



Winter in a Regency Wonderland (The Secret Crusaders #5)

Author: *Melanie Rose Clarke*

Category: Historical

Description: Anything can happen when they're trapped in a Winter Wonderland.

The first time Sarah met Damien Charles, the Earl of Rourke, she poured an entire bowl of fruit punch on him.

That was the moment he knew she would be his countess.

Only, the spirited beauty is not interested in marrying, and her guardian is inclined to let her have her way. Yet, if she accidentally became trapped at Damien's country estate during the winter snow, he would have time to convince her.

Total Pages (Source): 15

CHAPTER 1

“Sarah will be my countess.”

Eyes narrowed into sapphire slits, lips drew a severe slash. The ice sparkling in the windows seeped into the chamber, as the duke speared him with a glare as sharp as any icicle dagger.

Hardly the hearty exuberance Damien Charles, the Earl of Rourke, expected.

The coolness played foil to the warmth of the luxurious drawing room, the comforting symphony of rich oak furniture, intricate tapestries and priceless antiques that only sampled the extravagance of the ducal townhouse. A fire crackled in the massive marble hearth, scenting the room in smoke and wood, as Edmund Hawkins, the Duke of Bradenton, sipped his brandy. “Sarah received a dozen offers already. She has asked to choose her own match.”

Damien allowed none of his displeasure to show, as he sat as tightly as an Almack Patroness’s corset. That the spirited beauty already received a dozen offers was no surprise. Beyond her nearly obscene dowry, she possessed a rare beauty, with hair of spun gold and eyes the color of the morning sea. For most lords, her physical assets more than compensated for rumors she was beyond fashionably spirited.

For him, the money was negligible, the beauty pleasing yet unnecessary. That spirit?

That’s why she would be his.

That she received – and would no doubt continue to receive – offers did not matter. That Bradenton did not immediately agree was a challenge, but not unsurmountable. Damien did not wait for the world to accommodate him, but rearranged matters until the outcome was favorable, seizing power few in the ton held. “I would provide her with a most fortuitous match.”

“I have no doubt.” A sliver of regret tinged his friend’s eyes, melting into neutrality a second later. “Yet I must stand by my promise.”

“Come now.” Damien swirled the amber liquid of his crystal goblet. “You are her guardian. It is your right – and responsibility – to arrange an advantageous marriage.” His title spanned generations, his fortune rare even among the elite ton. “She would enjoy all the benefits of my position and wealth. I would provide a safe, secure and easy life.”

“I do not believe Sarah desires a safe, secure and easy life,” Bradenton mused, folding his hands together. His gaze narrowed. “Why are you so set on the match? You’ve only met her once, and if I recall, it was a bit of a sticky situation.”

Literally. They’d been introduced the night he finally decided to take a countess. He’d danced with beauty after beauty, enjoying the attention of countless ladies groomed for the position. Every word carefully chosen, false sentiments rampant amidst delicately fluttering eyelashes and half a dozen swoons.

Then Sarah had spilled an entire bowl of fruit punch on him.

The action hadn’t been purposeful, or at least it didn’t appear that way. She’d been racing through the hall, laughing with a joy as rare as a shilling in a spendthrift’s pocket. She hadn’t noticed the bowl – or him.

He’d noticed her.

Most women would have been mortified at the crisp white cravat dyed a shocking hue of pink. A book on proper etiquette would've listed swooning as the only appropriate response. Yet instead she'd grinned impishly and whispered, "That's what you get for distracting me." Then she'd apologized in a showing befit of a queen and dashed into the crowd.

He'd watched her the rest of the night, garbed in a damp and colorful cravat that didn't bother him nearly the proper amount. The amusement never left her face, not as she danced, not as she conversed with every wallflower and not as she bestowed countless smiles. That was the night the future Countess of Rourke was set.

Nothing, and no one, would change his path.

"You have your choice of diamonds of the first water." Bradenton's baritone tugged him back to the present. "Most guardians would accept your offer on the spot."

Yet none other could grant Sarah. Damien rose and stepped next to a jewel-encrusted vase almost as tall as his 6'3 frame. "She struck something in me. When she asks to make her own choice, is she perhaps asking to not make a choice at all?"

Bradenton's eyes hardened. "I do not know," he admitted.

"That cannot be to your liking." Damien traced the engraved sides of the vase, where emeralds sparkled. "You must worry for her, especially given her independent streak."

As flashing eyes confirmed his estimation, Damien pressed forward. "I am strong enough to handle her. If you will not outright agree to the match, then allow me to host her at my country estate for the winter."

Bradenton's gaze sharpened.

“Properly chaperoned, of course. My aunts live there full time.” Damien held out a hand. “When it snows, the roads become unpassable. If she accidentally became trapped, it would provide me with the opportunity to court her. You could even come if you’d like.”

Bradenton traced his fingers along the marble mantle. For a moment he said nothing, bestowing scrutiny that would have unnerved a weaker man.

Damien simply matched the gaze.

“She believes I see her as a responsibility, yet she is family. I care about her.” Rare emotion shone in the duke’s expression, before it disappeared a moment later. “You are not wrong that she needs someone strong. I believe you suit her well, and most of all, you would provide her with a good life. Perhaps we will take a short trip to your country estate. Priscilla and I will accompany her for the ride, but will return the same day. With my responsibilities, I cannot afford to be trapped away from London.”

Damien allowed his lips to curve up. “Are you going to share that with the ladies?”

“I think not.” Bradenton stood and held out his hand. “Of course, Sarah will demand to leave once she learns the truth. If the snow fails to arrive, you will have difficulty keeping her.”

“Don’t worry.” Damien shook Bradenton’s hand. “I fully expect a winter wonderland.”

“I refuse to leave London in the middle of the winter.” Sarah Hawkins clutched her cream winter clothing closer, shifting on the plush seat of the grand ducal coach. “What if we get trapped?”

She had refused a week ago, when Bradenton first mentioned the trip, then again the next day and the day after that. Now, nearly at their destination, it was an impractical exercise, yet she couldn't surrender her ability to voice her opinion, no matter its inefficacy in a man's world.

Yet, in truth, she was fortunate. When her father passed away, she feared the distant cousin she'd never met would leave her in the cold. Bradenton had done the opposite, taking her to London, paying for a season, and most of all granting her kindness and comfort. Yet it came at the cost of her freedom, and more than once, she missed that tiny whitewashed cottage with the leaky shingles and rickety fence.

The carriage rumbled over branches and logs, crunching brittle leaves, threading through bare trees. A woodsy aroma tinged the cool air, a welcome change from the heavy perfumes and endless grime of London.

"We're unlikely to get trapped." Bradenton did not remove his gaze from the government papers he'd perused the entire two-hour trip. "There's no use protesting when we're almost there."

"I've been protesting for days," Sarah grumbled. "Why aren't women permitted to direct their own lives?"

"Indeed." Priscilla lifted an eyebrow at her husband.

"I consider your opinions." Edmund turned to the next page. "I denied the dozen lords who asked for your hand, as you demanded."

"That's because they weren't asking me to marry them."

The paper crinkled as Bradenton bent it down. "Then whom, pray tell, were they asking?"

“Your money.” She grinned. “I imagine they will dine next to my dowry during the wedding breakfast and take it on holiday. They will dress it in bonnets and jewels. I wonder, how does one waltz with a shilling?”

Intelligent eyes sparkled. “You underestimate your own charms.”

She opened her mouth to respond, stopped as a tower peeked between brittle brown branches in the distance. It was tall and thin, hinting at a modest estate at best, a meager one at least. Belonging to a lord in need of a rich wife, perhaps?

Her throat dried. “You said we were visiting several elderly ladies. Is an eligible lord also in attendance?”

Silence revealed a hundred answers.

Sarah closed her eyes, opened them to a clearly unrepentant lord. Priscilla glared at her husband, who shrugged and replied, “You won’t even notice him.”

“If it snows, we’ll be trapped here all winter. Did you notice that narrow pass-through between the mountains?” Sarah parted her lips. “Wait, that’s not your—”

“We’re here.” Bradenton folded the papers.

Sarah looked out the window and gasped.

Meager estate indeed.

The tower had been like an iceberg’s tip, small, unassuming and grossly misrepresenting its true nature. The manor was massive, vine-covered brick walls extending one way and the other, as if they simply forgot to end. Its immense breadth was matched by its towering height, five stories tall without the turrets. Rich cream

columns curved upward, carved with swirling designs of leaves and vines.

How could the man who owned this estate need funds? Could he be impoverished in caring for such a grand residence? Last week, one of her suitors rattled off a list of improvements her dowry would provide and—

All thoughts fled.

A man emerged from the tall, carved double doors. Commanding. Well-built. Authoritative. Damien Charles, the Earl of Rourke, was the most handsome man in England, and one of the most powerful in the world. His fortune was legendary, and so was he.

He was a masterpiece of masculinity, his height well above six feet, his shoulders wide, his chest broad and expansive. His eyes were a shock of blue, his chiseled face a study of symmetry and sultry beauty. A perfectly tailored suit didn't hide his muscular form, as he strode down the stairs, master of his domain.

He stopped mere feet away, capturing her in his powerful gaze. A predatory gleam blazed, a determination, a challenge.

With endless wealth, Rourke didn't need money.

With his lofty position and handsome visage, he had his choice of ladies.

He ruled his world...

What did he want with her?

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CHAPTER 2

Satisfaction. Desire. Possessiveness.

Sarah watched him with wary eyes, her stance straight yet her gaze challenging, as if she already deduced his plans for her. Her blue eyes brimmed with intelligence, her cheeks tinged pink in the coolness. She wore a plain pale dress with few embellishments, her silky hair twisted in a simple knot, yet she held herself as resplendent as a queen. She broke his gaze, glanced to the left and the right. Was she looking for an escape?

There would be none.

He bowed. "A pleasure to see you, Sarah." He nodded towards Bradenton and his wife. "Your Graces."

"The honor is ours." Bradenton and Priscilla returned the requisite greetings, yet Sarah remained stoic.

Priscilla touched her gently on the shoulder, and she blinked. "Thank you for the invitation," she murmured.

"Welcome to my humble estate." The term was a misnomer, as he gestured them to a manor that was anything but modest. Bradenton held his wife's hand possessively as Sarah glanced about once more, poised to dart away should the opportunity arise. His hands twitched with the urge to reach out and grasp her. "Cook has prepared refreshments, including a delicious fruit punch."

Sarah halted. The pinkness on her cheeks deepened to a lovely rosy red.

Magnificent.

Twigs crunched under their feet as they traversed the textured cobblestone. The air was crisp and cool, the sky's unbroken whiteness scented with upcoming precipitation. If instincts proved correct, snow would soon arrive, enough to block the valley and prevent passage back to London.

He was not the only one who noticed. "We shall not stay long," Bradenton whispered as he passed underneath the curved entrance. "As soon as the opportunity arises, Priscilla and I will embark home." He frowned. "The ladies will not be pleased."

"I appreciate the sacrifice." Damien bowed his head. Sarah had stopped at the bottom of the stairs. He strode towards her. "Let me help you."

"That's not—"

He touched her.

Her sharp intake of breath was audible, matching the unexpected triumph surging through his chest. Light, gentle and only slightly improper, he splayed his hand on the small of her back, mirroring her movements as they stepped forward, not allowing any distance between them. Her eyes flashed, yet she was disciplined enough to say nothing, and he was bold enough to stay near.

They met the duke and duchess at the doorway, stopping just outside the entrance to the grand foyer. Around them, cream-colored walls rose three stories tall, covered in rich paintings and gold-threaded tapestries. A master artist had created the space, which drew gasps, stares and exclamations from nearly all visitors. Yet Sarah barely noticed as she glanced back to the carriage.

Did she have any idea her life was about to change?

“How is the fruit punch?”

It looked better splashed on his cravat.

Sarah exhaled a long, slow breath. That wasn't nice. Yet she couldn't be blamed for being unbalanced by the earl. Indeed, he collected women's swoons like a drunk hoarded liquor. Rourke had done nothing beyond typical for a wife-seeking lord, a process frightfully akin to selecting a broodmare for a breeding farm. He was considering a woman with a handsome dowry, well-respected family and satisfactory personality. By those terms, she seemed a reasonable option.

Yet something mysterious burned behind that golden visage.

She shifted on the firm wingback chair. Gold ruled in a luxurious dining room two stories high, with the precious metal framing priceless paintings and embellishing oversized pieces of furniture. It swirled on a massive oak table, was even embedded in the floor. It suited the earl – powerful, commanding, entrapping.

The worst part was her would-be suitor was not at all unappealing, but rather handsome, charming, enjoyable, handsome, well-spoken, intelligent, handsome, polite, muscular, masculine, handsome, tempting, witty, and handsome. And yes, she repeated handsome multiple times, but really it was his fault for being so handsome.

He'd captured her attention the night of the ball, as he charmed every debutante, danced with every wallflower and thanked every servant with a kind smile. He was the sort of man she'd want, if she was the sort of woman who wanted to be owned by another. Yet she had no intention of surrendering to a lord, especially one as powerful as Rourke. “The punch is lovely, thank you.”

He grinned. “Are you sure?”

“Of course. Why do you ask?”

“You looked like you wanted to do something unseemly with it. I believe you have experience with such antics.”

Perhaps his cravat had looked better pink.

Priscilla opened her mouth to speak, but Bradenton stopped her. “My dear, can I speak with you for a moment?”

The duchess pursed her lips, yet pushed the chair back with an audible scrape, before allowing Bradenton to lead her from the room. A door slammed, and Sarah twisted to the window.

“Sarah.” Rourke regained her attention. “You were just about to share your opinions on the fruit punch.”

She narrowed her eyes. “My lord, are you unbalancing me on purpose?”

“It’s a distinct possibility.”

“Aren’t you worried I’ll have another accident with the fruit punch?”

“I like the color pink.”

“Why stop at the cravat? Perhaps this time, I’ll make your entire shirt pink.” She sucked in a breath of air. What was this man doing to her? She had to stay in control.

He placed a hand under her arm.

All control fled.

He touched her lightly, yet he possessed her as strongly as iron shackles. Tingles danced on her skin. “Perhaps it wasn’t an accident after all,” he drawled.

It had been an accident, yet if she did it again, she could scarce claim so. She lifted her chin. “Perhaps pink cravats could be a new fashion trend. The color really was very attractive on you.”

He gave a wicked smile. “So you admit you find me attractive?”

To an extraordinary extent. “I most certainly do not,” she sniffed.

“Do not find me attractive or want to admit it?”

“I refuse to answer that question.” She had to regain power. “I know why Bradenton brought me here.”

“Do you?” He folded his arms across his chest, splaying the shirt taut against defined muscles. “Pray tell, why?”

“You are in need of a countess, and Bradenton believes I need a husband. Yet he has promised my choice of match.” She shifted in the hard back chair. It was as unrelenting as the man before her. “Are you looking for a wife, my lord?”

“No.”

“What?” She grasped the goblet so tightly the thin glass started to bend in her fingers. She quickly released it. “I was under the impression you—”

“I’ve already found one.”

A commotion sounded outside. Angry voices, a screech that quite resembled Priscilla and the rumble of a carriage. She turned...

“I’ve chosen you.”

She froze.

Ever-so-slowly turned back to him.

“What did you say?”

His power blazed like fire. “We will make a suitable match.”

What was happening? At least with the other men, they made some semblance of an offer. This was a command.

The man who gave it was going to learn she did not heed commands, not from her cousin, and most certainly not from a man who had no right over her. “That is not your choice.”

“We shall see.”

“No, we won’t,” she snapped. “I won’t stand for this, and neither will Bradenton.” Where was her cousin? The servants had left, and they were alone. She paled. “You’re not planning to do something improp—”

“Of course not,” he swiftly broke in, his stern visage shattering any doubts. “I am a gentleman.”

“Yet I am not a lady, just a relation to a well-positioned family. Furthermore, I am not yours.” She braced her hands on the table and stood. “Coming here was a

mistake. I shall inform Bradenton I wish to leave at once.”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible now.” Undisguised satisfaction belied the apologetic words. “The duke and duchess are no longer here.”

Her breath hitched, as the atmosphere turned far more dangerous. “What do you mean they’re not here?” Surely, she misunderstood. They had no plans to separate during this short sojourn.

