her head. “I am not certain.”

“I am sure of it.” Gesturing for her to turn the letter over, Norah turned her attention back to it, turning it over to break the seal.

Her stomach plummeted to the floor, and her heart seemed to come to a sudden stop, making it difficult to take in air.

There was no seal.

“Oh, no.” Closing her eyes, Norah drew in a deep breath, hearing Lady Adlay’s question as to what it was that troubled her so. “It is from the very same person who wrote to me at the first, I am sure of it.”

“You mean, the person who sent you those demands?”

Norah nodded, breaking the seal and unfolding the letter with trembling hands. Her eyes drove over the first few lines, seeing the very same hand there.

“Well?”

Taking in another breath, Norah handed the letter to Lady Adlay. Much to her surprise, she did not feel any great upset or fright. Instead, there was nothing but a tight ball of anger rolling around her stomach, forcing itself into the very depths of her heart and rendering her quite wrathful indeed. How dare this person demand I do yet more to injure Lord Yardley? Can they not see just how injured he was already by

such a thing? Why do they wish to do yet more to him?

“Good gracious! This is a very damaging statement indeed.”

“I quite agree.” Norah rose from her chair and began to pace up and down the room. “It states that I am to tell the ton that he is nothing but a philanderer whose particular taste runs toward those who are already wed.” Her hands clenched tightly together. “I shall not do it!”

Lady Adlay bit her lip. “And if you do not, then they say they will injure someone close to you – or you yourself.”

“Yes, they do. It is as before, and I confess that such a statement frightens me, but I cannot say such lies about Lord Yardley! It would quite ruin him.”

Her friend nodded. “It would indeed. Society would reject him entirely.”

“Which I cannot permit them to do. He would be forced to return to his estate, his life thereafter would be shadowed by such a thing and even his family’s good name could be tainted, for many years to come!”

Spreading her hands, one still clutching the note, Lady Adlay’s somewhat pale face looked back at Norah’s. “Then what are you to do?”

Norah lifted her chin. Determination flooded her, and resolve filled her to the very brim. No longer did she feel such upset or disillusion. Instead, there was a renewed vigor and determined purpose. “I shall take the letter and I shall force Lord Yardley to pay attention to it,” she stated, firmly. “Whether he wishes to hear more from me thereafter shall be entirely up to him. But I will not do such a thing again. He will have full knowledge of what has taken place and, in knowing of it, will perhaps be able to surmise who it might be that seems so very eager to pursue him with such

difficulties.”

Lady Adlay gave a small smile. “I think that is an excellent plan. He shall not be able to turn away from you then!”

Norah shook her head. “I have no promise, no hope even, that he will consider our connection in the way that he did only earlier today, but at least my conscience will be entirely clear. If he decides he cannot trust me, then I have merely to accept his decision. But I must hope that in revealing this to him, he will be able to guide me from this strange, dark path. I do not want to hurt him again. I do not want anyone to be injured because of my lack of action but I cannot remain silent as I did before.” Reaching for the letter, she held it in front of her eyes and read the harsh, biting words once more. “With Lord Yardley’s help, I will discover the person responsible for such dark demands.” Folding up the letter, she put it into her pocket and looked back at her friend. “I must. There is no other way forward.”

“Do you see him?”

Norah shook her head. “I do not.”

“He must be present somewhere!”

“Unless he, too, has decided he does not wish for company this evening and has chosen to remain at home.”

Lady Adlay grimaced, her lips curving down slightly. “I shall pray he has more courage than that.”

As do I. Walking arm in arm with Lady Adlay through the ballroom, Norah kept her chin lifted and let her gaze rove from one side to the other. Her heart was picking up speed with every step she took, afraid he would not be present. If she could not find

him, then what was she to do? The article would be expected within a day or so and if she did not write it and did not send it, then there would be a potential danger for Lord Yardley himself, if not one of her other acquaintances or friends.

“There, I see him!”

Norah’s breath hitched as Lady Adlay clutched at her arm, her fingers tight.
“Where?”

“He is speaking to Lady Maude. Do you see?”

Norah’s heart plummeted to the floor but she did not look away. She prayed silently that he had not returned to Lady Maude simply because of their circumstances, releasing her arm from Lady Adlay’s as she took in another deep breath.

“I shall speak to him immediately.”

“You have the letter?”

She nodded. “I do.” Swallowing against the growing ache in her throat and aware that her emotions were bubbling at the very surface, Norah told herself silently to keep herself composed regardless of what occurred. She did not want to embarrass herself, particularly in front of Lady Maude.

Clearing her throat gently and setting her shoulders, Norah made her way from Lady Adlay toward Lord Yardley, keeping her eyes trained on him. He did not look toward her immediately, for his attention seemed to be fixed on Lady Maude. Norah’s heart twisted as he smiled broadly at something the lady said. Her heart twisted. The last time she had been in his company, he had not smiled. Instead, he had been angry, frustrated, and upset. She did not know if he would ever smile at her like that again.

I shall not interrupt the conversation, as Lady Maude herself did. Standing quietly, Norah chose a spot a little to Lady Maude's left, given that her right side was occupied by Miss Patterson. The latter stood with her head lowered just a little, as though she did not want to be seen by anyone and did not want Lord Yardley to consider that she was worthy of conversation. Norah thought to give her a small smile, to make her aware that, in her eyes at least, she was acknowledged but Miss Patterson did not turn her head even a little.

Sighing inwardly, Norah kept her head up and waited for Lord Yardley to notice her. It took some moments and with every second that passed, Norah felt the weight of their previous interaction sink heavily upon her shoulders as if she were being pushed slowly into the floor. Her skin prickled as his eyes finally caught hers, pulled away again the very next moment by something Lady Maude said. Norah closed her eyes briefly, fighting against the worry that she would be entirely ignored by Lord Yardley and would be left to stand here quite alone, for as long as he wished her to be. Perhaps, she considered, that would be a fitting punishment for what she had done.

“Lady Essington – Norah.”

Her eyes flew open as Lord Yardley's deep voice caught her ears. In allowing her thoughts to capture her, she had not seen him step forward, had not seen him come closer to her, ending his conversation with Lady Maude.

“Lord Yardley.” Her voice was hoarse but her eyes were wide with astonishment as Lord Yardley smiled at her. “I – I have to speak to you.”