Rourke stood, towering over her, and suddenly he wasn’t a gentleman, but a commander, leader, warrior. “They left for London.”

“Impossible,” she breathed. They wouldn’t have left without her. Yet uncertainty propelled her forward, to the wide window and an ever-whitening world. She sucked in a breath of cool air, flattened her palms against the smooth glass. Cold seeped into her hands, yet she pressed closer. “The carriage is gone.”

“I imagine they’re halfway to the valley by now.” Rourke announced rather calmly – for a kidnapper. “You will be my guest for a little while longer.”

Something tiny, white and flaky fell from the sky. It was joined by another flake and another and another... “It’s snowing.” She gasped.

“Perhaps a little longer is an underestimation.” He gave a slow wide smile. “You are now my guest for the entire winter.”

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CHAPTER 3

Victory.

Damien expected satisfaction, pleasure even, at the plan's smooth journey. A dash of relief perhaps, a modest amount of pride. He never expected pure triumph.

Sarah was his for the foreseeable future. He now possessed the time and opportunity to convince her a match was most logical for both of them. By the end of the winter, she would be his.

Unsurprisingly, she was not taking well to her entrapment.

"No. No. No." She pressed closer to the window, the white light reflecting off creamy cheeks. "I cannot believe he did this to me."

The urge to comfort her was all-encompassing, and unexpected. He rubbed his hands together, warming the chill.

She glared at him. "I must leave." Then she hiked up her skirts, pivoted and fled .

He walked at a moderate pace, easily keeping up with her. "Where are you going?"

Her boots echoed on the hard floor. "London."

"Do you plan to walk there?"

“That’s right. I should be in time for luncheon – in a month of two.” She quickened her stride through the long hallway. Of course, he wouldn’t actually allow her to leave on such a perilous journey, yet better to convince her than toss her over his shoulder.

Even if the thought of tossing her over his shoulder was extraordinarily tempting.

She reached the grand double doors. “Since the snow just started, the valley is not yet blocked. If we leave now, we can pass.”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible.” He stopped in front of the door. “There is no one to take you.”

“You could take me.” Yet he remained silent as the moments ticked by, and her face turned as white as the flakes drifting in the window. “But you won’t, will you?” she breathed. “You wanted to trap me here, didn’t you?”

Silence betrayed the absence of a denial, his predatory stance belying any remorse. “Do not worry. When the ground becomes white, it becomes quite a wonderland. It will give you time to consider my offer.”

“I’ve already given my answer.” She glared, blazing fire against the winter world. “I will not accept your suit, no matter how long I am trapped.”

Challenge accepted.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Sarah tapped the quill against the pot repeatedly, a musical for an audience of one. She did so rather exuberantly, and just like her, the ink decided to be somewhere it wasn’t supposed to be, splattering on a mahogany table likely worth four times of

everything she owned. She wiped it up with the raggedy cloth already soiled from half a dozen such spills.

“Are you channeling your anger towards me on the table?” A deep baritone startled her. This time, the quill slipped and hit the table, spreading droplets of ink through the air. Where did it land? The location that seemed the unfortunate victim of all her spills, inadvertent or not.

Damien’s cravat.

Laughing would be the incorrect move.

Laughing would be highly inappropriate.

Laughing would not be recommended by ladies of high regard.

Although, he did kidnap you.

Laughing would be the correct option.

So she did, just a little, and not even the hide-behind-your-hand kind, as he blinked at his cravat, “I say, what did my cravat do to you?”

She choked back another laugh, fashioned her lips into a crooked smile. “It has been most impertinent, my lord. Would you like to hear about its many transgressions?”

His lips twitched, and he seemed to be holding back laughter, to a greater success than her endeavors of the same. “If it has offended you in some way, please do share. I shall take the necessary steps to defend your honor.”

“How noble of you.” Why was she continuing with the banter, from this man who

had all but declared her his captive? Yet somehow she did not only respond, but continued, “Would you challenge it to a duel?”

“Without hesitation.” The reply was as smooth as warm honey. “But pray tell, what has the cravat done to produce such hostility?”

“Actually, the man wearing it is the perpetrator.”

He pressed a large hand to his chest, brought it over his heart. “Someone else was wearing my cravat? Seems there are more reprobates at my estate than I ever imagined.”

There came the laughter again. “I regret to inform you, my lord, that you are the perpetrator. Shall I list your transgressions? I think I have enough paper.” She pointed to the large stack of paper, a rich trove in itself. “Actually, I must provide my regrets. Clearly, there is not enough paper here for your transgressions.”

“Is that so?” His voice was deceptively calm, as he edged closer.

“Indeed.” She resisted the urge to back up. “Perhaps you should rob a purveyor of paper. You do seem rather adept at stealing things that do not belong to you.”

“Do I?” he drawled. “And what are you accusing me of stealing?”

Me.

The unspoken word hung in the air between them. A spell spun, filling the air with tension, yet a delectable type, like a pot of chocolate just on the wrong side of wicked. She took a deep breath, yet his spicy scent inundated the air, and her senses.

Stay strong.

She turned her attention back to the mess, which hadn't been limited to his cravat this time. The beautiful table with the (previously) flawless surface that was still likely worth four times of everything she owned had become a temporary ink pot, covered in the thick, dark substance. She lifted the quill from the table, leaving an exact impression of its feathered sides. His gaze tracked her movements, but there was no anger. "Ah, I see the cravat had a co-conspirator in its tyranny."

She rubbed the cloth over the ink, yet it was far less effective than with the tiny droplets. She did succeed rather splendidly at spreading it around. "Don't ask what the table did."

"Too horrific to share?"

"I wouldn't want to make you swoon." She rubbed more vigorously at the stain, yet seemed only to accomplish rubbing it more in. Now a good portion of the table shone with a darker tint.

"Allow me."

Damien produced a cloth from his pocket, then poured a little water from the pitcher on it. He rubbed at the stain, with limited success.

"I'm sorry." Now she did truly feel regret, albeit just a smidgeon. She did not care to see a quality object marred, even if its owner deserved it.

"It is no matter." He waved his hand. "I can get it remedied."

Her smile faded. What fortune of lords to wave their hands and fix whatever malady dared intrude on their carefree lives. A life of knowing that all you had to do was ask, and others would obey your every word. The power to control others, especially and entirely ladies like her.

His expression turned wary, as if he knew the turn of her thoughts. Then, they too departed. Because he reached up and started loosening his cravat.

All the air in the room decided to take a holiday. “What are you doing?”

“I am removing my cravat.” He unthreaded the intricate knot, carefully drawing out the smooth fabric. He worked succinctly, his strength under the quality clothing apparent.

She gulped the little air that remained. “I can see that. Why are you removing your cravat?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” He nodded towards the ink on the table, held out the speckled cravat. “I shall like to get it cleaned immediately, if there’s any hope of rescuing it from the fate of the last cravat you took a disliking to. I believe my laundry maids are still working on the fruit punch.”

“You don’t say?” Yet she couldn’t take her eyes off the cravat or his hands or the loosened fabric around his neck. And a little voice made the altogether unacceptable, untoward and outrageous suggestion to splatter more ink on his clothing. Such as his shirt. And perhaps on his—

“Sarah?”

“Hmm?” It wouldn’t have to be a lot of ink.

“Are you quite all right?”

“Of course.” Surely, she could make it look like an accident. He did deserve it, after trapping her. She edged her fingers toward the feather.

“You’re not thinking of spilling more ink of me, are you?”

Not anymore. “Would a lady do such a thing?”

“Forgive me, my dear. I do not know what I was thinking.”

Exactly what she was thinking, apparently. She lifted her gaze to brilliant eyes, filled with fierce intelligence. No, she would not get anything past this man. There was a reason why he always secured what he sought.

“Does it bother you that I am removing my cravat? I apologize. I should have waited until the privacy of my quarters.”

“It’s of no matter.” Now it was her turn to wave her hand. “I certainly understand about the ink and all. You may remove whatever clothes you wish.”

She stopped. Just stopped. As he stared. Just stared. And the world? It also stopped. Had she just said—

“I may remove whatever clothes I wish?” he choked out the words.

And she choked on the plain air. “No, of course not.” But, actually yes. “I mean, of course you may undress in the privacy of your quarters. Not here. Not in front of me.” She swallowed at the completely inappropriate images her mind shared. “Obviously, I didn’t mean here.”

What was wrong with her? She could barely think in front of this man, much less speak. A scratching sounded at the door, and she practically jumped in excitement. Help, or at least distraction, had arrived. Without taking his eyes off her, Damien called for the servant to enter.

A footman strode in. “Excuse me, my lord. Lady Frederica wishes to see you. She is waiting in the red room.”

Damien nodded, and the servant bowed and left.

Red was the precise color that edged into Sarah’s vision. Heat spread from her face, through her limbs, to her ink covered hands. To every part of her body. “You have another lady here? You’ve done this to someone else?”

“What? No.” He pulled off the spoilt cravat. “It’s not what you think.”

“Indeed?” Her voice emerged as frosty as the winter wonderland outside the window. “I knew I shouldn’t have trusted you.” Forgetting about the quill and ink and the entire world in general, she pushed forward, striding past Damien. The housekeeper had shown her where the red room was earlier in the day, and now she set a direct path to it.

With his far taller stature, Damien had no trouble keeping up with her. “Whatever you are assuming is incorrect. You do not understand.”

“No?” Sarah moved forward, through one hallway, then another, frustration, anger and some other unknown emotion spurring her on. It almost felt like jealousy, but it couldn’t be, since that required another party to have something she wanted. She most certainly, unequivocally, definitely did not want Damien. “Are you telling me the young lady is here for another reason?”

“Well, yes. And your estimation of her is not quite accurate.”

“She isn’t a lady?”

“She is a lady. It’s just she isn’t—”

They reached the red room then, and she didn't wait for him to finish before she burst into its confines. It was the height of impropriety to "burst" in anywhere, but so was keeping not one but two ladies trapped at your country estate. Was he comparing them, deciding which one he preferred? She wouldn't have it.

She entered a room as red as its name, with garnet-colored walls, burgundy jacquard settees and plush ruby rugs. Even the light appeared red as it peeked out from red-tinted glass lanterns. The room smelled woodsy, and almost medicinal. A figure sat on the couch, with her back towards them.

Sarah did not wait for a proper greeting. "Lady Frederica, I have something to tell you."

The woman turned, surprise, shock and clear displeasure written upon her aged features.

Oh No.

No. No. No. No. No.

Damien strode ahead of her, conducting the introductions that would have been exceedingly apt thirty seconds ago, "Sarah, may I introduce my great aunt , Lady Frederica."

Sarah blinked at the woman who was older by about six or seven decades . She cleared her throat. Blinked some more, then added a bit of fidgeting and squirming.

The older woman gawked at her as if she'd gone daft. "I say, child, are you quite all right?"

No. Definitely not. "Um yes," she managed to choke out.

Lady Frederica scrunched up her face like Sarah was a particularly sour lemon she'd been forced to endure. And Damien? The man smiled.

He'd better say goodbye to all his cravats.

"I am well," she forced out, hopefully sounding a little less unhinged. "I am sorry, there was a little misunderstanding before."

"A misunderstanding?" The older lady's eyes sharpened, as her gaze shifted to her grand-nephew. "About what? Damien, do you know anything about this?"

"Why, yes I do."

He wouldn't.

"The truth is..."

She wouldn't just sacrifice the cravats. The shirts were going, too.

"Sarah believed..."

Actually, it wouldn't be terrible if the shirts also went. Then she would have a nice view of...

"That you were..."

She was going to decorate everything he owned with ink.

"In the throes of a megrim. She also suffers from them, so she felt terrible. She wanted to come right away to assist."

Relief flooded every sense. Perhaps she wouldn't have to splatter ink upon all his clothing. She pushed away the dash of disappointment that emerged.

The old woman looked at her critically. "Is this true?"

Sarah rubbed her forehead, where a true ache was starting to bloom. "They can be terribly painful, can they not?"

She hadn't exactly answered the question, but the older woman seemed to accept it, to an extent. "Thank you, but I do not have an ache in my head. I just wanted to discuss matters with my grandson. As you know, he has major changes upcoming."

"I understand." Only she didn't. What major changes? And why would the older woman think she knew about them? She waited for more elaboration, but the woman just tilted her head to the door. The message was clear.

"Since my services are not needed, I will make myself scarce. It was a pleasure to meet you," Sarah lied. Without a glance at her host/nemesis/man who would soon be short of cravats, she dashed to the door. The footman closed it, just as the words drifted through. "Now about your upcoming nuptials."

Oh, he was in trouble.

But clearly, not as much as she was.

CHAPTER 4

It snowed...

And snowed...

And snowed.

For minutes that melted into hours and hours that melted into days, snowflakes drifted from the sky, peaceful, steady and unrelenting. It frosted the world, turning dull brown trees into glittering ice sculptures and brittle ground into an expanse of silver. When nature finally finished, white blanketed the world, and it was indeed a wonderland.

Of course, Sarah would never tell Damien of her regard. She'd barely been able to avoid him these past days, despite her numerous attempts to do so. Yet he never quite stopped intruding in her space, time and mind, and in the end, she realized several truths:

1. He was as handsome, charming, enjoyable, handsome, well-spoken, intelligent, handsome, polite, muscular, masculine, handsome, tempting, witty, and handsome as she thought he was.
2. He wanted her.
3. She wasn't so sure she didn't want him.

She'd even imagined kissing him. It was outrageous and preposterous, these desires he'd awaked, yet it was undeniable. It also made it exceedingly hard to ignore him, or at least pretend thusly. Not that he would allow it for much longer. Already he lingered longer, spoke to her, even if she didn't respond.

Now she lounged in an oversized chair, swathed in a thick wool dress, as she sat by the fire. The flames snapped and crackled, their golden glow warming the chill. It smelled of wood, winter and wonder.

"I'd like to spend time together."

Her traitorous heart fluttered, as it always did whenever Rourke entered a room. He was all kinds of handsome today, his long legs encased in form-fitting black, a crisp white shirt stretched taut against his expansive chest. His boots boomed on the floor as he strode to stand before her.

"I'm afraid I'm busy." She turned to the side. "I was counting the new birds out the window."

"Were you, my dear?" His lips twitched. "There must be dozens."

"Twelve thousand, four hundred fifty-two to be exact."

"Indeed?" He chuckled. "Are you absolutely certain you counted them all?"

"Twice." Yet in truth she'd been dreaming by the fire. Unfortunately, that dream had involved the man before her, as well as a kiss (or twelve thousand, four hundred fifty-two). Even more unfortunately, she couldn't ask him to give her a kiss (or twelve thousand, four hundred fifty-two).

He kneeled down before her. The massive man usurped her entire vision, and she

couldn't pretend she didn't notice every inch. "I'd hoped you would enjoy yourself while you were here," he said softly.

Strangely, she was, despite the tangle of emotions his presence wrought. There was something comforting about sitting by the fire, next to the enigmatic man. "You trapped me."

"Just because you're trapped doesn't mean you can't be happy. Come." He grasped her hand. "It's frightfully boring to build a snowman alone."

She stopped. "You wish to build a snowman?"

He gave a lopsided grin. "Is that not something ladies do?"

She opened her mouth to say no, but stopped. The thought of building a snowman was alluring, the thought of building it with Rourke even more so. "All right."

Then... he smiled.

It was not one of those polished smiles lords brandished as they waxed poetic, or one of those greedy grins they gave when they learned of her dowry. It was wide and genuine, and encouraged the ridiculous urge to smile right back.

Yet she kept her neutral mask carefully in place as he lifted her from the seat. "Let's fetch your pelisse. I had a new one made for you."

The pelisse turned out to be the softest, most luxurious article of clothing she'd ever donned, made of winter white with diamond embellishments and tiny sewn-in pearls. Accompanying it were thick lace-up boots, pearl-hemmed gloves, a scarf and a thick hat. Even the maids had quality clothing, which should have been far too expensive for them to afford. Yet all the workers had such garments, which Rourke must have

supplied. It was a thoughtful, rare and unexpected gesture.

And like everything else that softened her towards the powerful lord – dangerous.

“Ready?” He opened the door to reveal...

A winter wonderland.

No other term could describe the magnificence of the world before them. Ice glittered from trees, crystal masterpieces sculpted by nature’s hand. The sky was a sea of blue, the world bathed in brilliant amber. A shock of cold surrounded her, yet it was toasty under the thick pelisse, next to the man who edged just a little closer than proper, even if not as close as she hoped.

“What do you think?”

Magical. Delightful. Enchanting. It was all those and more, yet she could not betray her true feelings. “It is... lovely.”

They stepped forward, and a maid followed. Sarah insisted they use a chaperone whenever they left, even if its efficacy was doubtful, with the servants’ clear devotion to the man.

“Would you like me to warm you?”

She looked at him sharply, yet his expression remained neutral. Still, a mischievous gleam sparked, as he smiled wider. “In a gentlemanly way, of course.”

“Of course.” She breathed out a puff of misty air as images of him warming her in a very ungentlemanly way flashed. “I am fine.”

He chuckled. “You are determined to not enjoy yourself, aren’t you?” He rubbed his hands together. “I consider that a challenge.”

“You seek to force me to enjoy myself?” She stepped under a glistening trellis. “Do you believe you control everything, my lord?”

He grinned. “Naturally.”

“And is modesty another trait of yours?”

His grin widened. “To an extraordinary amount.”

She couldn’t stop the smile.

They came upon a dip. Before she could hop over it, he grasped her waist and carried her over. Warmth sizzled everywhere he touched. “We will explore all but the southwest corner of the estate, where the pond freezes over.” He stopped as a loud sneeze reverberated through the air.

They turned. “I’m so sorry.” The maid rubbed her nose, which had turned crimson. “The cold weather is a little harsh for me.” She sneezed twice more.

Poor thing. She shouldn’t be out in the cold. Sarah opened her mouth to tell her they would return, but Rourke spoke first, “Return to the manor at once.”

The maid’s eyes filled with tears. “I’m so very sorry. I need this position—”

“I wasn’t dismissing you.” Rourke’s voice softened. “If I was harsh, it’s because I’m upset you didn’t tell me. Go home and rest until you are well.”

With a watery smile, the maid pivoted and hurried back to the house.

Sarah swallowed. “That was kind of you,” she said softly. The term gentleman did not often extend to treatment of the lower classes.

“She is new, which is why I didn’t know about her reaction to the cold.”

Most lords wouldn’t have known – or cared – because she was a servant, and therefore unimportant and invisible. Something shifted in her, even as she fought it. She couldn’t allow this man to affect her.

They wandered through untouched land, their footprints the only sign of human life. The birds tweeted, wild and free as they soared in the sky. “Do you think it’s wise to be out here without a maid?”

He kept her moving with a gentle yet firm hand on the small of her back. “Why? Are you planning something untoward?”

Like grasping his cravat and pulling him down for a kiss that would be a true wonderland? Then proceeding to kiss him for the next 10 seconds minutes hours days? “I would never imagine such a thing!”

He grinned wickedly.

“I must say I am a little concerned.” His hold on her never lessened. “You could even be hiding a glass of fruit punch under your pelisse.”

“Don’t be silly.” She raised a shoulder. “I have an entire pitcher.”

“No doubt.”

They took a winding path leading to a wide clearing between towering oaks. The air was fragrant with the coolness of winter and scented with wood and smoke from

distant chimneys. “Do you see the robins?” Rourke pointed to a pair of small, colorful birds flitting from tree to tree. They chirped a happy greeting, as they danced among the frost-covered branches.

She shielded the sun from her eyes. “They’re lovely.”

“My goodness, that almost sounded cheerful.” His eyes crinkled at the corners. “Perhaps from someone who is enjoying herself?”

She looked away, lest he see the smile she couldn’t hide. “Actually, I’m quite disappointed. I heard there used to be lovely blue birds.”

“I’m afraid they have gone away.” He studied the trees. “Yet new birds have come. Can you hear their love song?”

It did sound like a love song, sweet, melodic and harmonious. Her smile faded. When she’d first learned she was to have a season, she’d imagined a love match of her own, a heart exchanged for a heart. She quickly learned that was not how the ton worked. “I doubt it’s a love match. Likely the lady bird has a substantial dowry – a stash of bird food perhaps – the male wishes to possess. Once he secures her beak in marriage, he will proceed to tell her what type of flying is appropriate and which trees are improper for a bird of her position.”

He let out a sharp bark of laughter. “Is that so?”

“Indeed.”

He ran his hand along the branch of a tree, gathering a small ball of snow. “Are you ready to build a snowman?”

“Yes, my lord.” She pointed to the ground before her. “I shall make mine here, and

you can make one there.”

He lifted an eyebrow. Likely he thought they’d collaborate, yet she’d seen how lords “worked” with women. They directed them to sit while they did all the actual labor. If she was going to pretend to not enjoy herself while building a snowman, she may as well actually build it.

“I have an idea.” He slowly circled her. “How about a wager?”

For a kiss? She closed her eyes at the traitorous thought, opened them to a knowing look.

“Are you all right?” He grazed her shoulder. It was entirely too familiar, wholly inappropriate and altogether delicious. And she couldn’t stop herself from leaning into it.

“I am fine.” She notched up her chin. “What would you like to wager?”

“How about a kiss?”

“Absolutely.”

What. Had. She. Just. Said?

“I meant a kiss is completely inappropriate!”

“Are you certain you know what the word ‘absolutely’ means?” He grinned. “You sounded almost eager.”

“I was shocked and dismayed.” Or satisfied and excited. “I should be chastising you for even suggesting such a thing.” Or applauding. “Of course, I plan on winning.”

Although if a kiss were the consequences of losing, then perhaps...

Focus. "What do I get if I win?"

His eyes shined like the diamond frost. "What do you want?"

A kiss. Perhaps three. Why not go for an even dozen? "I'm not sure," she hurried out. "Perhaps I could tell you after I win."

He laughed. "I'm not sure that would be a very wise bet."

"Why not?" She rubbed her fingers together. "Are you afraid I'll ask for my own castle?"

"One of my estates is a castle." He shrugged. "You will own it when we wed."

His words instantly sobered her. "Untrue. A woman gains nothing in a marriage, yet loses everything. You retain full ownership of your possessions and gain all that belongs to your wife. Including, her."

All amusement fled from his eyes. "My bride does not gain nothing. She will possess my title, my protection, my care. She will have everything she desires."

"You would control all that she does," she countered. "She would have to bend to your will, follow your dictates. She would not be allowed to make her own decisions."

"That is not the marriage I foresee." He shook his head. "My wife will be happy and free."

"You may say that, but you will do as you wish." She walked around him, sinking

into the snow with every step. “If you decide your wife should do something – or shouldn’t – then she would have no choice but to obey.”

He frowned. “I am certain we would agree on such matters.”

“You plan to let your wife do whatever she likes, whenever she likes? That is optimistic, especially considering how protective you are.” He frowned, and she continued. “You’ve acted protective of me, a woman for whom you have no responsibility.”

His eyes flashed. “You are my guest.”

“Yet you have declared we will wed.” She stood as tall as she could. “You are a powerful man, Lord Rourke. In my former circumstances, I never would have caught the eye of such a man, and I do not intend to submit now. Do not mistake me for a woman who follows dictates.”

“Never.” His eyes turned serious, as he stepped closer. “Yet do not mistake me with a man who gives up. I never surrender a challenge.”

“Neither do I.” She closed the gap between them and notched up her chin. “This winter will not last forever. Soon, the snow will melt, and then I will leave.”

“We shall see.”

Their gazes locked, tension sizzling in the snow. “How about this?” he whispered. “If I win, I get a kiss, and if you win, I will stop trying to get you to enjoy yourself.”

She drew herself back. If it was what she wanted, why didn’t she feel pleased?
“Agreed.”

“Shall we get started?”

She nodded. Time to build the most magnificent snowman ever.

It was the most magnificent snowman ever.

Not that he'd spent any time studying the artistry of snowmen, or judging them for that matter, yet he'd put special care into this creation. He'd smoothed the snow, carving it to perfect symmetry. With a tree branch, he'd etched intricate designs on its sides, and drew a silly face topped by a hat made of leaves. In the end, he'd crafted an extraordinary clown.

It had to be, to give Sarah a chance to see him as something other than her foe.

In truth, her estimation was not wholly incorrect. While he planned to ensure his wife's happiness, he couldn't quite pledge to give her complete freedom. Especially on matters of her safety, he would maintain a measure of power.

Yet clearly, she thought he was some sort of tyrant. He would show her otherwise.

Now her brows were creased in concentration as she repeatedly stuck a heavy branch into the side of her snowman. Yet the “arm” was too heavy, and it flopped down with every attempt. “How are you doing?”

“Ugh.” She tossed the branch onto the ground. “Clearly, Parson Brown does not want arms.”

“I'm sure that's not true,” he soothed. “Maybe he just wants a lighter arm.” He picked up several frosty branches from the ground, testing their weight. He selected one. “Here we are.” He trimmed off the excess twigs, shaping the end into a semblance of a hand. “It doesn't have the correct amount of fingers, but hopefully it will do.”

She bit her lip as she grasped the branch. It slid easily into the snowman. "Parson Brown thanks you."

"He is most welcome." He tipped an imaginary hat. "What was that?" He cupped his hand to his ear. "He's asking if we are married."

She huffed out a sigh, yet her eyes twinkled. "Tell him, no man."

He relayed the message and stood back. With its rounded body, rocky button nose and branchy limbs, it was an accomplished effort, although not quite as magnificent as his clown. Clearly, he had won.

The relief was astounding.

He stepped back until he was next to her and said quietly. "I apologize if I am a little overbearing."

Her lips parted. "You trapped me at your estate and proclaimed we would marry."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Slightly more than a little overbearing?"

She lifted her pert little nose. He resisted the urge to tap it.

"Perhaps a lot," he admitted, "but only because I wish for your happiness. I don't blame you for being wary. Lords wax poetic all the time, with little substance behind extravagant words."

"You can't imagine the extent." She rubbed her gloved hands together. "Last month, a lord complimented my elbows."

He swept snow from his gloves. "I was just going to compliment your beautiful

elbows.”

“Were you?” She lifted an eyebrow. “The lord compared them to a blooming rose.”

“Your elbows remind of all types of flowers,” he shared. “Gardenias, tulips, violets and more. It even reminds me of cooking flour, that powdery goodness.”

Her shoulders shook with silent laughter.

“As for your knuckles, they are as beautiful as the morning dew, the sunrise over the ocean and the stars in the sky.”

Her shaking increased. “My knuckles remind you of the morning dew?” Her eyes twinkled. “I have the strangest feeling you’re not being honest.”

“Yet you like me enough it doesn’t matter,” he guessed. “If it makes you feel better, women also exaggerate. Last week, a lady gushed over my strong hair.”

“Truly?” She shook her head. “What did you tell her?”

“I told her I exercised it on a regular basis. Weight lifts, running, that sort of thing. I’m thinking of pugilism.”

“Pugilism for hair?” Her laughter returned, sweet and soft and oh-so-tempting. “How very...”

“Innovative? Creative? Mind-bogglingly delightful?”

“That’s exactly what I was going to say.” She winked. Her cheeks were pink, her eyes alight. And everything about her was beautiful.

“You’re lovely when you laugh,” he said softly.

Her pinkness deepened. “Now who is waxing poetic?” She tapped him on the shoulder.

He caught her fingers. “I mean every word,” he murmured.

She cleared her throat, stepped back. “We should judge the snowmen now.” She peered at his efforts, and her eyes widened. “Wow.” She stepped towards the crystalline creation, gently touching the icy masterpiece. “Were you tutored in snowman design?”

He hid his satisfaction. “Does this mean you like my circus clown?” He stepped so close his clothes brushed against her back. Nameless emotion surged through him, as he leaned down to the nape of her neck, where wispy curls escaped.

She hesitated, glanced back and forth between their creations. Even she couldn’t claim hers matched his. “Yours is average.”

Perhaps she could.

“Average, you say?”

“I’m trying to be kind.” She circled it. “It may be a bit under average, in reality. Actually, disappointing is more accurate.”

“Is that so?”

“I’m glad you agree.” She smiled. “Unless you like artistry that belongs in a museum if it wasn’t going to melt into a puddle. Now if you prefer true brilliance.” She gestured towards her creation. “Parson Brown is perfect.”

He folded his arms across his chest. “I believe someone is trying to sabotage our wager.”

“So you admit it?”

He circled closer. “Is the idea of a kiss with me so abhorrent?”

All amusement fled from her expression. She stared at his lips as she licked her own. “Quite the opposite, I’m afraid,” she whispered. “It is all-too-tempting.”

“So you admit that you los—”

Then, the snowstorm came.

It was sudden and intense, the sudden “snowstorm” that blew by, not a natural one, but crafted of a dozen children. The kids saw his circus clown far too late. In a moment, his sculpted masterpiece was a pile of snow.

Sarah gasped. “The kiddies knocked him down!”

The children froze, as if they too, were made of ice. In the next moment, a dozen gasped apologies came, amidst quivering lips, fearful eyes.

Sarah stepped forward, but Damien held up his hands. Silence ended the storm.

He exhaled, as he turned to her intact snowman, then to the heap of snow formerly his masterpiece, as his efforts melted as surely as the spring snow. When he turned to the terrified children, he softened. “I knocked down my share of snowmen in my day. If you promise to be more careful, no one needs to know about this.”

Expressions of horror and fear immediately transformed to brilliant smiles and

relieved sighs. Amidst a dozen grateful expressions, the children raced off in search of more adventure.

Damien turned to Sarah. “I suppose you have won. As agreed, I can stop wooing—”

She pressed her lips to his.

CHAPTER 5

Reasons not to kiss Rourke:

1. He would believe it was a surrender.
2. She would believe it was a surrender.
3. Truly it would be a surrender.

Reasons to kiss Rourke:

1. He was still handsome, charming, enjoyable, handsome, well-spoken, intelligent, handsome, polite, muscular, masculine, handsome, tempting, witty, and handsome.
2. See above.

The earl tasted like chocolate, cinnamon and just a hint of brandy. His lips were firm and moist, as he took immediate control of the kiss. She sighed as she pressed closer, as his tongue dipped between her lips, eliciting glorious sensation. Her breaths came in a series of gasps, as he held her even nearer.

The world was frigid, but he was fiery warmth. He rubbed her shoulders, her back, lower still.

Laughter sounded in the distance.

They broke apart, or at least as far as he allowed. Their eyes locked, and the sound of the children's laughter faded into the distance. What had just happened? Why had she allowed him to kiss her?

Could they do it again?

The first two questions were answered by a temporary bout of senselessness, the last a resounding no. She couldn't allow this to happen again, not now, not ever. She was here temporarily, with a man who'd all but claimed her. She couldn't allow her feelings for him to overtake her. It would make her yearn for dangerous things. She'd actually been jealous when a woman complimented his strong hair.

"We should return now," she said quietly.

He gazed at her for a moment more, before nodding. Yet he never let her go, not as they turned towards the manor, not as they walked through the glistening lane. The question sparkled as brilliantly as the icicles:

Would he ever let her go?

Unbalanced.

There was no other word for what this man did to her. When she was unbalanced, she worked on her writing. After her earlier failed attempts, she had tried again in her room, yet a pile of artistically crumpled papers was all she could show for the effort. Sometimes, when she couldn't write, she would find someplace interesting to be. Which was why she was currently traversing the snowy ground at an hour highly inappropriate for any creature not nocturnal.

Of course, it was mightily frowned upon for a woman to go walking alone, which somehow made it all the more tempting. After donning her warm gift from Damien,

and absolutely not thinking of him a hundred and eight-two times while doing so, she made it into the frost-filled night. It was a wonderland of shadows and secrets, and even more chilled with the sun safely tucked in bed. Clutching her supplies under her pelisse with one hand and a lantern with the other, she moved forward.

In moments, her destination came into view. The orangery, a rare indulgence, holding precious contents for this time of year. She had just reached the glass walls, when tingles slid down her neck. It was freezing, and yet somehow heat sparked.

“Going somewhere?”

She jumped at the baritone voice, spinning around to face the intruder of her past, present and future. Her foot slipped on an icy patch, and she pitched forward – straight into Damien.