“And I to you, also.” He took a step closer, his blue eyes suddenly grave. “You asked for me to listen to you. I did not do so. I was angry.”

“You have every right to be –”

“But I ought to have more faith in you, should I not?” His hand touched hers and Norah found herself clinging to it, her heart finally warming, rather than being pulled low by fear and worry. “You are not the sort of lady who is manipulative, dark, and cruel. There must be a reason for what you wrote. A reason that I hope you will give to me now.”

Norah swallowed, closing her eyes to take in more air. She felt a little dizzy, absolutely overwhelmed by his response to her. “I had not expected this.”

“There is a lot to explain, I presume?”

Opening her eyes, she nodded. “Perhaps we should find somewhere a little....” Her eyes flew to where Lady Maude and Miss Patterson now stood, their heads low together as Lady Maude spoke rapidly, although Norah did not hear a word of what she said. “A little more discreet?”

“Indeed.” He released her hand. “Come. There is a quieter corner over here.”

Norah followed after him, pausing only to nod and smile at Lady Adlay, who had been waiting a short distance away, her hands clasped tightly together. The brilliant smile on her friend’s face caused her lips to curve and she turned back, ready to explain everything to Lord Yardley.

“I do hope you will accept my very sincere apology for leaving you as I did in the park.” Lord Yardley’s expression was a little harder to see now that they stood in the quieter corner of the ballroom where the shadows clung a little more tightly. “It was wrong of me to do so.”

She smiled, their hands finding one another in the gloom. “I quite understand. I am only relieved you thought to return, Lord Yardley. I cannot tell you how much joy this conversation in itself is bringing to me! Although I fear the happiness we share at

present will not last for long.” Seeing the confusion on his face, she pulled the letter from her pocket and handed it to him.

“What is this?”

“ This is the reason I wrote what I did,” she said, by way of explanation. “This was received only this afternoon and I confess, I do not know what I ought to do.” The tightness came back into her chest just a little. “The fear you would be severely injured scares me deeply.”

Waiting for him to finish reading the note, Norah watched the play of emotions flickering across his face. First, there came the way he blinked rapidly, lifting the paper a little closer to himself. Second, came shock. Shaking his head, one hand rubbed hard at his chin, only for his jaw to tighten and his eyes to narrow just a fraction.

He was angry.

“ You received this?”

“Yes. Someone else knows I am Mrs. Fullerton.”

“And they sent this to you?”

“This is not the first. It was brought to me by a small street boy, who delivered it with thought only for the coin he had received. I have kept him on as an errand boy.” She gestured to the note. “I was told I had to write the first else Lady Adlay would be injured again – or that worse would occur with either yourself or –”

“Lady Adlay’s injury came from this person?” He waved the note and Norah nodded. Briefly, she explained about the first note she had received as regarded Miss

Geraldine Pottinger and how she had chosen to ignore it – and that Lady Adlay had been injured as a consequence.

“Therefore, when the second note was received, I had no choice but to do so, out of fear that something even more untoward would occur.”

Lord Yardley closed his eyes, his face pinched. “Who would dare to do such a thing?”

“I do not know.” She moved a little closer, looking up at him. “I am more sorry than I can say that I did such a thing, but I felt as though I had no choice.”

Opening his eyes, Lord Yardley reached out, his fingers brushing gently across her cheek. The shadows hid them and Norah was all the more grateful for it, glad that she could be so close to Lord Yardley whilst being in the midst of a ball.

“I understand.” The softness of his voice smoothed away the guilt in her heart, the gentleness in his eyes sending joy into her soul. “I am even more sorrowful over what I did in removing myself from you with such haste. Had I only listened, then...” His fingers brushed the curve of her neck and Norah caught her breath. “I suppose such things do not matter any longer. We are at an understanding now.”

She smiled at him. “Yes, we are.”

“One thing I must ask, however.” His hand dropped back to his side, perhaps a little afraid that he might be seen and her reputation then brought into question. “Were you forced to write that particular piece about yourself also? That seemed, to me, to be a very strange thing indeed.”

“Oh, no, I was not.” Quickly, Norah explained what had taken place. “I assume that given there now was no way for them to add additional parts to the articles I had

already written, they then decided to threaten me directly.”

“But they chose first to write about you,” Lord Yardley mused, his eyes narrowing as he looked out across the crowd of guests. “Then about some young lady that neither you nor I know about.”

She nodded. “At least nothing was ever written about her. The person in question did not demand I do as I was asked as regarded her, at the very least.”

Lord Yardley’s lips bunched and he rubbed at his chin with one finger. “So Miss Pottinger is quite safe. Thereafter, the article was about me.”

“Yes, that is so.”

“And this next piece is also about me.”

Nodding slowly, Norah began to realize what he meant. “The person responsible for such stories is known to the both of us.”

“And obviously, there is a reason behind their desire first to injure you and, thereafter, to injure me.”

She bit her lip. “And this first story did not have as much of an impact as was desired,” she added, softly. “Hence, there is to be a second – one that will surely push you from society forever.”

Lord Yardley’s jaw worked and he looked away. Instead of trying to think as to who would do such a thing, her mind went only to the article she was to write and the effect it would have on Lord Yardley.

“I cannot do it.”

His eyes shot back to hers.

“I cannot write this piece. I cannot see you so injured.”

Lord Yardley’s hand grasped hers tightly. “But if you do not, then the consequences could be most severe. I think not of myself but rather of you! They threaten to injure you, Norah!”

“They threaten to injure you also, Lord Yardley,” she responded, softly. “Or to further injure Lady Adlay. I know you will both say that you will be careful that that such a thing does not matter, but I assure you that it does. I cannot put you in danger but I also cannot write what is being demanded.”

His fingers squeezed her own, his eyes searching her face. “Then what shall you do?”

Norah’s mind began to whirl, searching for an idea, for something that would release her from her current difficulty whilst protecting those she cared for. “I am not certain as yet but, mayhap with yourself, Lady Adlay, and I working together, we will find a way forward. A way that removes us both from this state of difficulty once and for all.”

Chapter Sixteen

“Thank you for coming.”

“But of course.” Lord Huntsford sat forward, looking out of the carriage window as though impatient they had not yet arrived. “What you have told me thus far is most intriguing.”