Pure heat. A tiny spark beget a firestorm, in a world far less frosty. She pressed against a wall of solid heat, her hands splayed on an expansive chest as his arms came around her. They were to steady her, to support and secure, and yet in a moment, it turned to so much more. She sucked in a breath of air.

It pressed her even closer to him.

“Are you all right?” he murmured, not making any move to release her.

“Quite well,” she replied, not making any attempt to be released.

It was ridiculously comfortable and wonderful and somehow just right in his arms. A second passed. Then another, and another, and another.

She should lean closer to him. Should do what she’d been dreaming for an inordinate amount of time. Should kiss him. Instead, she backed up, or at least tried to, and her

foot slipped again. Her ankle twisted precariously, causing her to wince as pain shot up her leg.

His expression transformed in an instant, bemusement melting into genuine concern. “Are you all right?” He reached out, brushing her cheek with the back of his knuckles? “Are you unwell?”

Does fighting the urge to lean into his touch and purr like a kitten count as unwell? She managed to neither purr, nor meow, or even sigh or moan as he rubbed her cheek again. She hadn’t been particularly well before, and now she was positively unraveled. She should move back, out of his touch. She commanded her body to do exactly that.

Instead she moved closer.

“Perhaps we should get you to bed.”

“That sounds lovely.”

He froze, and she blinked. What had she said? She’d been so busy leaning into his touch and contemplating just how inappropriate it would be to start purring when he’d spoken. Yet now she could only think of the massive bed that was the centerpiece of her room, with its soft-silky sheets that seemed a blank canvas just waiting for a subject.

He cleared his throat.

“Did I say lovely? I didn’t mean lovely. How could you suggest such a thing? Don’t you realize how impertinent that is?”

His brow furrowed. “What exactly do you think I was suggesting—” He stopped, and

his eyes widened. “I didn’t mean it as a proposition. I was just suggesting you may want to lay for a spell – alone.”

“Oh.”

After that most eloquent response, she tried again.

“Oh.”

Unfortunately, her mouth was working no better. She tried again.

“Oh.”

Definitely broken.

“Of course, I knew what you meant!” Her mouth started functioning in a rush of words, far too quick. “Of course, what else would I have meant? It’s not like I thought it would be lovely if you... you...” She stopped. There was nothing in the world that would make her finish that sentence.

His eyes dilated, darkening with power. Oh, yes, he knew exactly what she’d assumed.

“I am quite fine.” She cleared her throat. “And I know what you are trying to do.”

“Do you?” he said mildly, leaning back. “And what is that, pray tell?”

“Trying to take control. Why else would you be here?”

“I saw a figure outside my window. I thought it may be you, and I was worried. That was all.”

“So you didn’t come to... to...”

His eyes reflected the moonlight. He edged closer. “What is it that you want me to do, Sarah? This time, you will have to be perfectly clear.”

Leave. Depart. Stay Away. She forced thoughts she didn’t mean. And then she said, “Kiss me.”

He did.

Sensation surged at the sudden kiss, desire streaking through her blood, as he surrounded her. Suddenly he was everywhere, as she pressed against his hardness. As always, he took control, as he softly gripped her cheek, angling her just right for his administrations. When she parted her lips on a sigh, he slipped his tongue in.

Oh my.

It was too intimate and yet not intimate enough. Intoxicating, scandalous, and yet somehow igniting even greater need. He traced her curves, spanning her waist with his large hands. He was forbidden pleasure, heated hardness, sensual strength. She pressed closer, but he pulled back.

She leaned forward, and hair loosened from pins fell like a waterfall over her eyes, blocking her vision. Yet other senses shared what the shield stole, his heady scent, the feel of his muscular arms supporting her, his heat. Each and every time they kissed, the willpower to pull away eroded just a little more.

Would there be a day she couldn’t – wouldn’t – want to leave?

“That was delicious,” he murmured.

He was delicious. She barely kept the words from existence, as they both breathed like they'd run a foot race. Only no one had won the sensual battle, or perhaps no one had lost. They were equally affected and afflicted by this madness between them.

Yet suddenly she jerked back. What was she doing? It was entirely possible someone heard her yelp when he'd startled her and would come to investigate. If they caught them together like this...

Her future would be set, no matter what she wanted.

He watched her warily. Thankfully, he said nothing about their transgression. Somehow, he knew she couldn't discuss the kiss right now. "What are you doing out here? You know there is no escape until the thaw, if that's what you're thinking. It is dangerous to be out by yourself, roaming the gardens." Now he seemed quite miffed, different than his normal bemused, amicable, serious, powerful self. More displeased than she'd ever seen him.

But this was her life, and she would do what she wanted. "I can do as I wish. You are not my guardian."

"Your guardian left you in my care."

"I do not need to be in anyone's care," she hissed. "Lords want to lock ladies in towers."

"That's ridiculous," he scoffed.

"Is it?" She breathed deeper, her heart still racing from their kiss. "Some men keep their wives locked away, in conditions barely better than a tower. Women should be permitted to buy towers, as well. It would serve you right to be placed in one after trapping me here."

“You wish to place me in a tower?” he drawled. “Whatever for?”

So she could have him at her disposal. So she could visit him whenever she wished. So she could—

“So you could leave me there and never come back?”

“Exactly,” she lied.

His grin widened, as if he knew her thoughts had nothing to do with leaving him and everything about having him right where she wanted him. “Perhaps we could be locked in the tower together.”

Fantastic idea. A real winner. Ding, ding, the man deserves a prize.

But she said none of that, instead tapping her chin. “Do you know the current rates for building a tower? Am I better renting a tower or buying one? Perhaps you could inquire about investment opportunities.”

“Perhaps, I will.” His eyes flashed. “With so many independent women, towers could be a great investment.”

The sides of her lips quirked up. Why couldn’t she stay serious with this man? “Domineering lords, you mean.”

He just shook his head. “You were about to explain your late night stroll.”

No, she wasn’t. She couldn’t tell him she’d been looking for a location to write. It was a private endeavor. “What does anyone do in the gardens?” she said breezily. “I came to admire the flora of your orangery, of course. I am a huge fan of plants, and I wanted to view them in the privacy of the night.”

He stopped, folded his arms across his chest. “Did you now?”

She stood up tall, straightening her dress. “Absolutely.”

“All right then.” He gestured to the structure before them. “Pray tell then – describe what you see.”

Clearly, he saw that he couldn’t argue with that. With a curt nod and a smile, she turned to the orangery and pointed to the... darkness.

Woops.

The orangery was a sea of shadows, lit only by distant streams of candlelight. Of course, she hadn’t actually looked at the plants, or whatever they were. In the shadow-drenched world, little could be distinguished, save for blobs and lumps. Why hadn’t she said she simply wanted some fresh air? “I see many lovely and fair plants.”

His lips twitched. “Do you indeed? Could you describe them?”

Most certainly not. “Certainly.” She lifted her nose. “They are... green.”

“Are they?” His chest shook slightly. “How intriguing.”

“I think so, yes.”

“I did not know you were such a connoisseur of plants.”

That he knew she was lying was as obvious as the fact that most plants were green. Would she admit it? Never.

“Please tell me more. I’d love to hear your expertise on these plants.” He walked further along the side of the orangery, where the shadows grew longer, and moonlight replaced candlelight. The scent of gardenia swirled in the air, intoxicating and beautiful.

“What about that plant?” He pointed at an amorphous blob through the glassy pane.

“That’s quite rare,” she quickly said.

“Indeed?” He cocked his head to the side. “Is it also green?”

“Quite,” she informed him most regally. “It also has leaves.”

“You don’t say.” Feigned shock heightened every word. “How rare. Don’t tell me it also has a stem.”

Didn’t plants have stems by definition? “Quite right.”

“And that one?” He pointed to a plant in the distance, beyond the perfectly manicured rows to where a little bit of disarray had been permitted. No doubt it was beautiful in the daytime. “Do you know what it is?”

Its name? She stopped, peered at it. Of course, she could pretend not to know in what was clearly a useless exercise. He knew she hadn’t come to admire a garden she couldn’t see. Yet as long as he was distracted enough not to realize her true motives, she would have accomplished her aim. “That is also a rare plant. Also green and with leaves and... um... a stem. It is extremely rare and beautiful. In fact, brides often use it for their weddings.”

“Does it have a name?”

“Of course.”

He smiled. “Do you know its name?”

“Um... dweedledoof.”

He stopped, stared.

What. Had. She. Just. Said?

Really the first thing that came to her mind, a jumble of letters that sounded more like court jester than a plant. Yet what were the chances he knew the actual name? “Are you certain?” His gaze was hooded. “Because I know it by a different name.”

“Ah, yes it does go by many names. Some call it a—”

“Weed.”

Oops. “A weed?”

“That’s right.” We let that section be more natural, and thus weeds have filled in between some of the plants.”

“Well, of course, it’s a weed.” She bobbed her head like some sort of possessed child’s toy. “Everyone knows that dweedledoof is a weed.”

“Do they?” He leaned in. “And you’re sure you’re not making this up?”

“Would I do something like that?”

“Absolutely.”

His chest now shook header, and he chuckled. She let a giggle escape, yet even as she held a hand to her lips, she could not contain it. Her soft chortles perfectly complimented his deep rumbles. His eyes crinkled at the corners, his expression soft and warm.

By the time her giggles calmed to an occasional laugh, her eyes were watery. Yet she felt alive in a way she hadn't in a very long time, here in the cool, brisk night, under a velvet star-studded sky. And for once, it didn't feel as if it were her against society, against the world. For once, she didn't feel alone.

"We shall have to explore the orangery together during the day so you can show me more."

"I would like that." The reply came without thought, the instinctive and yet dangerous answer. "I mean, I would have liked that, if only there was time."

The humor had left his eyes. "I'll make time."

She should protest, should argue. Yet instead she only nodded. He took her hand, leading her away from the plants he had asked her about. She should demand he let go, retreat to the safety of her quarters. Yet when he squeezed her hand, somehow she squeezed him back, and when he edged a little closer, she did as well. Their sides brushed.

"If you cannot sleep, why don't we get to know each other better?"

Her breath hitched, at images of "getting to know each other better." More kisses would most certainly be involved. Possibly touches. Maybe even— She lifted her nose. "You are highly inappropriate, my lord."

"Am I?" He raised an eyebrow. "Do you not want to get to know each other better?"

“Of course, I want to get to know you better.” She cringed. “I didn’t mean that.”

Perfect. Now she was imagining how to get to know him better.

“We should definitely, most assuredly, positively, not do anything to get to know each other better,” she said primly. No matter how much she wanted it.

“You do understand I meant we could learn more about each other. By talking.”

Talking?

Assorted body parts rebelled.

“Of course!” she rushed out. “Well, obviously, I knew that’s what you meant. What else would you have meant?”

As his eyes darkened once more, every assorted body part reminded her.

“Ah, yes.”

“Indeed.”

She cleared her throat. Time to distract him – and herself – before she did something to truly get to know him better. “I really should get back.”

“I have another idea.” He squeezed her hand slightly, reminding her that he held her captive, in more than one way. “Come with me.”

She shouldn’t.

But she did.

CHAPTER 6

S arah seemed both pleased and displeased when his idea turned out to be chocolate in a small hidden drawing room neither the servants nor his aunts knew about. He'd taken her there not to have his wicked way with her, but to ensure privacy, and her the freedom to make the choices she desired, without a marriage forced by discovery.

Of course, that didn't mean he had any intention of letting her go.

She was delightful in more ways than he ever imagined. She was intelligent and witty, with quick retorts and clever insights. She was strong, with a powerful spirit far too many women hid, yet there was also a kindness to her, a goodness. Bradenton had mentioned some of her charitable activities, and he imagined he didn't know half of it. He was a fortunate man to have found her.

He would be even more fortunate when they wed.

But now he was immensely curious about her outing. There must have been a reason for her walk, since it clearly wasn't to view his fictional dweedledoof collection. It may have to do with whatever she had unsuccessfully hidden under her pelisse. He could see her trying to grip something as she walked.

She removed the pelisse upon entering the warm room and placed it on a chair by the fireplace. This room was smaller than most, cozy with emerald and sapphire settees framed by a dark wood. There were several wooden writing desks with plush chairs, and he lit the fireplace until it crackled with cozy warmth. He used this room for his own writing when he didn't want to be disturbed – or discovered.

She sank into the settee furthest from him, as if the physical distance could somehow insulate her from his influence. It would not.

She sat as straight as a wooden board. "This is lovely."

"Thank you." He poured her a cup of the exotic chocolate he had sourced from his secret supply and handed it to her.

She took a small sip, and her cheeks flushed with delight. "This is extraordinary. Where did you get this, and could I have a hundred pots more?"

He chuckled softly, as she blushed. "I know a few connoisseurs of exotic goods. And there may be more for you, depending on how forthright you are."

She scrunched up her nose at him. "Just when I was considering sparing some of your shirts."

"I'm sorry?"

"Never-mind. It would be lovely of you to offer more such delights." She took a sip that turned into a gulp, but he didn't mind. Most women didn't show their true selves, instead hiding behind propriety and society's strict rules. It was refreshing to find a woman who revealed her true identity.

"I could barter, perhaps, for another serving. How about you tell me what you were hiding in your pelisse?"

Her cheeks turned a delightful shade of pink. "What makes you think I was hiding anything?"

"Other than the fact that you are blushing?" He smiled as her blush deepened to a

rosy red. “I could tell you were holding something. Plus, it seemed extra bulky. You can tell me.” He lowered his voice. “I am excellent at keeping secrets.”

She looked back at the pelisse, and then at the chocolate pot. Lifted her chin. “Fine. It is no big secret. I wanted to write, thus I brought supplies to do so.”

He sat up. “Please tell me you’re not planning on ruining more of my clothing. My laundry maids shall have a fit.”

“You think I would do something like that?” she sniffed, yet her color seemed even more pronounced. Perhaps he should start wearing his less expensive cravats when she was near a pot of ink.

“My apologies, Sarah. Do tell me, what do you write?”

She hesitated, but then straightened. “I write stories. I know it is not a common activity, but I quite enjoy it. I hope one day to get published.”

She stayed silent, as if expecting his rebuke. Instead, he sat straighter himself. “Really?” How extraordinary. She couldn’t know this, but it was something they had in common. He loved to pen stories of fiction, ever since he was a child. It was not a common activity for lords, and not among the more accepted pursuits of physical prowess or visiting one’s club. “I am something of a writer myself.”

She looked at him doubtfully. “Are you?”

“I am.” He refrained from total honesty. No doubt she would be shocked to learn of his literary identity, yet that was not something he was ready to reveal, at least not yet. “I would love to see your writing.”

“Oh no.” She looked down. “No one has seen it.”

“Then you are quite past due. I am certain it is wonderful.” He was truly curious. If she had true talent, he could set up a meeting with Mr. Tennant, the representative from his publisher. He had a country estate nearby and was in residence. Yet he would have to hear a sample first. “How about we make it a game? We can even put something on it.”

“A game?” She eyed him warily. “How so? And what could we possibly wager?”

“You will go on a carriage ride with me tomorrow.”

“No.”

“You didn’t even hear my terms.”

“No.”

“Are you sure there’s nothing you want?”

The no didn’t come this time, at least not immediately. She opened her mouth as if to give the negative, yet closed it, tapped her chin. “If I win, will you ignore me while I am here?”

“Is that truly what you want?”

“Yes.”

But her eyes said the opposite. Still, he had no intention of losing. “That would be terribly boring for both of us. However, I could give you a few days to get acclimated to the... situation.”

She watched him warily. “I don’t kn—”

“I’ll add a week’s worth of chocolate.”

“Deal.”

The chocolate had been a fortune, but well worthwhile.

She lifted a finger. “But it can’t just be me. If I am going to share my writing, you will have to share yours, as well.”

He never shared his writing with others. Actually, that wasn’t true. He shared with half of England, evidenced by the robust sales of his books. Half the ton talked about his stories of adventure, and loathe as he was to admit it, romance. Of course, he couldn’t share his current work, or she may guess about his books. Yet for her presence, he would share something else.

“All right.” He stood and walked to one of the writing tables, then gestured to the other. “We will both write something new, so as not to give away any secrets. Supplies are inside the table.”