“And presents a great difficulty. Lady Essington will have to send something to the newspaper by the day’s end but it is clear she has no thought as to what to write as yet.”

The carriage drew up to the house and James let out a long, slow breath. “I should also thank you at this present juncture, given that it was entirely due to your words that I gave Lady Essington any further thought.” He winced as Lord Huntsford grinned. “Had you not said something I would, no doubt, be lingering in anger and frustration rather than giving her words any further consideration.”

“You are quite welcome.” Lord Huntsford climbed out of the carriage, leaving James to follow suit. Together, they began to climb the steps that led to the front of the house, seeing the door already opening for them.

“I do hope this means you shall soon be engaged, Yardley?”

Lord Huntsford’s abrupt question caught James off-guard and he tripped on one of the steps, stumbling forward before managing to catch himself in time. Lord Huntsford did nothing but laugh, his eyes bright as James flushed hot.

“I shall take that to confirm my hopes,” he told James, who closed his eyes and drew in a long, steadying breath whilst embarrassment flooded him. “I am glad, old boy. She is a lovely young lady and I think many a gentleman would be jealous of the clear affection that is shared between you.”

James tried to smile. “I thank you.”

“Many a lady, also. Although Lady Maude –”

His words died away as James started suddenly, staring back into Lord Huntsford’s face. It was as if someone had pulled back a thick curtain to reveal the glorious sunshine. Why did I not think of it before?

“We must tell the ladies.”

Handing their particulars to the butler, James found himself impatient as he was shown to the drawing room. He did not stop even to bow but hurried forward, took Lady Essington’s hands in his, and looked into her eyes.

“It is Lady Maude.”

She stared at him for a long moment, then, much to James’ astonishment, began to laugh. Lady Adlay joined in also and James took a step back, only for Lady Essington to lean into him, her head going to his shoulder.

“Forgive us, it is only that we have been waiting for you so that we might make the very same conclusion!” she exclaimed, as James finally began to smile, realizing what she meant. “Yes, it must be Lady Maude! Although why she would want to injure you, I am not yet certain.” Stepping back, she looked up at him, her smile fading, and James wanted nothing more than to pull her back tight against him – although he restrained himself, given the company he was in.

“Good afternoon, Lady Essington, Lady Adlay.” Lord Huntsford bowed low, a calming presence in amongst the angst that now filled the room. “I was reflecting with Lord Yardley only a short while ago upon Lady Maude’s character. To my mind, it seems she dislikes the fact that he now shows his affections and interest to another.” James saw the way his eyes turned to Lady Essington and then watched the slow, beautiful smile spread across her face. “It may be that, as punishment for his lack of eagerness to return to her company, she has chosen to attempt to ruin him by any means she can.”

“She must have somehow discovered you were Mrs. Fullerton,” Lady Adlay agreed, her voice a little thin as she turned to Lady Essington. “Goodness, I wish I had never introduced you to her!”

Lady Essington shook her head. “None of this is your doing, my dear Sophia. You need not look so upset. Come, let us ring for tea and decide what we are to do next. The article will have to be written very soon, one way or the other.”

James reached out and caught her arm gently. “You will not wish to carry on writing as Mrs. Fullerton? Not after you have been so discovered?”

Lady Essington smiled softly. “It is not a question as to whether or not I wish it, Lord Yardley. At the present time, I must.”

“Must?” He saw Lady Adlay and Lord Huntsford come together in conversation and stepped a little closer to Lady Essington. “This is something you must do?” he asked, keeping his voice very low indeed. “But why?”

She sighed and put one hand on his chest. “My late husband left me this townhouse and a small yearly sum – but without being ungrateful, anything I can do that would bring in a little extra coin would be a great help to me and my present circumstances.” Her eyes held his but color bloomed in her cheeks. “That is why

Lady Gillingham came to me, I suppose. Having been in my situation herself, she was all too aware that being widowed could bring financial difficulties and wanted to be of aid to me.”

“I quite understand.” Lifting his hand, he cupped her cheek, marveling inwardly at the softness of her skin. “Mayhap there will be another alternative and you will not have to rely on such an income any longer.” Seeing the question in her eyes, he shook his head. “But now is not the time for us to talk of such things. Come. We must find our way forward in this matter. You will not be under Lady Maude’s hold for much longer, Norah. I promise you that.”

“Good evening, good evening.”

James looked down at Lady Essington, glad she had been so willing to take his arm. “Are you quite well, my dear?”

“I am very anxious indeed,” came the honest reply, “but given you are here with me, I am comforted.”

He smiled at her. “There is nothing to fear. We are certain Lady Maude is the one who has done such things. There is no other that it could be! In confronting her, we must hope she will see no way forward and, thus, you shall be freed of her threats for good.”

Lady Essington nodded, taking in a deep breath as she did so. “You are quite correct. It is only that I am....afraid she will not listen. That her demands will increase all the more.”

“Then we shall decide what to do thereafter, should it come to that,” came the reply. “Do not forget we also have some power. The boy you now employ in your house, he could easily identify Lady Maude, should we ask it of him. That information could be

given either to her father or even written about in the paper itself! There are ways we can take control.”

Lady Essington let out a long, slow breath but she nodded and, looking up at him again, tried to smile.

“It will not be long until we have the opportunity to speak to Lady Maude alone. Hold onto your courage for a little longer, my dear lady.”

He felt a tremor run through her arm into his but her smile told him of her determination. This evening would bring an end to the matter, once and for all.

“She is gone into one of the smaller rooms with Miss Patterson.”

James nodded as Lady Adlay came alongside Lady Essington. “Then we are quite prepared?”

“Indeed, we are. Lord Huntsford is already engaging them in conversation so that they will linger there.” She smiled briefly. “It is good this evening assembly has so many rooms open to their guests. I am certain we shall be able to have a somewhat quiet conversation, without being overheard by too many other guests.”

A small, grim smile pulled at James’ lips. “I am certain Lady Maude will not wish to have any of our conversation overheard,” he stated, firmly. “Let us go there directly.” He saw rather than heard Lady Essington take in a deep breath, her chin lifting just a little and her green eyes darkening.

“Yes, indeed.” Her eyes caught his. “I am ready.”