“Agreed.” She rose and traveled to the other writing table, opened the drawer and retrieved paper, quills and a pot of ink. He cringed and began to loosen his cravat.

She grimaced at him but then shrugged. “Probably not a bad idea.”

No, it wasn’t.

When they had both set up their supplies and he had moved his cravat to the far end of the room, she rubbed her hands together. “What are the terms?”

He thought for a moment. How could he judge her writing without being obvious? And most of all, how could he win? “How about we attempt to move the other person

with our writing? It could make them sad or delighted, but it must touch them.”

She tilted her head thoughtfully. “That may be difficult to judge.”

“True. We will have to rely on honesty. Can I trust you?”

She sighed but nodded her head. “You have my word. Shall we give it a fifteen-minute time limit?”

“Sounds fair.”

The clock rang then, providing the perfect starting bell. He thought for only a minute, then pressed the quill onto the paper. The minutes soared as swiftly as the snow drifting outside the window. The words followed, as he drew in sweeping swirls. Finally, the clock ticked the quarter hour, and they both put down their quills.

“That wasn’t bad,” she admitted. “It quite spurred me on. Perhaps I shall try to write like this from now on.”

“I am happy to offer my services any time.”

“Oh I didn’t mean... nevermind. I’ll go first.” She cleared her throat, took out her paper and began to read.

With every word, Damien’s smile – and delight – grew. She was not merely competent, but fantastic. She told a miniature yet charming tale of children who traversed an enchanted forest. By the time she uttered the end and gave a mini-curtsey from the seat, he had already decided to invite the publisher over to speak with her. She deserved the chance to show her work – and perhaps something even more.

He clapped. “That was fantastic.”

She couldn’t quite hide the smile. “Do you truly think so?”

“I truly do.” He put as much earnestness as he could into the words, and by the pleasure spilling into her eyes, she believed him. “I suppose it is my turn. Prepare to be moved.”

With a nod, she threaded her hands and sat back in her seat, giving him her full attention.

“Dweedledoof, oh dweedledoof, how fair art thou? You bring so much beauty to my world. Firstly green, such a rare and delightful color. With leaves so leafy and a stem so stemmy, just a weed so weedy. You are a portrait of perfection in a rose-littered world, the true standout of nature’s bounty. Delight is a bouquet of your beauty. Dweedledoof, oh dweedledoof, how fair art thou? Neverending.”

He stopped and placed the paper down on the desk.

Sarah blinked at him. Then she laughed. And she laughed. And laughed and laughed. It was pure music, and infectious as well. Finally, they both managed to tone down the laughter to smiles. “That was... that was...”

“Delightful? Amusing? Moving?”

“Yes to the first two, but the last not so much. I cannot deny your writing... errr.. skills, however I cannot claim it truly touched me. It was not enough to merely amuse. Therefore—” She leaned forward. “I have won.”

He frowned. She was right. While amusing, the writing hadn’t really affected her. He was not going to win, not unless he shared his true writing. “I would like a second

go.”

“That wasn’t in the rules.”

“Two weeks of chocolate.”

“The time starts now.”

The words flowed easily now, as natural as the thoughts in his mind. She inspired more words than he could ever gather, a feast of delights from which to choose. The ink flowed as the moments passed, and it seemed but seconds when time was up. He put down his quill. “Are you finished?”

She smoothed out her paper and nodded.

“As am I.” He had read and reread it several times and it was perfect . If this did not move her, then he had gravely misjudged. “Would you like to read yours first?”

She inclined her head. “I hope you don’t mind, but I took some inspiration from you.” With a deep breath, she started, “Cravat, oh cravat, how fair art thou? You bring so much beauty to my world. Firstly white, such a rare and delightful color. With knots so knotty and fabric so fabricy. You are a portrait of perfection in an ink-splattered world, the true standout of men’s clothing. Delight is a bouquet of your beauty. Cravat, oh cravat, how fair art thou? Neverending.”

He never laughed so hard in all his life.

This clever, clever woman. Any husband of hers would have a lifetime of delight. It was only one of the reasons why he was determined to be that man.

She looked as delighted by his reaction as he was. “I hope you liked it.”

“I cannot tell you how much. And now it is my turn.” He took a moment to calm, allowing for the seriousness the passage deserved. There wasn’t a snowflake of humor in his new work.

“A perfect rose cannot compare to you. Softness as silky as a velvety petal. Loveliness with more color than even the brightest bloom. Strength as sharp as a thorn’s power. Drive more powerful than a bud bursting into the world. Cleverness to forge a path of destiny. Kindness a gift to perfume the world. Beauty to delight every sense, as much hidden on the inside as revealed to the world. No, a rose could never compare to the perfection within you.”

She stared again, and yet this time no laughter came. No outward sign of delight or joy. Instead, just a deep, searching gaze, with eyes darting among his features as if searching for something he kept hidden.

Perhaps they both kept parts of themselves hidden.

He stood and placed the paper down on her desk. “Did it move you?”

She stared for an eternity more, finally gave a curt nod.

Satisfaction rose within him. Partly because he had won and partly because he would now gain the pleasure of her time. Yet entirely because he had moved her, and for a moment, that seemed the only thing that mattered in his world.

“I shall see you tomorrow then.” He inclined his head to the chocolate. “Have as much as you’d like. Regardless of the contest, you may have every day for as long as you are with me.” Did she realize how long that would be? He wondered as he turned to leave.

He hadn’t made it to the door when the patter of light footsteps reached him, and then

she was behind him. “Wait. Why did you write this?”

He turned. Silhouetted in the moonlight like an ethereal creature, she was lovelier than any woman he had ever seen. Yet as he had written, she was even more beautiful on the inside. “Because it is true,” he said simply.

Her eyes lingered on his lips. It took all his strength to hold back, yet he did. She deserved a gentleman. If they were to have the sort of connection he hoped they would, she would need to discover it for herself. She moved forward, brushed her lips against his.

Then, she was gone.

He stood transfixed as she fled the room and his presence, but only for a short time. Soon, she would realize exactly what he planned. He would commence his plan to win her over, starting tomorrow.

He could not wait to make Sarah his bride.

CHAPTER 7

“ You will share all your secrets,” Sarah declared to the man before her, as they rode in the luxurious carriage hours later. Although the night had passed, it seemed the same day as when they met, when he shared words she could still scarce believe. She’d read them over and over again, and would continue to do so far into the future.

They had met earlier in the crisp morning air of the snowy world, at the carriage to await the aunt who likely still thought she was unbalanced. Yet the time passed, and his aunt didn’t arrive. Damien went to check on her and discovered she’d developed a troublesome stomach and wouldn’t make it. He suggested that since they’d already gone to so much trouble, and since neither would do anything untoward, they should still continue on a short ride.

Somehow that made sense at the time, although she didn’t actually commit to not doing anything untoward, and realistically their record left something to be desired. Yet now they were riding together in a carriage – alone – playing a game. Her friend Hannah had shared the tale of her own game of forfeits with a dashing duke, and now she was happily married. Not that Sarah wanted to get married, of course.

Yet curiosity urged her to learn more about the powerful lord. A game in which you take turns asking questions seemed perfect. If the person chose not to answer, they would have to face a challenge instead.

Unfortunately, her mind was being very wicked. “It’s my turn. Are you keeping secrets from me?”

The answer was immediate. “I can neither confirm nor deny that.”

It was the expected answer, the certain answer, and yet it lodged heavily in her breast, like a vice squeezing her lungs. While he expected all truths from her, this man kept secrets. Just like all men.

He paused, as if reading her discomfort. “I can say no more, except that I do plan to share all in short time. There are simply some details between us that must get sorted first.”

What sort of details? The question danced on her tongue, yet the syllables wouldn’t form. Very likely the answer would start a battle between them. He may have trapped her at his home, but he didn’t get to decide whether to keep her. No, best let it go to a challenge. “I suppose you will then have to do something instead.

He inclined his head. “What would you ask of me? It could be anything.”

Anything?

In that case, she’d like a kiss. Or two. Or even four hundred and fifty-two.

“I didn’t expect that.”

Her gaze shot up – straight to his lips – at the murmured words. “Didn’t expect what?”

“For you to be so obvious in what you want.”

She gaped at him, sputtered. “I was not obvious.”

“Really?” He brought his hand under his chin. “Because I am fairly certain I know

what you want.”

“You most certainly do not,” she bristled.

“You want a kiss, don’t you?”

“I do not,” she sniffed. “You are completely and utterly wrong.” She wanted four hundred and fifty-two kisses, which was exceedingly different than a single kiss.

“Indeed,” he drawled, his tone assured she was either outright lying or deceiving him. “Yet you were looking at me just like during our last kiss.”

“I have learned a lot since our last kiss.”

The sides of his lips curled up. “Our last kiss was approximately twelve hours ago.”

She smiled sweetly. “It’s amazing what you can learn in so short a time.”

“Ahh, so you are saying you did not enjoy the kiss?”

She blinked. Commanded the words to form. Stared at him instead.

A year or so passed.

“Well?”

She blinked again . Commanded the words to form again . Stared at him instead again

.

“I say, have I broken you?”

“Of course not!” Her mouth suddenly decided to work again, yet not to pretend the kiss had been anything less than extraordinary. “I was just deciding how to respond to such an impertinent question.” She folded her arms across her chest, nodded curtly, and still didn’t answer the question.

“Since a kiss is not what you wished for...” Every word made clear he knew it was exactly what she wished for. And what she couldn’t stop imagining, naturally. “Then what would you like me to do?”

She bit her bottom lip, as a thousand images and desires vied for attention. Why had she read that book her married friend had shown her, the ones that included all sorts of interesting things a man could do? Because now she was thinking of interesting things and Damien, a combination most certainly not conducive to convincing him she wasn’t interested.

Or perhaps she could further her goal of convincing him he wasn’t interested.

She hid her smile, as she sat up loftily. “Obviously, I like to be pampered in every way possible.”

He barked out laughter. She glared, and he sobered, or at least he made an extremely poor attempt to hide his amusement. Of course, she wasn’t one of those women who demanded, or even cared for, pampering. She rather disliked it, yet for the sake of her campaign, sacrifices must be made.

“All women deserve to be pampered.” His eyes sparkled in the beams of the morning sunlight.

“Don’t you mean all ladies?” The response was automatic, and she cringed. She had to choose one strategy at a time in which to dissuade him.

Yet none of them seemed to move him. “No,” he said softly. “I didn’t.”

She swallowed a lump of air. Many men saw nothing and no one beyond the ton’s golden borders. That this man had more kindness couldn’t matter. “As I said, I do enjoy pampering. Perhaps you could...” She fluttered her eyelashes. “Rub my...” As he leaned nearer, she licked her bottom lip. “Feet.”

She’d surprised him. Widened eyes betrayed it, albeit only for an instant. She expected him to protest, to groan or at least show some sort of dismay at the prospect of rubbing another person’s feet. Instead, he straightened. “I thought you were going to say somewhere else,” he murmured.

Somewhere else he could caress? And with that, every interesting body part from the book returned, accompanied by images of him touching such body parts.

Running his hands through her hair. Tracing her neck. Smoothing her arms. Scraping her neck. Stroking her stomach. Brushing her legs. Caressing her—

“Just my feet!” she shot out, as the images descended into far more interesting parts.

“Of course.”

“Of course?!”

“Indeed.” His voice lowered to a deep rumble. “Were you expecting me to say no?”

He was supposed to say, “Absolutely not.” Then he would grow angry and demand they turn around the coach and immediately return home. He was not supposed to genially agree. Actually, by the look in his eyes, it almost seemed he was looking forward to it. “Of course not. I knew you would say yes. But obviously if it bothers you, you could say no. In fact, if you’re offended and want to return back to the

estate, I would understand.”

“Of course.” He grinned.

Wait – he wanted to go back?

And why in blazes was she so disappointed?

“All right then.” Her voice came out low and breathy. She cleared her throat, spoke louder. “I certainly understand. Do you want to bang on the roof to get the coachman’s attention and—”

“Absolutely not.”

“What?”

He leaned forward. “I didn’t mean I wanted to go back, just that I appreciated the offer. I was rather looking forward to your challenge.”

Her breath caught. “You were?”

“Oh yes.” He widened his body and patted his lap. “Are you ready?”

Oh. My. Goodness . The lord was literally going to caress her feet. She could count on all ten toes of said feet what a bad idea this was, and yet now that she’d issued the challenge, she couldn’t escape from it without betraying his effect on her.

“If you are uncomfortable, you could choose something else,” he drawled. “I wouldn’t want to make it difficult for you to control yourself.”

“Control myself?” she sputtered. “How dare you! I have complete and utter control,

especially when it comes to you. You could caress anywhere, and it wouldn't affect me."

His eyes widened, as very briefly his control slipped. And hers?

It had jumped out of the carriage and was trying to rent a convenience back to London.

Her words brought back the unbidden images of him caressing everywhere – and anywhere, as it were. Innocent places. Not-so-innocent places. Feminine places. And those places grew sensitive... and achy... and... "Are you going to start?" The words came out louder than she planned, yet fortunately, or unfortunately, the coachman made no sign that he heard.

"I am waiting for you." Damien gestured to the feet tucked on the floor, as away from him as possible. "I cannot bend down." His voice deepened. "You will have to place what you want caressed into my lap."

This challenge was getting worse by the second. Or according to a traitorous body – better. No doubt his omission of the actual body part was no mistake. He would caress any body part she laid in his lap.

Oh-so-tempting.

Yet he was correct that she would have to get closer. It would be nigh impossible for him to fold his massive body in the small carriage. She should just get it over with. His gaze tracked hers as she scooted back, smoothing the dress over her legs. With a glance at the curtained windows and a breath of courage, she lifted her legs.

"Let me help you." Once she started the movement, he took control, grasping her ankles. She couldn't stop a squeak as her back pressed against the side of the

carriage, her legs propped on his thighs. They were rock solid.

“Dami—”

“Shhh.” His gentle hushing stole the words from her lips. He held her ankles with two strong arms, fully encircling them, capturing them and her in the prison of his hold. That he would release her at a single protest was no doubt, yet the words wouldn’t form on her lips. His hands were heated, large.

“Shall I remove your boots?”

No. Yes. No. Yes. A seesaw of affirmatives and negatives rose. It was dangerous, of course, for should the coach suddenly stop, it would take precious seconds to don them. Yet the thought of his bare hands caressing her skin... “I believe you must.” The words emerged crisp and cool, with far more logic than they represented in truth. “After all, you cannot actually fulfill the action with them on.”

“Indeed.” His eyes sparkled. “So it is for my benefit, is it?”

She hid a traitorous smile. “I try to be magnanimous.”

“I already know that about you.” His lips curved up. “And I am very glad you are allowing me to do this.” His hands lingered on the laces of the chocolate half-boots. “Just relax.”

Her throat tightened like an Almack’s patroness’s corset. Relaxing was beyond impossible, as he slowly pulled a lace, untightened the bow and loosened the boot. He did the same with the other before ever-slowly pulling them from her feet. She wriggled her toes as the cool air permeated the thin stockings, yet then his hands cupped them, and all coolness fled. His touch brought pure fire .

Many body parts were considered sensual. A ladies bosom. The derriere. Places she would not mention. She'd never considered feet sensual, and yet every touch sent streaks of sensation from her feet, up her legs, and throughout her body. He traced a single finger down her heel, a light and yet oh-so-excruciating touch that channeled lightning. Then he grasped both feet in both hands and... ecstasy .

A sigh escaped. It melted into a moan as she closed her eyes, surrendering to the touch. He never strayed above her ankle, yet it was as if he touched all of her, for the depth and breadth of his ministrations. He kneaded the tender skin, rubbed and caressed. He bestowed attention on each toe, rubbing it between his finger, before smoothing out her heel. He manipulated her body like a master sculptor, plying pleasure that seeped into her blood, channeled to every part of her. Muscles released hidden tension, and she rather felt like a glob of orange marmalade.

“I think that’s enough.”

She fluttered her eyelashes, opened her eyes as Damien slipped a boot back on her feet. He studied it intensely, his eyes shuttered, his movements crisp and methodical. He did the other, tying the laces firmly yet not too tightly. He finished, and carefully lowered her feet to the floor, before gazing at her.