Quickly, they made their way from the main assembly room, following Lady Adlay as she led them to where Lady Maude was. Stepping into the room, James turned and

hastily shut the door behind them, effectively shutting them into the room with Lady Maude and Miss Patterson. Much to his relief, there were no other guests present and he did not want that to change.

“Good gracious, Lord Yardley!” Lady Maude turned to him, her eyes wide with astonishment. “Is there some reason you wish to keep us all in this room? Surely you cannot expect to keep me from my mother who will, no doubt, soon be looking for me.” She tilted her head, a somewhat coy smile playing about her mouth. “Unless it is that you seek for any conversation between us not to be interrupted for some reason?”

“I have an excellent reason for such a request,” James replied, just as Lady Essington came to stand beside him. “That is the reason both myself, Lady Essington, Lord Huntsford, and Lady Adlay are all present in this room with you at this moment.”

He watched as the smile began to fade from Lady Maude’s face, her eyes beginning to move around the room, focusing in turn on each of the faces. “What is the meaning of this?”

Lady Essington took a step closer to the lady, her eyes a little narrowed. “You need not pretend any longer, Lady Maude. The truth is out.”

Lady Maude threw up her hands, color fading from her cheeks. “I know not what you are speaking of.” Casting a glance toward Miss Patterson as though she might understand, Lady Maude shook her head. Miss Patterson kept her head bowed low, her hands clasped in front of her and she did not say a single word. Lady Maude let out another huff of breath. “This is ridiculous. Speak plainly or do not speak at all!”

James looked to Lady Essington, lifting one eyebrow gently. It seemed she would have to be blunt if she were to have any answers from Lady Maude.

“The articles in the society papers,” Lady Essington began, speaking without a flicker

of hesitation in her voice. “The articles demeaning first myself and, thereafter, Lord Yardley. Those were by your hand.”

Lady Maude’s eyes flared wide and her mouth dropped open.

She is stunned we have been able to find her out. A small sense of satisfaction curled in his chest and he moved closer to Lady Essington, boldly slipping one hand about her waist so Lady Maude could be in no doubt as to how he felt about her.

“I do not know how you managed to engineer Lady Adlay’s accident, but I will not have Lord Yardley, Lady Adlay, or any of my other acquaintances continually threatened.” Lady Essington lifted her chin. “Your last letter was meant to terrify me but in that regard, you have failed. I have told Lord Yardley everything. Lord Huntsford and Lady Adlay are also aware. I shall not write anything again about Lord Yardley, not when they are naught but falsehoods.”

Lady Maude folded her arms across her chest, her eyes flashing. “Lady Essington, I have no knowledge of what it is you speak of.” Her chin lifted. “Whatever it is, I can assure you I have never threatened Lord Yardley.”

The confidence James had felt only moments ago began to fade at Lady Maude’s stringent denial. He had expected her to be angry, certainly and yes, he had thought she might deny the matter entirely but the confidence with which she spoke as well as the firmness in her eyes made him wonder if they were, in fact, mistaken.

Then who else could it be?

“You mean to say you were not the one to write that additional piece about Lady Adlay?” Lord Huntsford planted both hands on his hips whilst Lady Adlay’s eyes remained thoughtful. “You did not, thereafter, write to Lady Essington demanding she write untruths about Lord Yardley?”

“Write them where?” Lady Maude’s gaze fixed itself on Lady Essington, only for her eyes to flare wide as she suddenly realized the truth. “You mean to say that you are Mrs. Fullerton?”

Lady Essington closed her eyes. “It cannot be Lady Maude,” she murmured, opening her eyes to glance first at Lady Adlay and then up at him. “There is truthfulness in her astonishment.”

“I cannot help but agree.” James pursed his lips, just as Lady Maude clapped her hands in evident happiness.

“Ah, you are Mrs. Fullerton!” she exclaimed, the delight in her eyes nothing but a warning. “I cannot quite believe it!”

Lady Adlay pointed one finger in Lady Maude’s direction. “And you shall not say a word, Lady Maude. For if you think it would be wise for you to inform the rest of the ton about your supposed assumption that Lady Essington is Mrs. Fullerton, you would be wise to consider the consequences of such an action.”

Lady Maude laughed, her lip curling. “What consequences could there possibly be?”

Silence ran across the room but Lady Adlay did not remove her gaze from Lady Maude. Instead, she took two small steps closer, a smile playing about her mouth.

“If Lady Essington is , in fact, Mrs. Fullerton, then is there not a danger that you might find your name written in the society papers, Lady Maude?”

Lady Maude’s smile shattered and naught but a choking sound came from her throat. James felt Lady Essington’s hand move closer and he tugged her closer to him. There was now nothing but disappointment and dissatisfaction where he had expected to feel triumph and relief. If it was not Lady Maude, then James could not tell who it

might be. His mind began to fill with darkness. Lady Essington would have to write the article as she had been directed or else risk injury to herself or someone else. Society would turn its back on him. He would be forced to return to his estate.

“You do not look at all surprised, Miss Patterson.”

Lady Essington’s voice was soft, her words very quiet indeed but the weight of them made it seem as though they had been shouted aloud. James blinked in surprise at the remark, realizing quickly that the lady in question had chosen not to respond but had lowered her head all the more as if to hide her expression from them all.

“Miss Patterson?” Lady Essington’s voice was louder now, drawing the attention of everyone. “You already knew I was Mrs. Fullerton, did you not?”

Even Lady Maude turned to face her friend, her hands dropping to her sides.

“Miss Patterson?” Lady Maude moved closer but the lady did not look up. “You already knew of this?”

James’ heart began to beat a little faster as he glanced down at Lady Essington. She looked up at him, her face set. It was clear what was in her mind.

“It cannot be,” he whispered, just as Lord Huntsford cleared his throat.

“Are you suggesting, Lady Essington, that it was not Lady Maude who did such thing but, instead, was Miss Patterson?” He sounded just as incredulous as James felt but the more he considered it, the more it began to make sense. “For whatever reason would she do so?”

Lady Essington turned back to the lady, released herself from James’ embrace, and moved toward Miss Patterson. When she spoke, James was surprised at the softness

in her voice. There was no anger, no frustration, or ire. Instead, there seemed to be nothing but a gentle sense of understanding.

“You have been directed by your father to continually be in company with Lady Maude, is that not so?” Miss Patterson did not move nor speak but Lady Essington continued regardless. “There is, I assume, a specific reason for this? Perhaps you might be brave enough to inform us as to what that reason could be.”

Silence followed for some minutes. Even Lady Maude, it seemed, did not know what to say. All eyes lingered on Miss Patterson but she remained just as she had been before – silent, with her head bowed and her hands clasped.

Lady Essington drew in a deep breath. “I have, in my household, a young boy by the name of Joseph. He was the one who delivered the second note to me. I have kept him on as an errand boy.” James watched Miss Patterson closely, seeing her head lift just a little. “What you might be unaware of, Miss Patterson, is that he saw the person who wrote the note. He is quite able to identify you.”

“That cannot be so. I gave the note to – ”

Miss Patterson threw one hand across her mouth, her eyes wide with the horror of what she had just said. James blinked in astonishment, staring at the lady with utter shock washing over him. It had been Miss Patterson, then. She had been the one to add that additional paragraph to the society pages about Lady Essington. She had been the one who had tried to blackmail Lady Essington into writing more and who had caused him great strife in the process. She had been the one to injure Lady Adlay!

“Mary?” Lady Maude’s eyes were huge, one hand pressed lightly against her heart but her voice was barely loud enough for anyone in the room to hear. “Is this the truth, then?”

Miss Patterson closed her eyes and a single tear slid down onto her cheek. She gave no answer but her silence confirmed it was the truth.

“But why should you do such a thing? What caused you to behave so?”

A flush of anger suddenly appeared in Miss Patterson’s cheeks and when she opened her eyes, they were burning with a fury that James had never once expected to see from the lady. She was so quiet, so timid, and yet, evidently, had been hiding a fiery wrath beneath that silent façade.

“As if you do not know!” Miss Patterson exclaimed, throwing out one hand to point at Lady Maude. “My father has informed me of it all. You are to marry the very best of gentlemen and are to be looked upon as one of the very singular diamonds amongst in all of society.”

Lady Maude blinked. “That does not explain –”

“ I must do all I can to make certain your standing is maintained. You must be worshipped, you must be adored. And, in time, if you make the very best match in all of London, your father will make certain I am found a suitable match also. A marriage where I shall lack for nothing. But the responsibility upon my shoulders is great.”

“Marriage?” Lady Adlay spoke before anyone else. “Why can you not seek out a suitable match of your own at present?”

Miss Patterson dropped her hands to her sides and squeezed her eyes closed. “My father has used my dowry.” Her words were bitter. “He gives the appearance of wealth and consequence but he has very little coin remaining. I believe it is only his friendship with Lady Maude’s father that has given me any hope for a settled future.”

Lady Essington let out a small sigh. “My dear Miss Patterson, might it be you have taken those words of direction with a good deal too much seriousness? From the sounds of it, it appears that Lady Maude’s father is a gentleman with a generous heart. Mayhap he only wished for you to be a friend to Lady Maude, to aid her in her social endeavors.”

“He would never have wanted you to do such a thing as this!” Lady Maude’s face was white and she took a step backward. Throwing a glance to Lord Huntsford, James was relieved when he came to stand by Lady Maude. As much as he did not like the lady, it appeared she had done nothing wrong and was just as shocked as they. He did not want to see her fall or injure herself and was glad when she accepted Lord Huntsford’s arm.

Miss Patterson shook her head but tears began to drip onto her cheeks all the faster. “I am desperate. I must do all I can to assist Lady Maude! If I do not, then I shall be a spinster!”

“And thus, when you saw Lady Maude was displeased with the attention I showed to Lady Essington over her, you thought to injure Lady Essington by adding that postscript.” James walked toward Lady Essington but kept his shoulders down and his voice low, not wanting to appear at all intimidating. “But she was able to prevent you from doing so again.”

Miss Patterson nodded miserably. “Lady Maude was most displeased you continued to favor Lady Essington. Indeed, she even mentioned it in front of her father and I knew I had to do something! Something that would make Lady Maude glad that you had removed your attention from her.” She threw out one limp hand toward Lady Essington. “But I could not intercept your letters any longer given the changes you had made, so I had to come up with another idea.”

“And the letters and the threats were what you decided to do.” James wrapped one

arm around Lady Essington's shoulders, seeing the sadness in the depths of her eyes. "You injured Lady Adlay because Lady Essington did not do as you had asked."

"No!" Miss Patterson's eyes flew wide and she began to gesticulate wildly. "I did no such thing! That was an accident I was then able to use to my advantage. The truth is, I had very little idea as to what I was to do should Lady Essington refuse to write what I had demanded."

Lady Essington let out another long breath, rubbing her forehead with one hand. "And Miss Geraldine Pottinger?"

"She and Lord Umbridge were both very rude to Lady Maude in front of her mother. But given that Lord Yardley was the only one she spoke of, I then concentrated my efforts on...on you, Lord Yardley." Miss Patterson dropped her head, unable to look at anyone in the room. "I have to do such things if I am to gain a suitable match."

James shook his head. "I am in agreement with Lady Maude and Lady Essington, Miss Patterson. I do not think that such things as you have done would ever have been required of you. You have gone much too far and injured a great many people."

Lady Essington's hand on his arm prevented him from saying anything further.

"I shall not remain angry with you, Miss Patterson." Her quiet words astonished James and he looked down at her sharply, only to feel her fingers tightening gently. "You are afraid. You are scared. I quite understand those feelings. Pray, understand that this is not what was asked of you, however. I beg of you to desist."

Miss Patterson pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve and wiped at her cheeks. "I will not continue."

"I shall leave you and Lady Maude to speak but one thing I shall say before I depart."

Turning, she looked directly at Lady Maude. “Pray do not remove your friendship from Miss Patterson. You have never been and never shall be in her current circumstances. You lap up praise and adulation from practically everyone around you and complain about the few who do not – or who decide to pursue someone else.” A glance toward him made James smile, relieved beyond all measure that he had given his heart to Lady Essington rather than to Lady Maude.

“In short, Lady Maude, please attempt to show some sort of understanding and compassion to Miss Patterson. Treat her as your friend rather than an underling who must do as you bid.”