Her breath caught in her throat. If the activity had unbalanced her, it had affected him as well. His eyes shone in the sunlight, darkened with undeniable hunger. His muscles were taut, his movements not quite as smooth from a man normally as graceful as a tiger. She took a shuddering breath, sat back. “You fulfilled the challenge.”

“Actually, I believe we have only just begun,” he murmured.

She stiffened, opened her mouth, yet the denial caught on her tongue. With emotions swirling, better to move forward. “It is your turn.”

For a moment, he just stared at her, as if deciding whether to start a far deeper, and more dangerous, conversation. Yet he breathed out, relaxed back. “Are you trying incredibly hard to dislike me?”

It was the perfect question to lighten the mood. “Yes!” The word was loud and succinct, and somehow still didn’t alert the coachman. She allowed a grin. “I believe that is clear.”

“Quite.” He returned a wicked smile. “And how is that working out for you?”

Terribly. As in extraordinarily, positively, like a goldfish who’d accidentally swam into a ball for sharks sort of bad. Because not only did she not dislike him, but she could no longer stay neutral. Despite her every effort, she liked him. The extent of it was not something she was willing to explore.

Only he was not letting her not. “Do you like me?”

Oh yes. “It’s not your turn,” she protested. “I just answered your question. It is my turn to ask.”

“I believe you have misjudged me...” He leaned forward. “For a man who follows the rules.”

That she’d misjudged him was starkly clear, in far more ways than he asserted. That he didn’t heed to rules was also quite obvious. Yet other aspects of who he was – and who he wasn’t – were not as she imagined. “Regardless of whether you wish to follow the rules, you shall do so in my presence. Or do you not wish for me to follow them as well?”

He lifted an eyebrow. “I believe we’ve already established that you take society’s dictates as a light suggestion, before finding a way about them.

Yes, she did.

“Why waste time protesting when you can just answer the question? It is a simple yes or no.” He lifted a shoulder. “You could answer in three seconds and then return to whatever dastardly query you have next for me, such as how large my dungeon is or where I hide my harem.”

Annoyance bit her for a harem he obviously didn’t have. Yet if a man like him wanted one... “It’s just the rules. If I let you break it, then what else might you want?”

“I believe I’ve made quite clear what I want – and what I am going to get. You admitting anything won’t change that.” Her heart thumped with each word. Was what he said true? “I don’t think this about the rules” he continued. “I don’t think you want to admit you are starting to like me.”

Yes. That’s right. So very true.

“That’s not–”

“Remember, if you lie you have to do the challenge.”

“Fine! I like you.” The words came rapidly, strongly and loudly, and it was a miracle they didn’t alert the coachman. The words also didn’t stop. “Do you know how much I tried not to like you? So much. I should be furious for all you’ve done, never want to see you. Instead all I seem to notice are your qualities, your charm and your wit, your kindness, and fates help me even your power. It’s like I’ve taken the mail coach to simpering miss village, and can’t find a return ticket.” He gave a half-choke/half-laugh. She should stop, needed to stop, and yet words still tumbled out. “I even enjoy spending time with you,” she accused, in a tone more suited for a man who had purposely poured a gallon of fruit punch over her head than who had the audacity of

attracting her. She sat back and folded her arms across her chest. Slowed her breathing, waited for her heart to stop playing a speedy tempo in her heart. And as it did, a single question emerged:

Had she gone mad?

The answer to the question was an indubitable yes as the seconds passed, as Damien continued his rather disconcerting study of her. What did this man do to her? “Would you believe I was jesting?”

“Most certainly not.” His voice was low, absent of all humor. “I don’t understand.”

What was there to not understand? She liked being with him, and she liked him, to an extent that she had not truly revealed and would never admit. “The whole point was that you were not as dreadful as I believed.” She smiled to show the tease, yet it did nothing to lighten his expression.

“I do not believe that is true,” he murmured.

No, he wouldn’t. It was why she’d risked this outing with him, when she knew it could lead to a forced marriage. Whether she even had a chance to escape was in doubt.

What would Damien do to secure her as his bride?

CHAPTER 8

“I have a surprise for you.”

That never ended well. Yet somehow Sarah kept her expression neutral as she followed Damien through the endless paths of his vast home. She'd gotten more accustomed to it, yet she still couldn't quite make out the labyrinth of hallways. Finally, they entered the “Gold Room,” aptly named for its golden covered chairs and the golden accents atop every surface. Lamps, vases, bowls and more glittered in dazzling away, set off by the golden embers of the fireplace, which scented the room with a woodsy and warm aroma. She was afraid to ask how many ornaments were actually crafted of the precious material

“A visitor?” She stopped, her slippers nearly sliding on the polished floor, as she caught sight of the man waiting on the settee. As always, Damien somehow anticipated her movements, as he reached out to steady her. Immediate suspicion rose in her, but she pushed it down. Apart from being authoritative, he hadn't been what she'd expected. She hadn't expected to enjoy her time with him so much.

Or to want there to be far more of it.

Damien performed the introductions. Apparently, the man was called Mr. Tennant and was a long-time associate of Damien's. Yet despite that or perhaps because of it, she couldn't quite eradicate all wariness as the man rose. “A pleasure to meet you. Damien has told me all about you, specifically your writing.”

The wariness flamed to full strength. Her writing was shared in private and wasn't to

be shared. This was why she kept her endeavors secret.

“I am especially interested in your interest in nature.”

Her cheeks flamed. Was he making fun of her? Had Damien also told him about her fictional flora? Did he think he could just make fun of her? Perhaps it was time for him to see how it felt.

“I am certain you are,” she gushed. “People from wide and far come to hear all about the dweedledoof.”

Mr. Tennant looked perplexed. “I’m sorry?”

And Damien looked alarmed. “Sarah—”

She stopped him with a hand. “That’s okay. I want to share everything. I don’t feel Damien appreciates the dweedledoof like I do.”

Mr. Tennant looked toward Damien, as if searching for guidance. Damien looked as if he was rather hoping a hole would open up in the ground to swallow him. Or perhaps her?

Both looked as if they wanted to speak, but Mr. Tennant did first, “I’m sorry, I don’t know what a dweedledoof is. I meant your stories. Damien said you wrote a tale about children who visit an enchanted forest. I work for a publisher, you see, and I would be willing to read your work, if you have something ready for perusal.”

Oh. No.

Oh. No.

Oh. No.

What could she say to fix this? Apparently, nothing, since she just stood there, staring at him like a wooden puppet. Finally, Damien stepped in. “Don’t mind her little jest from before. Her great wit is what makes her a wonderful writer. Would you like to send him some of your work when you are ready, Sarah?”

All the words had been plucked from the world, so Sarah just nodded. This was... amazing, wonderful and astounding. A chance to show her work to a real publisher. And even though she’d clearly misinterpreted Damien’s intentions and embarrassed both of them, he still wanted to help her. “Thank you,” she finally managed.

“Of course, my dear.” He nodded toward Damien. “I’d do anything for my star author. Although if you’re as good as he claims, you’ll be doing me a favor.”

Damien had done that for her? She couldn’t hide her wonder – or smile – as she glanced back at him. Then she stopped, turned back to the publisher. “Did you say star author?”

“Oh dear.” Now Mr. Tennant looked rueful. Next to him, Damien stiffened. “I wasn’t supposed to say anything. But it will be fairly difficult to hide if you also work for me. I’m afraid I have another engagement to attend. I’m sure Damien can tell you the details.”

They said their farewells. Damien left to see Mr. Tennant out, returning moments later. For once he seemed the wary one, as he poured himself a drink.

Yet she had softened toward him. What he had done for her was astounding. She was grateful, but right now there was another mystery to solve. “Why did you do this?” she blurted out. She flushed. “I’m sorry, I should be grateful. I am grateful. It’s just I don’t understand.”

“It’s simple.” He walked slowly toward her. “You are a wonderful writer. You deserve the chance to show your work to someone who can share it with others. As Mr. Tennant said, I am doing him a favor as much as you. Your work was fantastic.”

“Thank you,” she said softly. “I’m sorry about before. I thought...”

“That I was making fun of you?” he guessed correctly. She nodded. “I figured as much, but you underestimate me. I would never do anything to hurt you.” His voice softened. “Do you believe me?”

Yes, she did. She gave him a bright smile. “Now I want to know what he meant about you being his star author.”

His neutral look melted into a grimace. “I’d hoped you’d forgotten about that.”

She tilted her head. “Did you really?”

“It was not a realistic hope,” he admitted. He breathed deeply, as if questioning what to reveal. Would he hedge again? “As I told you, I also like to write. I have written books with modest success.”

“Really?” She didn’t need to feign her interest. “Would I know of any of them? Do you use a different name?”

He nodded. “I go by E.L. Carruthers.”

She opened her mouth. “E.L. Carruthers is one of the most famous writers in England. His books are wildly popular, and for good reason. They are fantastic. You’re not telling me you’re him.”

His grimace never left, but he nodded. “I am.”

“Wow.” Because there really wasn’t anything more to say. This man was far more than he portrayed.

“If you don’t mind, I’d rather you not share this with anyone. Not even my family knows, only my publisher.”

Why he would want to keep such great success to himself was a mystery, but it was his right. As part of the ton, she understood what it was like to have others make decisions that should be yours. “It will be our secret.” She gave him a big smile. “Now I have to find a way to repay you.”

“Want to go to the garden to look for dweedledoof?”

She grinned. “I’d like nothing more.”

CHAPTER 9

Even as the world remained chilled, the days and weeks melted into each other. Despite her pledge to resist Damien's charm, her defiance melted as surely as the spring snow. He was now Damien, not Rourke, as they enjoyed more walks, more fireside chats and more snowman building contests, with a kiss always as the prize, no matter who won. It was beautiful, enjoyable and unwise. This winter wonderland was not reality.

"Are you listening? The sleigh bells are ringing."

Sarah did not turn from the window, not as Damien came behind her, so close she could feel his warm breath on her neck. She edged back, a whisper of a move with roaring ramifications. Despite her best efforts, she had softened towards him.

"It's a beautiful sight, isn't it?" he whispered. "Whether you admit it or not, you are happy tonight. Walk with me." He held out his hand.

Fate help her, she took it.

They stepped into a world alight with beauty. Under the full moon, the snow sparkled like a blanket of diamonds, a silvery sea on the glistening lane. Snow sunk softly under her feet, as they walked through the cool, crisp night. The biting cold of the winter's crescendo had lessened, and under their thick wool outerwear, it was pleasant.

Damien linked arms with her, drawing her near. "So you don't get cold," he

murmured.

Next to him she was as toasty as a fireplace. “Of course.” Now she moved just a little closer, so he wouldn’t get cold, of course. The walked step in step, every movement a match.

Including each other.

Was she considering a match? The first week, she would have said absolutely not, the second week, probably no. The third and fourth week, perhaps. And now?

The thought became more alluring with every winter walk.

Yet challenges remained. She would not accept anything less than a love match, and Damien made no mention of love, despite repeated assertions they would wed. Yet at times, his gaze showed something stronger, just like the emotions she couldn’t face within herself.

She glanced at Damien. He gave a lopsided grin, and all fortitude vanished like snow in the spring sun. Was it possible to forge a destiny here?

“You are entirely too serious for a walk in a winter wonderland.”

Despite herself, she smiled. “Am I now? I didn’t realize there was protocol for joviality.”

“Dictated by the patronesses of Almack’s themselves.” He winked. “You shall enjoy yourself, as you have this entire journey.”

“Untrue,” she exclaimed. “I have not enjoyed every moment.”

“Haven’t you?” He crossed well-muscled arms across his broad chest. Back in London she’d wondered how he managed to stay fit, yet here in the country, his many physical activities were obvious. A man of his position and wealth had no need to do anything physical, yet he said he enjoyed it.

She also enjoyed watching him, even if he always managed to notice her perusal. In truth, she’d enjoyed nearly every moment of her time here. “I did not enjoy stubbing my toe two Thursdays ago.”

“How dastardly.” His voice deepened. “You must tell me of the offending foe, and I shall vanquish him.”

She bit her lip to keep from smiling. “It may be a little difficult to vanquish the wall.”

“Still, I shall attempt it.” The amusement in his eyes faded, replaced by a somber promise. “I would defend you against anything.”

The breath froze in her throat. For a moment, he was a true hero, promising to defend the woman he loved. As already tumultuous emotions tumbled, she fought to remember his true motivations. He wanted her because of her connections, position and suitability.

This wasn’t a love match.

She needed a distraction. When he turned to point to the new bird singing a love song, she swiped her hand over some icy bushes, gathering snow. She swiftly patted it into a small ball.

He turned to her. “What do you think abo—”

The snowball shattered against him in a hundred glittering flakes.

Ever-so-slowly, he picked off the snow, pretending to grasp each snowflake one by one. She laughed as the mood lightened once more. When he tossed his own snowball, she only laughed more.

“How will you respond to that?” he challenged.

Clearly, he thought he was dealing with some timid society miss. She grasped another scoopful of snow. “The reward is a kiss, I assume?”

“Of course.”

As they tossed snowballs and then kisses in the glistening lane, she’d never enjoyed a time more.

His plan was proceeding splendidly. Despite her reluctance, Sarah hadn’t been able to hide her happiness. It sparkled in every smile, rang in every laugh, glimmered in blue eyes. As for him, their time together had been more than enjoyable.

He loved it.

He’d told himself he chose Sarah for the typical reasons, her temperament, personality and suitability, yet every minute in her presence brought something more. The urge to explore increased every day, even as their time dwindled. Much of the snow had melted, allowing the passage to be cleared. Just this morning, he received a letter from Bradenton, announcing the duke’s imminent arrival.

He had to ensure Sarah was his before then.

Now they sat by the fire in a garnet-colored drawing room, sipping mugs of creamy hot chocolate. Firelight bathed the room in amber brilliance, and the air was scented with cinnamon and cedar. They lounged on the settee, so close they brushed against

their sides, yet not nearly as close as instincts demanded. They'd started further apart, when his aunts sat in the corner, chatting about the rapid approach of spring. The elderly ladies excused themselves not long ago, making no mention of the inappropriateness of leaving the young couple alone. They understood where this journey would end.

Did Sarah?

"Did you enjoy our walk this afternoon?"

"I enjoyed our snowball fight." Her eyes shined as she smoothed down the silky rose dress that perfectly complimented her complexion. "Especially since I won."

He edged closer. "Actually, I was victorious with 54,134 snowballs."

"I tossed precisely one more than that." She grinned. What a tangle of wonderful contradictions this woman was, with the grace, poise and dignity of any lady, yet endless merriment as she lobbed snowballs. In truth, they both emerged victorious. Simply being with her was the grandest prize of all.

"Regardless of the winner, did you enjoy your reward?"

"A bit too much." She sipped fruit punch from a cut crystal goblet. The sweet liquid stained her plump lips pink, far more delicious than any sweetened beverage.

"Be careful." He glided his fingers along the bare skin of her wrist, eliciting delicious shivers. "I know your past misadventures with fruit punch."

The firelight danced on her silky skin, accentuating her ethereal beauty. She was loveliness defined, not just on the outside, but within. He touched a cheek as soft as the roses that would soon bloom. "You are the most extraordinary woman I've ever

met,” he murmured.

The goblet slipped from her hand.

Fruit punch flooded his shirt, a bolt of coldness vanquishing the heat. He caught the goblet before it could shatter, yet colorful droplets spritzed through the air. His cravat?

Once more, bright pink.

Sarah turned as white as snow. “I’m so sorry.” She leapt to the sideboard and grasped a pile of white linens. She rushed back. “I truly didn’t mean to spill it.” She patted his shirt, scrubbing at the stain.

Blazes.

If the fruit punch had been uncomfortable, Sarah smoothing his chest was pure torture. It burned into him, forging intense need and inescapable desire. She scrubbed more vigorously, delving lower, lower, lower... He caught her hand.

Her eyes widened. “Should you take your shirt off?”

Clearly, she was a master of torture.

It was obvious the moment she realized what she said. “I meant because it’s wet and uncomfortable, and you wouldn’t want to be in something wet and uncomfortable, and I’m rambling, aren’t I?”

“Quite.”

She licked plump lips. “You don’t have to remove your shirt. Only if you want to

because you were uncomfortable. Not because I want you to. One should not wear wet clothing, however, especially during the winter.”