Lady Maude blinked but she did not speak. Her lips were flat, her face quite pale but she gave the tiniest of nods as she looked to Miss Patterson. James turned away from them both, following after Lady Essington as she made her way to the door. Lord Huntsford murmured something to Lady Maude and then stepped away also, followed by Lady Adlay. James stepped to one side, waiting until they had all stepped from the room before closing it behind himself, leaving Lady Maude and Miss Patterson alone.

A great rush of breath escaped him as he walked to join the other three who were standing a little away from the door. Shaking his head, James raked one hand through his hair, blowing out a long breath as he did so.

“I certainly did not expect that particular outcome,” he murmured, as Lady Essington took his proffered hand. “But it is over, at least.”

“Indeed.” Lady Essington did not look as pleased as James had expected. “I am glad on that count, certainly.”

“But you are not pleased.”

“I am sad,” Lady Essington replied, as Lady Adlay murmured she, too, felt the same. “Miss Patterson is clearly in a very difficult situation, scared for her future and thus, determined to go to extreme measures to make certain she fulfills what is expected of her. I am sorry for her for that.”

Lord Huntsford cleared his throat. “I shall make certain Miss Patterson is within my sphere of acquaintances,” he said quietly, surprising James with such consideration. “I too feel the same sympathy.”

“I confess I lack the compassion you all share,” James told them, deciding to be honest. “But I am certain it will come, in time. For the moment, I am only relieved this matter is at an end and we are all quite safe. Especially that you are safe, Norah.” He smiled at her, seeing the light return to her eyes. Her smile, he considered, was the most beautiful he had ever seen as though this circumstance had brought with it a freedom that had finally released her from any bonds of tension and fear. “We have much to discuss, my dear.”

“Although mayhap here and now is not the best situation to discuss such particulars,” she murmured, making him laugh. “Might you call on me tomorrow?”

“I shall, of course.” Taking her hand, he brushed a kiss over the back of it, feeling his heart tremble with excitement. “Tomorrow, my dear Norah. I can wait for one more day.”

Epilogue

The moment Lord Yardley stepped into the room, Norah was on her feet, her hands outstretched, ready to greet him. She had barely slept the previous night, having been both overwhelmed with relief and lingering sorrow for Miss Patterson's situation, whilst the anticipation and excitement of Lord Yardley's arrival had grown steadily with every passing hour.

"My dear Norah."

Her heart lifted as he took both of her hands in hers, only to then step even closer and lower his head. She had no time to think, no time to speak even a word before his lips caught hers in a kiss.

Her hands released from his, finding their way up over his shoulders so she might clasp them about his neck. His hands went about her waist, pulling her close to him as he angled his head, so their kiss might deepen all the more. Fire began to lick its way up Norah's core, her breathing quickened, and her heart filled with more affection and love than ever before.

When he finally pulled back, Norah could not open her eyes for some moments, hearing only their ragged breathing. Her heart still pounding furiously, she opened her eyes and looked up into his face.

Lord Yardley was smiling at her.

"I could not hold myself back even for another moment." His hand went cup her

cheek, his thumb brushing the curve of her neck. "It feels as though we have stepped into a new day, where my only thought is of you."

"I feel the very same." Her hands remained about his neck, her fingers pushing themselves gently into his hair. "I am free. I have nothing to pull me back, nothing to tug me away from what I feel. I am able to see it, to recognize it, and to give it the awareness it deserves."

Lord Yardley leaned down and kissed her cheek, his words whispered against her ear. "And can you tell me what it is you feel, my dear?"

Norah's eyes fluttered closed, her toes curling deliciously. "I feel nothing but love, Yardley."

"Love for me?"

Opening her eyes, she laughed at the teasing smile on his face. "Yes, indeed. I have never felt such emotion before. My first husband was not of my choosing and we did not spend a good deal of time in each other's company. I was not eager to be with him, as I am with you. I was contented to avoid his conversations, but I can barely wait to hear what it is you are to say. In short, I find my heart is filled with a deep and growing love for you, my dearest Yardley."

"Then I am sure it will come as no surprise to hear my heart shares such a sentiment, my dear." His voice was low and soft, wrapping itself around her heart. "We have endured a great deal but the truth has never departed from me. I love you most ardently. I want you to marry me, so we might live as husband and wife together, for that, I am sure, will bring us both a happiness that we have never before shared."

There was not even a momentary hesitation on her part. "I should like nothing more than to be your bride, Lord Yardley. Of course, I shall marry you."

He began to lower his head to kiss her again, only to pull back suddenly. “What of Mrs. Fullerton?”

Norah laughed, her hands reaching around so she might cup his face. “I think she has written her last piece, Lord Yardley.”

Smiling, he tugged her a little more closely. “I am very glad to hear it,” he whispered, before dropping his head to kiss her once more.

I am glad Lady Essington found a loving husband! She found out writing a gossip column is not easy...I can imagine it would be a good way to get into trouble!

Prologue

“ I have wonderful news!”

Rebecca looked up at her mother, but then immediately turned her head away. Lady Wilbram often came with news and, much of the time, it was nothing more than idle gossip; something that Rebecca herself did not enjoy listening to.

“Yes, Mama?” She did not so much as even look up from her embroidery, but rather continued to sew. The long, bleak winter stretched out before her, dreary and dismal – much like the state of her heart at present – and with very little to cheer her. Her father, the Earl of Wilbram, had made it clear that he was not to go to London for the little Season and thus, Rebecca was to be stuck at home, having only her mother for company. No doubt there would be a great deal more of this sort of occurrence, whereby her mother would burst into the room, expressing great delight at some news or other and, in doing so, remind Rebecca of just how far away she was from it all.

Although I am not certain that I wish to return to London at present. There is the chance that he would be there and I do not think I could bear to see him.

“Rebecca. You are not as much as even listening to me!”

Out of the corner of her eye, Rebecca caught how her mother threw up her hands, but merely smiled quietly. “I am paying you a great deal of attention, Mother,” she answered, silently thinking to herself that it was the only thing she could do, given just how determined her mother was. Having been quite contented with her own thoughts, it was a little frustrating to have been interrupted so.

“You shall soon drop your embroidery once you realize what it is I have to tell you.” The promise in her mother’s voice was one that finally caught Rebecca’s interest, but telling herself not to be foolish, she threw only a quick smile in her mother’s direction.