The strangest urge to “accidentally” spill fruit punch on her dress emerged. He just managed to remind himself he was a gentleman.

Still, he undid the top button. “It is quite cold.”

She parted her lips.

He unfastened the button below that. “I wouldn’t want to catch something.”

She shook her head curtly.

He unhooked button by button, then whipped off the garment in one fluid movement. She stayed perfectly still, her face arrested.

“Sarah?”

No response.

“Are you well?”

No response.

“Sar—”

She kissed him.

CHAPTER 10

It was not her fault.

It was hard enough to resist him when he was fully clothed. Difficult when a reasonable distance separated them and when others were nearby. Alone in the enchanting night, in front of the desirable man without his shirt, she was helpless.

She'd imagined what he looked like under the fine clothing, yet it had never been like this. He was power defined, sculpted muscles of raw masculinity. He'd hidden his true power behind a gentleman's facade, yet now his strength was clear.

She could not resist this wonderland .

He tasted like fruit punch, brandy and pure male. Desire fired as she touched his expansive chest, powerful muscles jumping under her hand. If the beverage had been chilled, now he was pure heat.

Never one to surrender power for long, Damien immediately took control, pressing into the kiss, at the same time he pulled her nearer. She moaned her surrender, and he dipped his tongue through her lips. She matched him move for move, swollen lips tangling in hot possession.

Her movements became more frenzied, as thoughts scattered like snowflakes in a winter storm. All she could do was feel, yet it was not enough. She wrapped her arms around him, pressing into his bare chest. Fire surrounded her.

Still not close enough.

“Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?” Damien peppered kisses down her neck, over her shoulders, across her décolleté. Her entire body felt lit by lightning, streaks of sensation covering every inch. Awareness seared her most feminine of spots, as he branded her with fiery possession. Yet she wanted more.

Why shouldn't she have it?

The future was uncertain, her path unwritten. With every moment, Damien drew her to a bond that was irresistible. Perhaps this would allow her to unlock the emotions that swirled underneath.

But more than anything, she just wanted to be with him.

“Don't stop,” she whispered.

He kissed her deeply. “I won't,” he promised.

“No—” She drew back ever-so-slightly. “I wasn't referring to the kiss.”

He gave a sharp intake of breath. His gaze darkened, as unvoiced hunger sparked. “I am a gentleman.”

“That you will remain, no matter what we do,” she whispered. “But this is right. Can't you feel it?”

He paused, his heavy breathing audible over the fire. “I do feel it, yet this isn't how it's done. If you wish, we can attain a spec—”

“I don't want to wait.” She gazed into his eyes, allowing her need to show. “Please,

Damien.”

A million emotions passed through his eyes, before they settled on one: Triumph.
“You belong to me now.”

She opened her mouth to protest the presumptuous words, yet he took her lips before she could utter a syllable. And then she was lost in a world of sensation, where she moved without thought, instincts guiding her in a timeless dance. This time, he did not stop.

He kissed a breast.

She sucked in a breath, arching into him. He kissed the other breast, then palmed them both, flicking his finger over puckered nipples, sensitizing them until they were achy and swollen. She pushed into his hands.

“We should get you out of these clothes,” he murmured.

She answered without words, reaching for her laces. Yet he gently pushed away her hands, loosening them himself. Her breasts grew heavy as their support disappeared, as the dress was lifted over her head. In seconds her undergarments followed, and suddenly, she was completely exposed.

His gaze took in everything . Her skin pinkened in the fire’s amber light, and she turned away, yet he cupped her cheek. “You are perfect.”

She swallowed, and somehow kept her hands by her sides as he continued his perusal. Her body sweltered under his scrutiny. Then...

From the absence of feeling to endless touches, he was everywhere. He teased her nipples into hard beads, splayed his hands on her stomach and kneaded every muscle

she didn't know she had. When he touched her in her most intimate of spots, she cried out.

He swallowed her cry with a kiss, before pulling away. She opened her mouth to protest, but stopped when he grasped his pants.

Oh. My. Goodness.

The words repeated in her mind again and again as he removed his clothing. If he had been magnificent with clothing, he was glorious now, his strength undeniable, his force unparalleled. Then that power returned to her, as bare skin touched bare skin, endless muscles to feminine strength. He was everywhere all at once, his lips, hands and body taking possession. He demanded her surrender, and she gave it.

A bond formed, a connection unlike anything she'd ever felt before. A mere moment of pain, and they became one, existing in pure harmony. A fever came, in this new world she discovered, and her body knew what to do. It burned hotter and hotter and hotter...

She shattered.

Damien stretched on the satin sheets, as the sun streamed through the wide windows of the master bedroom, where they had slipped after their lovemaking. Everything was the same, and yet everything was different, after a night more amazing than he could ever imagine. It was not merely a new day, but a new life.

His instincts to pursue this woman had been correct, as they formed a connection that came once in a lifetime. It wasn't just about physical compatibility, but something far deeper. She was extraordinary, his perfect match. Emotions lurked beyond that, yet those he would not examine. He turned over in bed, reached for the object of his desire...

She wasn't there.

Frowning, he pushed himself up. The bed was still indented, the sheets still warm. He slid off the mattress and travelled to a carved wood chest of drawers. Swiftly donning black pants and a cream shirt, he strode into the sitting room. Sarah stood with her back to him, fully dressed as she looked out the window.

Satisfaction surged. Something was so right about her presence. She turned.

Something was so wrong.

"What's the matter?" He stepped forward, yet she jumped back. Her eyes blazed fire, her lips curved down, as she clutched a piece of paper tightly in her hands.

He stiffened.

"You read my mail?"

She did not apologize. "I saw Bradenton's signature and my name. Since you were discussing me, I felt it fair I read it." The paper crinkled in her hands. "Imagine my surprise when I learned you already asked Bradenton for my hand, and he agreed."

He tightened. "I did ask," he admitted. "Yet Bradenton did not agree. He said it was your choice. I've been clear about my intention to marry you this entire time."

"He spoke about specific arrangements in this letter." Her eyes blazed as she waved the offending paper. "Even gave suggestions on how to use my dowry."

Blasted! Bradenton assumed his campaign would be complete by now, and he would have won over his reluctant bride. "The dowry is of no importance. I was going to put it in a fund for you—"

“This letter makes your interest clear. It’s never been about me.” Her voice broke. “Bradenton is one of your best friends, so marrying his ward makes sense.”

He stepped forward. “Nothing about how I feel makes sense.”

“I already knew you arranged for me to be trapped,” she snapped. “You believed your scheme would work. You are a powerful man, and there was no question I would be attracted to you.”

“Last night was about more than physical attraction.” He held out his hands. “What we have is more .”

“What we have?” Her stare was unwavering. “What do we have?”

He hesitated. That she wanted his emotions was clear, yet they could not be part of this.

He had to keep control.

“We have many things.” He held up his fingers. “We have amiable companionship, similar likes, compatible personalit—”

“Do you hear yourself?” The pain in her eyes nearly undid him. “Such trivialities are not the foundation for a marriage, at least not the type I wish for.” She held up the paper. “You sought to entrap me through deception, and through it all, you still think only of logic. This is over.”

No. It. Wasn’t. “I am a gentleman, and I compromised you. There is no choice but to marry.”

She paled. “I do not intend to tell anyone. If you are a gentleman, neither will you.”

The paper slipped from her hands. “At least I now know Bradenton will arrive any day. The moment he does we shall depart. Until then, I plan to spend my days—” She exhaled. “And my nights alone.”

It took every ounce of strength not to reach out and grasp her as she swept past him. After all they had shared, he could not lose her. Somehow he would find a way to make her his.

CHAPTER 11

He'd tricked her.

Damien and Bradenton had conspired together. They'd discussed trapping her into marriage months ago, despite her cousin's claims of allowing her a choice and Damien's talk of freedom. The earl planned to have her from the moment she stepped down from that carriage.

Well, he couldn't have her. She wrote her own destiny, not Damien, not her cousin, and certainly not a society that considered women weak.

It was time to find her own winter wonderland.

Sarah sucked in a breath of frosty air, shivering at the chill. It was still a world of white, for although it melted enough to clear the valley, a thin layer of snow still blanketed the ground. Damien thought she was safely sulking in her gilded prison, yet she stayed only long enough to pack a few necessities. She couldn't remain in this wonderland, building snowmen, watching new birds, dreaming by the fire.

She would head to the small town a few miles from the estate. Although Bradenton insisted she not return to her small cottage in the country, she'd convinced him to keep it, at least for a time. For once, she had something on which to spend her guardian's generous pin money. She would purchase passage to her home, her real home.

London was not home. For a while, she believed this could be home, but it wasn't to

be. Home was her simple cottage in the simple town, where there were no confusing lords who conspired by the fire and no guardians who married off wards faster than a snowball fight.

She picked her way through the snow, past the clearing where they had built snowman, over the glistening lane where sleigh bells had rung, so far from the fireplace where dreams had been made. She walked swiftly now, through a graying day. The air was cold as ice itself, the warming of the past weeks disappeared.

“Sarah, come back!” The words whipped the air, accompanied by the sound of heavy footsteps. How had he discovered her gone so quickly?

She tramped quicker, risking a quick glance back. Steady footprints provided a trail as brilliant as any lighthouse. She pivoted to a different path, where the snow was sparser, broken. Even as the calls grew ever-louder, she moved swifter, darting over branches and threading through trees. She broke into a run...

And slid.

Suddenly the snow-covered ground disappeared, replaced by a solid expanse of ice. The rocky ground became perilously smooth, and the world lost all traction, as momentum pushed her forward, wrestling control in an instant. She hurtled forward like a runaway sled, falling to her hands and knees. Fierce cold burned her hands, as she squeezed her eyes shut. It seemed forever before the world finally slowed, until she finally came to a standstill. She opened her eyes, gasped out a breath of puffy white air...

She had slid straight onto the frozen pond.

Where was Sarah?

It should have been easy to track her, yet the clever woman eschewed the obvious path, zigzagging over rocky ground, hopping to where her footprints disappeared. Fear tightened Damien's muscles, his heart beating like a drum in his chest, as he pushed through towering oaks, hurdled over stumps and darted through branches. "Sarah!"

This was his fault. He would never regret choosing her for his countess, but subterfuge and dominance had sabotaged his efforts. Mistaken logic blinded him to his true motivation, the emotion that now burned so clear:

Love.

In the moments after she'd walked away, he'd freed his feelings, relinquished the control that bound him. Love was why he'd brought her here, why he hadn't considered others. It was why he couldn't give her a choice, and why he had to do everything in his power to ensure she remained his. This wasn't a winter wonderland because of the snow. Not because of the glistening lane, new birds or sleigh bells.

She was his winter wonderland.

He had to fix this. He would fix it. She had softened towards him, with every emotion she couldn't hide blazing in her eyes. She didn't believe he could give her a love match. Somehow he would find a way to prove it.

But first he had to find her. He stopped and pivoted, scanning the land for subtle signs. An errant footprint appeared, facing the southwest corner of the estate. He stiffened.

The pond.

Stay calm.

An unbroken expanse of ice surrounded her, so thin liquid water streamed underneath. She inhaled slowly, fighting to not gulp in big breaths of fear as she braced herself, pressing up ever-so-slightly. An incorrect movement could shatter the thin layer between her and tragedy.

Crack.

The sound was but a whisper, like the cracking of an eggshell. Yet the surface rippled under her, like driftwood on a swaying sea. Then...

A thin line appeared in the ice.

“Sarah!” Damien burst into the clearing like an avenging warrior. He froze the moment he saw her, undisguised horror arresting his features. An instant later, he leapt.

“No!” Crack. “You’ll fall in the ice, too!” Crack.

Fear pierced her belly, like a dagger’s sharp edge. Not for her, but for the man she loved...

The man she loved?

Terror vanquished the walls guarding her heart, exposing the raw truth she could no longer deny. She had been so stubborn, so certain the only path was to return to her simple life. Yet she was not the same woman as before, not because she desired luxury, prestige or money. Because she needed him.

And unless something wonderful occurred, she would never have the chance to tell him.

Damien stopped right before the ice, a thousand emotions swirling in his expression. Despite the danger, something shifted in her. This man cared far more than he admitted.

“I’m coming!” He grabbed a thick branch, breaking it with one swift pull. He lunged forward, even as she gestured him back. “I won’t come too close. If the ice breaks under me, hopefully it won’t take you with me.”

The ice shook anew. She splayed her hands on the trembling surface, fighting for traction as piercing cold seeped through her gloves. Her knee slipped from under her.

Crack.

She pushed herself up again, sliding forward like a baby learning to crawl. The ice shook with every movement, a web of cracks marring the once smooth surface, as she inched to a shore a miracle away. Then, Damien stepped onto the pond.

“No!” she gasped, as fear scraped her stomach. She lifted her hand, quickly returned it at renewed crackling. “Stay where it’s safe.”

“Nothing can keep me away.” One step and then another, his hands held out for balance, he never took his eyes off her. “Everything will be all right.”

Unlikely, as the ice trembled. She pushed herself forward, inch by inch, even as the quivering increased with every movement.

The next crack sounded like a hundred eggshells.

This was it. She was going to plunge into the water. As the ice rippled like a raft on a raging sea, she squeezed her eyes shut.

“Grab the branch!”

She gasped as spindly twigs tickled her fingers. Damien leaned down, extending the branch as far as he could reach. She tried to push forward, but the ice crackled. “It’ll break if I move!” she cried. “Go back, or you’ll fall in, too.”

“I’m not leaving without you. Try again.” he commanded.

With a deep breath, she grasped for the branch, yet the ground pitched, and the slippery wood slipped through her fingers. She reached one more time, wrapped her hand around it...

The ice shattered.

She screamed as the floor dissipated, separating into a thousand pieces. Freezing water soaked her stomach, but she did not sink. Somehow she moved forward .

It was like a horizontal ride on an icy hill. The branch scraped her palms as Damien lunged forward, every step denting the ice. The ice shattered behind her, chasing her with perilous promise. Yet suddenly, the ground changed, becoming hard, solid. The world still swam, yet more in her mind than the actual world.

Somehow, they made it.

“Are you all right?” Damien’s voice was rough, uncontrolled, as he swept her into strong arms, held her against a hard chest. Warmth surrounded her, security, possession. Hot tears stained her cheek, as she gasped the cool air.

“I am well.” She clutched the man who’d risked his life to save hers. He was a mountain of power, as he held her like he’d never let go. “Thank you,” she whispered.

He drew her closer, rubbing her arms. “Don’t you understand how much I love you?”

He loved her?

Her world shattered like the icy pond’s surface. The words echoed on the wind, whispered again and again. “You do?” she breathed.

His eyes shone with undisguised adoration. “I don’t care about your dowry or your family connections. Your position and suitability don’t matter. It certainly isn’t about logic, because this courtship has been anything but easy.”

She gave a watery smile.

“I haven’t given you much of a choice, and I should apologize for that. Only I can’t, not any more than I can let you go. I know this isn’t the life you envisioned, but I truly believe—”

“I love you, too”

He froze.

She smiled, showing him all the love in her heart. “I tried to fight it. Tried to hold on to what I thought I wanted, unable to face the plans that you made. Yet you were too caring, too kind, too charming. And I utterly, completely lost my heart to you.”

“And I to you.” His smile was indeed wonderful as he held her closer. He leaned down... She leaned up...

They pressed their lips together.

She shivered at the taste of perfection. He vanquished the cold, conquered the

lingering fear of what almost was. Her skin became sensitized in all the right places. She deepened the kiss.

“I suppose I do not have to ask if you are well.”

They broke apart as a deep voice boomed, wry words filled with undisguised relief. Bradenton stood tall, arms folded across his chest. Yet his lips twitched, and a sparkle in his eyes belied the severe visage.

Next to him, Priscilla made no attempt to hide her delight. “I knew it!”

“You’re here!” Sarah gasped.

“Obviously a moment too late.”

Actually, far more than a moment. Sarah and Damien smiled as Bradenton looked heavenward. He glanced behind them to the pond and paled. Jagged slates of ice were all that remained of the frozen surface. “You truly are all right?”

At her nod, his features relaxed. “Thank goodness.” He hesitated, stepped forward. “I want to apologize.”