“Yes, I am sure I shall,” she promised softly. “Please, tell me what it is. I am almost beside myself with anticipation.” Her sarcasm obviously laid heavy on her mother’s shoulders, for she immediately threw up her hands in clear disgust.

“Well, if you must behave so, then I shall not tell you the contents of this letter. You shall not know of it! And I shall be the one to go to the Duke’s Christmas... affair.”

Rebecca blinked, her gaze still fixed down upon her embroidery, but her hand stalling on the needle. Had she heard her mother correctly? Had she, in fact, said the words Duke and Christmas? Her stomach tightened perceptively, and she looked up, her irritation suddenly forgotten.

“Now I have your attention.”

Her mother’s eyebrows lifted and Rebecca set her embroidery down completely, her hands going to her lap. “Yes, Mama, now you have my attention,” This was said rather quickly and with a slight flippancy, which Rebecca was certain her mother would hear in her voice, but she did not seem to respond. Seeing her mother’s shoulders drop after a moment, her hands going to her sides again, Rebecca let out a slow breath. Evidently, she was forgiven already.

“Yes, I did say the Duke – the Duke of Meyrick, in fact – and I did say Christmas.”

“What is it he has invited us to?”

“A Christmas house party. It is a little unusual, for it appears to be longer than many

others would be. But then again, I suppose as the Duke of Meyrick, he is quite able to do as he pleases!”

“How wonderful!” In an instant, the grey winter seemed to fade from her eyes, no longer held out before her as the only path she had to take. Instead, she had an opportunity for happiness, enjoyment, laughter and smiles – as well as the fact that there would be very little chance of being in company with him . No doubt he was either back at his estate or would return to London for the little Season.

“We shall have to speak to your father, of course.”

At this, Rebecca’s heart plunged to the ground, splintering as it fell. Her father had only just declared that he would remain at his estate over the winter. Even if there was an invitation to a most prestigious house party, the chances of him agreeing to attend were very small indeed. Scowling up at her mother, she turned her head away. Why had she told her something such as this only for it to be snatched away again?

“Even if your father should not wish to attend, there is no reason you and I cannot both go,” her mother continued immediately, turning Rebecca’s scowl into a smile of delight. “He will understand – and given that his estate is not very far from our own, the journey will not be a difficult one. Besides which, it is an excellent occasion for you to make further acquaintances in preparation for the summer season... that is, unless you have any desire to find a gentleman suitor this Christmas.”

Rebecca laughed, shaking her head at her mother’s twinkling eyes and forcing herself not to think of him . Given that her mother and father knew nothing about the affair and, therefore, the abrupt ending to what had taken place, she did not think it wise to inform them of it. “Mama, I am very glad indeed we have been invited. I go with no expectation, just as you ought to do.”

Lady Wilbram smiled warmly. “You are quite correct. Now we must make

preparations to attend this house party. You will need to look through your gowns and decide which of them is the most suitable. We have time to purchase one or two new gowns also, for there is certain to be at least one Christmas ball! You must be prepared for every possible occasion.” Making her way back towards the door with purposeful steps, as though she intended to begin such preparations immediately, Lady Wilbram threw a glance back at Rebecca. Understanding that she was meant to go after her mother, Rebecca set her embroidery down and followed immediately, her heart light and filled with hope.

“Prepared for every occasion, Mama?” she asked as her mother nodded firmly. “What exactly is it that I ought to expect from such a house party? I have only been to one before and it lasted only three days. There was very little that could be done by way of occasion.”

“You will find the Duke’s house parties are very different experiences,” her mother told her, grasping her hand warmly as they walked through the door. “You must have every expectation and, at the same time, no expectation. That is why we must be prepared for every eventuality, making certain that you have an outfit suitable for whatever it is the Duke might decide to do. Christmas is such a wonderful season, is it not?”

Rebecca laughed softly at her mother’s excited expression and the delight in her voice. “Made all the more wonderful by this house party,” she agreed, wondering how she was going to contain her anticipation for the few weeks before the house party began. “I am looking forward to it. It seems as though winter will not be so mediocre after all.”

Chapter One

After being introduced to everyone, Rebecca took her seat beside her very dear friend, Miss Augusta Moir, whom she was very glad to see. They had exchanged letters quite frequently, and when news of the house party reached Rebecca, one of the first things she did had been to write to Augusta. How glad she was to receive Augusta's letter back, and how delighted to know that she would also be present!

"And that is almost all of us!" Lady Meyrick put her hands out wide, welcoming them all. "There are only one or two other guests still to arrive. I do not know why they have been delayed, but that does not mean we cannot continue. We will soon begin our festivities and they will join us when they are able. Pray, enjoy your conversations for a few minutes longer and, thereafter, the first of our games will begin!"

Rebecca glanced around the room, looking at each and every face and recognizing only a few of them. She did not know exactly who else would arrive, but the company here seemed to be quite delightful. In addition to the fact that she had her dear friend Augusta present also, she was quite convinced it would be an excellent few weeks.

"I do wonder what such festivities will be," Speaking in a hushed whisper, Miss Moir leaned towards Rebecca. "I have heard the Duke is something of an extravagant fellow. Perhaps that will mean this holiday house party will be an exceptional one."

"Yes, but all Dukes are known to be extravagant fellows," Rebecca reminded her friend, chuckling. "I would expect nothing less. Although," she continued. "I do

wonder where the Duke himself is.”

“Did you not greet him when you arrived? He was waiting on the steps to make certain that we were greeted. I certainly was made to feel very welcome by his mother!”

“Yes, he did do so.” Remembering the slightly pinched expression on the Duke’s face when he had greeted both her and her mother, Rebecca allowed her own concern to remain. “He did not appear to be very glad to see us, however. I will say that for him.”

Her friend nodded slowly, her gaze drifting around the room as murmurs of conversation continued between the other guests. “He did not smile once, and certainly I found him rather stiff. His mother, on the other hand, was quite the opposite.”

“Mayhap he simply does not like the cold, and given the Season, it is rather cold.”

Her friend nodded in agreement, although Rebecca did not miss the twinkle in her friend’s eyes. “It is almost as though he does not realize it is wintertime,” she remarked, making Rebecca laugh. Her laughter changed into a sigh. “Perhaps he is as I am, in waiting and hoping for the summer to return,” Her mind grew suddenly heavy, and she looked away. “I confess I struggle with this long winter. My mood is much improved now that my father has permitted me to come to this house party, however.”

Miss Moir laughed softly. “And I am also grateful for your presence here. I am, as you know, a little shy, and I confess that not knowing a great many people here as yet has allowed my anxiety to rise a little.”

“You have no need to be at all anxious,” Rebecca replied firmly. “You are more than handsome, come from an excellent family and you are well able to have many a

conversation with both gentlemen and ladies.” She lifted one eyebrow. “At times, I think you pretend this anxiety is a part of your character, for I do not think I would be aware of it otherwise.”

“I swear to you, I do not pretend!” Miss Moir exclaimed, only to let out a chuckle and to shake her head, realizing that Rebecca was teasing her. “Do you hope to meet anyone of interest here? Or shall you only be interested in furthering your acquaintances? Christmas is a time where many a gentleman will seek to steal a kiss!”

Hesitating, Rebecca wondered how she was to answer. Her friend was entirely unaware of how her heart had been broken this last Season. Indeed, neither her mother nor her father was aware of it either, but she had borne this heavy weight for many months. The pain lingered still, and there was only one gentleman that she was to blame for it. Her mother and her friends might be hopeful that she would acquaint herself with a gentleman of note with the hope that perhaps the match would be made in the summer Season, but for the present, Rebecca was quite contented to have only acquaintances – and nothing more. Her heart was still too damaged. It certainly had not been healed enough for her to even think about becoming closely acquainted with another gentleman.

“Lady Rebecca?”

Rebecca blinked quickly, and then silently demanded that she smile in response. “Forgive me, I became a little lost in thought.” Shrugging, she looked away. “I think I should be glad of new acquaintances for the present at least. I do not want nor require anything else.”

“I quite understand,” Miss Moir looked away, just as Rebecca turned her gaze back towards her friend. Rebecca chose to say nothing further, waiting until her friend looked back at her before she continued the conversation.

“What do you think shall be our first game?” With a quick breath, she returned their topic of conversation to the house party itself. She did not want to go into any particular details about what had happened the previous season, given that a good deal of it was still a secret.

Miss Moir clapped her hands lightly. “I do hope it will be something that will make us all laugh and smile so that there is no awkwardness between any of us any longer.” Excitement shone in her eyes, and Rebecca could not help but smile.

“Perhaps there will be some Christmas games! Out of all the ones you can think of, which one would be your favorite?”

The two considered this for some minutes and, thereafter, fell into a deep discussion about whether the Twelfth Night cake or Snapdragon was the very best game. But eventually, their conversation was cut short by Lady Meyrick speaking again.

“I do not think we shall wait any longer. Instead, we shall proceed to the library – but not to dance or any such thing! No indeed, there shall be many a game at this house party! Yes, we are to be provided with a great deal of entertainment during your time here, but on occasion we shall be required to make our own entertainment... as we shall do this evening.”

Chuckling good naturedly, Rebecca grinned as Miss Moir looped her arm through hers so they might walk together. It appeared this was to be the beginning of a most excellent holiday.

“Do you know who it is that is yet to arrive?” Rebecca asked quietly, as Lady Meyrick spoke quietly to her son, who had interrupted her for some reason.

“No, I do not know,” Miss Moir shot her a glance. “But I, myself, would not dare to be tardy to something such as this, not when the Duke and his mother have shown such generosity!”

Rebecca shrugged. “Mayhap those still absent are well known to the Duke and had always stated they would be tardy?”

“Mayhap,” Miss Moir looked around the room at each guest in turn as they waited to make their way to the library. “I admit I am eager to know who else is to arrive!”

“As am I.” Rebecca grinned at her friend just as Lady Meyrick clapped her hands brightly, catching everyone’s attention again. The bright smile on the lady’s face reflected the joy and anticipation in Rebecca’s heart as she waited to hear what it was they were to do.

“We shall begin by playing ourselves a few hands of cards. However, it shall be a little different, for there will be forfeits for those who lose, but gifts for the winner!”

This was met by murmurs of excitement as Rebecca’s heart skipped a beat in a thrill of anticipation. She was already looking forward to the game, wondering whether she would have any chance of winning, and if she did, what the gift she would receive might be. A million ideas went through her mind as she battled to catch her breath. There was often a good deal less consideration to propriety and society’s customs at such occasions, according to her mother. They were a good deal freer, no longer bound by a set of strict and rigid rules. This was a chance to laugh, to make merry and to enjoy every moment of being here. She was already looking forward to it.

“If you would like to make your way through to the library, the card tables have already been set out.”

Unwilling to show any great eagerness for fear of being teased about it by either her mother or her friend, Rebecca stood quietly but did not move.

“Come!” Miss Moir immediately moved forward, tugging Rebecca along with her. “What do you suppose the forfeits might be?”

Rebecca laughed as they made to quit of the room. “I confess I can think of a great many things, but I cannot be certain whether I am correct!”

Miss Moir bit her lip. “I do hope I shall not fail. I would be most embarrassed should I make a fool of myself.”

Rebecca pressed her friend’s hand. “I do not think you need to have any fear in that regard, my dear friend. The forfeits will not be severe. They may make us a little embarrassed, but it is all in good humor. At least, that is what my mother has told me!”

At this, Miss Moir let out a long breath. “I understand. There will be nothing of any severity.”

“Nothing.” Rebecca smiled as she walked into the library. “Absolutely. In fact, I do believe there will be nothing in all the time we reside here that should bring you any shame, embarrassment, upset, or anger.”

With a smile still upon her face, she walked directly into the room, only to come to a sudden halt. To her utter horror, she perceived a gentleman standing directly opposite her, a gentleman whom she recognized immediately but whom she had vowed never to see again. Her breath hitched as she looked directly at him.

Surely it could not be. Fate would not be so cruel to demand this of her, would not take such a happy occasion and quite ruin it by his presence, would it? And yet, it appeared she was to have such misfortune, for the one gentleman sitting there was the one who had broken her heart. The gentleman who had taken all from her, who had left her with nothing – and at the end, begged her to keep it from the ears and eyes of the ton. A gentleman who now went pale as he realized who she was, a shadow in his eyes as he looked at her.

And everything suddenly went very cold indeed.