“You do?” The question came from all at once.

He nodded firmly. “Sarah, you’ve probably surmised my role in trapping you here, yet it wasn’t about duty. I’ve known Rourke my whole life. With how he spoke about you, I could see he felt something deeper.” He paused. “I truly believed he’d make you happy. Yet what truly matters is what you believe. You are my cousin, my family. If you don’t want this, we shall leave.” He pinned Rourke with a searching look. “No matter what has happened.”

Damien opened his mouth to respond, but Sarah stopped him with a finger on his lips. She thought she'd always be alone, but it wasn't true. She had a family who loved her.

Soon, she'd have another family as well.

She smiled at the man she loved. "I've never wanted anything more."

Damien grinned pure elation, Priscilla clapped and even Bradenton smiled, before swiftly straightening his expression. "In that case, do you have something to ask me, Rourke?"

"Actually, I have something to ask Sarah." He took her hands. "You are a wonderful woman, Sarah – beautiful, sweet, caring and so very kind. I've never been so happy as when I'm with you, and I want nothing more than to make you happy. I wish to spend my days with you, build a hundred snowmen, take a thousand walks. I wish to smile and laugh, delight in each other's company. I simply want you." His eyes were a brilliant amber. "Sarah, will you be my wife?"

All around the world sparkled in white brilliance, yet none could compare to the wonder within her. "Yes," she whispered.

"Yes?" He smiled.

"And if anyone cares, my answer is yes, as well." The wry voice sounded again, yet this time Bradenton's smile was as wide as the rest of them.

Damien gathered her in his arms. "Our lives will forever be a winter wonderland, filled with happiness, joy and love."

"It's what I always dreamed," she whispered.

And her dream came true.

EPILOGUE

The fire crackled, sending tiny tendrils of smoke into the toasty air. Sarah stretched, burrowing deeper into her husband's arms, against a warmth she knew so well. It was where she belonged, and where she would always remain.

The past month had been a whirlwind. They'd married by special license, in a small ceremony with all the people that mattered: Bradenton and Priscilla by her side, Sophia, Clara, Emma and Hannah nearby. They wed in their Winter Wonderland, promising to never let each other go.

He placed a soft kiss on her neck. "Do you know how much I love you?"

She laughed softly. "You tell me thrice a day."

"That's all?" He kissed her forehead. "Clearly I have been remiss." He kissed her cheek. "I shall endeavor to share far more." He kissed her lips. "For my love is endless."

"As is mine." Under the sensual onslaught, she shivered. He kissed her again, but then drew back.

When she gave a mewl of protest, he kissed her hand. "I have a gift for you, in exchange for making me the happiest man in the entire world."

She laughed softly. "You've made me the happiest woman in the world."

“Still—” He reached behind him and retrieved a white box with a wide satin ribbon. “I plan to shower you with gifts.”

“Being with you is the most wonderful gift of all.” She took the box and placed it in her lap. She untied the ribbon, lifted the top and gasped.

The white figurine glittered like a diamond. She turned the small sculpture in her hands, bathing it in the light streaming through the window. “It’s a perfect replica of your circus clown.”

“Do you like it?”

“It’s lovely.” She placed it on the table, where it glistened in the sunlight. “It shall always remind me of that beautiful day.”

He took the box from her and placed it on the floor. “It also has a practical use.”

“Does it?” She bit her lip to stop a smile. “Do say.”

“If you’d recall, I was about to win our wager before the kiddies knocked my snowman down.”

“Actually, I recall it differently.” She thumped her chin. “I believe you were to lose the wager to Parson Brown.”

Shining eyes proved he knew the truth. “Perhaps we should make a wager now. Whoever has the best snowman wins.”

“But I don’t have a snowman,” she protested. “I didn’t even know there was a wager.”

“So you forfeit?”

She chuckled. “I am afraid I must. Dare I ask the prize?”

“The original terms were amiable.” He traced a finger down her cheek. “Since I won, I would like a kiss.”

“A kiss?” She gasped as he nuzzled the ultra-sensitive skin of her neck. “That’s all you want?”

“Perhaps not,” he murmured.

She leaned into him. “A wager is a wager.”

Their lips met. Passion swirled in their embrace, in a love that was destined to last forever...

In a true Winter Wonderland.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:27 am

ESCAPING THE DUKE PROLOGUE

Thank you for reading *Winter in a Regency Wonderland*. I hope you enjoyed their romantic world.

1804

It started with a creak.

Low and brittle, like a thin branch breaking under her favorite garden bluebird. In the next moment, the carriage dipped, gently pressing her into the plush seat.

Then... the world plunged.

Priscilla slammed her eyes as the carriage pitched forward, thrusting her toward the inescapable hardness of the wooden wall. She braced for an impact that never came, as someone grabbed her, pulling her back against a softness she knew so well. Warmth and security blanketed her, even as the carriage tipped this way and that, straightening only to tilt once more. Yet no more fear surfaced. Grandmother would never let anything harm her.

Of course the world knew this, for just then the carriage skidded to a halt, still erect if at a jaunty angle. A moment later, the door jerked open.

A blast of icy air blew into the carriage, swirling crystal snowflakes on its tendrils. A form loomed against a backdrop of shadows and danger. “Are you all right, Lady Susan, Lady Priscilla?”

Priscilla relaxed at the coachman's steady, if rushed, voice. Her grandmother gripped her, her usually merry blue eyes hard with concern. They softened only slightly as Priscilla returned the calm gaze. "Are you all right, child?"

Priscilla lifted her chin and said in a voice that wavered very little, "I am well."

A ghost of a smile graced her grandmother's lips before she returned her attention to the warmly garbed coachman. "And you, Dobbs?"

The coachman nodded, then glanced outside. Under the moon's dim light, his frozen breath swirled into tiny puffs. "One of the wheels shattered. Unfortunately, the carriage with your daughter and husband is far in the distance, and I doubt they realize we are no longer following. I know someone nearby who can replace it. Would you like to stay here, while I hurry to his home?"

Stay here? Priscilla just managed to hold in a gasp. Out the door, fluffs of white rode the blustery wind, a concoction of light against dark. There was little to see in the late night, yet what was visible gave little doubt as to the fortunes of the residents: broken down hobbles, garbage strewn about the streets, buildings a hearty breeze away from collapse. A group of children in ragged clothing peered from a windowless hole in a barely standing shack.

Something cold and sour settled in her stomach.

"Thank you, Dobbs." Her grandmother nodded. "Be careful."

"Of course." He nodded respectfully, then backed away, firmly closing the door behind him.

"Do not worry, my dear. He'll be back soon."

Priscilla sat up straight. “I’m not scared,” she said in a voice that made her sound at least nine.

“Of course not.” Her grandmother’s lips quirked up. “It seems frightening, yet they are simply poor. I have visited here before.”

Priscilla widened her eyes. “You have?” Her mother would never dare venture into such a world.

“I have friends of many circumstances.” The older lady smiled. “Poor, rich, servants, lords, we are all people. Do not ever forget that, child.”

Priscilla nodded, then jumped as the carriage shook in the wind, as the howling outside increased. Suddenly the door opened. Frozen air snapped at her, and she scooted back in fear of the monster who must surely be there. Yet only the frigid outside greeted her.

Her grandmother reached for the handle. “Do not worry, child. It was probably damaged in the—”

She stopped.

Peered outside, looked around.

Priscilla slowly moved forward. “Is all well?”

“I hear something,” her grandmother murmured.

Priscilla listened closer, yet heard nothing save the trees blowing in the wind, the ramshackle buildings shuddering against the onslaught. The streets were deserted, no foolish soul willing to face nature’s wrath. “I only hear the wind.”

Her grandmother's gaze darted into the street, back to her, and then set. "I cannot leave you alone. Come along."

"We're going out there?" Priscilla rushed out in a hushed breath, even as she took her grandmother's proffered hand. "Surely it is dangerous."

"And well it is, for all creatures. Yet we haven't a choice." Her grandmother removed a shawl from her shoulders and placed it around Priscilla. "No one should be out in this."

Priscilla shivered at the nonsensical answer, sucking in a breath of cold as she stomped through the thick gray powder. Could one freeze from the inside out? If so, then how would—

A sudden cry pierced the silence. Was it some sort of animal? Her grandmother hastened her stride, still firmly holding her hand as she raced along a hedge of low bushes, covered in trash. As the cry came again, she moved almost frantically. Then, she froze. And Priscilla gasped.

The bundle was so tiny. Barely the length of Daddy's hand, and not much thicker. At first it seemed like a simple brown cloth, yet it was moving, squirming.

Her grandmother reached down, and slowly, carefully picked up the bundle. She swept aside the coarse fabric.

A scrunched up little face and a pink bow mouth. A tiny curl of hair and the most pathetic cry Priscilla had ever heard.

A baby.

"But how? Wh—" The words caught in Priscilla's throat. "No," she whispered.

“Come, dear. We must hurry.” With a sturdy hand holding the baby to her chest, her grandmother stomped through the snow, in the direction away from the carriage.

The wind picked up, sending snowy pellets into her eyes, yet they continued on. Her grandmother clutched the baby closer. “We’re almost there.”

“Where are we going?” The wind swallowed Pricilla’s words, yet it didn’t matter as her grandmother released her to knock on the door of a wide two-floor building. It was plain and badly needed paint, yet further from collapse than most of its neighbors.

The door opened, sending a sliver of yellow candlelight into the night. A thin woman in a gray dress peered out, then opened it wider. A hushed voice betrayed clear surprise, “Lady Martha?”

“I’m sorry to bother you so late, Mrs. Henley.” Her grandmother moved forward, bringing the baby into the warmth. “Our carriage broke down, and I found something in the bushes. I was hoping you may be able to help.”

The young woman peered closer, then gasped, a hand to her lips, as she stared at the tiny bundle. “Alone?”

Her grandmother nodded solemnly. “I must have found her within minutes, though she is frightfully cold. I know you normally only take children with mothers, but I cannot bear to leave her at an orphanage and—”

“It’s all right.” Mrs. Henley reached out and carefully took the child. The baby cried, yet her voice was so weak. The woman held her close, gently shushing her. As the baby quieted, the woman called to someone behind her. “Elizabeth, fetch some warm blankets.” She turned back. “I will ask around, of course. Make certain there was no mistake, no one missing her. I will also ask the authorities.”

“And if no one should come forward?”

The woman gazed down at the baby, her expression softening. “I believe we have enough room for one more.”

Priscilla released a breath of icy air. She stood taller, trying to see the little bundle.

“Thank you,” her grandmother said quietly. “I will send extra this week.”

The woman peered at her for a moment, then nodded.

Another gust of wind iced the world, and for just a moment, the two women stared at each other as if sharing some sort of secret communication. In the next moment, her grandmother stood taller and backed away. “I will leave you to warm the baby, and I will do the same for my granddaughter. Be well.”

Her grandmother turned briskly around and took Priscilla’s hand once more. Priscilla tried to get one last look, but the door closed with a soft click.

“We must return to the carriage.”

They strode quickly as the snow started to thicken. Yet even the cold couldn’t intrude on the thoughts tangled in Priscilla’s mind. She squeezed her grandmother’s hand. “Will she be all right?”

Her grandmother looked down, and her expression relaxed ever-so-slightly. “I believe so.”

Priscilla breathed out.

“Do you realize what we did today?” her grandmother asked.

Biting her lip, she shook her head. Her grandmother smiled. “We saved a life today.”

Saved a life?

Her grandmother stopped, bent down. Her eyes sparkled in the moonlight. “Some people will say you can’t do amazing things, Priscilla, just because you are a female. Do not ever believe them. You can do whatever you wish to do. You can save the world.”

Wonder bloomed in Priscilla, bright, beautiful and perfect, and she smiled so wide, her cheeks hurt. Yet she couldn’t stop herself, not at the feeling that was better than a hundred of cook’s tarts. A moment of absolute perfection in a world of darkness, changing someone’s life. It was the best feeling in the world.

She never wanted it to end.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:27 am

ESCAPING THE DUKE 1

1 817

Dear Lord P,

As usual, your tip was impeccable. I cannot fathom how you knew Lord Hamsford would be amenable to changing his vote when he had been so steadfast in his denials, but your suggestion of showing Lady Hamsford the factories worked perfectly. Within the hour, she convinced him to change his mind. Now he is fully supportive of our measure regarding worker conditions. Though you have denied my request already, I ask again for you to emerge from the shadows, for what we can accomplish will be even greater.

Yours,

Bradenton

“It is so refreshing to see a lady who knows her place.”

Do not pick up the nearest vase.

“Serious matters are simply too much for gently-bred women.”

Do not clobber him over the head with said vase.

“Leave the important decisions to men, who are far better equipped to handle such

matters.”

Do not start looking for another vase with which to clobber.

As if granted by the heavens above, the song ended, saving Lady Priscilla Livingston from the idiotic ramblings of the exalted earl and her hostess from the loss of a dozen priceless vases.

Only years of practice gave her the ability to maintain a serene expression. “Thank you for the dance, my lord. Your wisdom is always so...”

Preposterous. Absurd. So ridiculous a potted plant could best you in a game of wits.

“Enlightening,” she choked out. “And now there is my next dance partner, right behind the potted plant. I’m afraid I must dash.”

She turned before he had a chance to respond, a tad sharply yet not rude enough to blatantly insult. He was off the suitor list and onto the newly-created “I’m not nearly that desperate” list. Likely it would amass many, many suitors before the season’s end.

She adjusted her ivory dress. The silky gown floated around her, an ethereal masterpiece glittering with delicate beadwork and intricate lace. Matching jewels sparkled upon the complicated creation of curls into which her maid had pulled, yanked and otherwise punished her hair. She felt confident, able to conduct both of her tasks:

Finding an appropriate suitor and...

Investigating.

She walked to the refreshment table and took a drink, sipping quietly as she observed the guests. They laughed and danced and mingled, reveling in frivolity. For them, life held no meaning beyond such trivialities. For others...

“You’re being hunted.”

Priscilla jumped at the whisper in her ear. She turned, relaxed at the sight of Lady Hannah Breckenridge. “May I ask who is hunting me?”

Hannah’s gaze remained serious. She grasped Priscilla’s arm and led her to a nearby corner, which afforded a slight measure of privacy. “I’m not joking,” she hissed.

The inklings of unease churned in her stomach, yet Priscilla showed none of it. “I am certain you are mistaken. For what purpose would someone hunt me?”

“Someone has decided you would make a most eligible bride.”

Priscilla released a breath, stood taller. “I am the daughter of a duke, with a handsome dowry, a good family and quite proper behavior.” She smiled, lowered her voice. “The last may not be entirely true. I’ve had offers, but my father will not force me to—”

“It’s Bradenton.”

Priscilla froze. Tightened. Imagined the man who always got what he wanted.

An invisible cage rose on all sides.

“That’s right,” Hannah whispered. “The most powerful lord in the ton is interested in you.”

“Impossible,” Priscilla claimed, even as icy unease traced her spine. Keep control. Breathe. “Bradenton is not looking for a wife.”

Hannah shook her head. “I overheard his sisters.”

“You must be mistaken.”

“I am not. Do you know what will happen if he discovers your secrets?”

All too well. Her friend had no idea the extent of the secrets she kept. The sewing guild that had nothing to do with sewing. The secret quests she undertook. The cause for which she fought.

If the duke uncovered the truth...

“I’m sure I can stop it.” That was a lie. “It will be easy to convince him.” That was another lie.

“I hope you’re right,” Hannah breathed out. “Because if he finds out – our purpose – he could threaten everything.”

“I won’t let that happen,” Priscilla promised.

“It may be too late.”

Priscilla turned... and stared.

There was no exact word to describe the moment the Duke of Bradenton entered a room. A distinct murmuring arose, passed from lord to lady, servant to servant, matron to debutante. Conversations changed from rowdy banter to hushed whispers as all turned towards a single target.

With a massive body defined by muscle and strikingly handsome features of coal black hair and sapphire eyes, Bradenton commanded attention. He stood well above six feet, with a presence that far transcended his title, one of power, control and unforgiving dominance. He made men cower with a mere look, affected women far more. And her?

They meant far more to each other than he could ever imagine.

Bradenton garnered attention wherever he went. The matchmaking mamas ran to him, trailed by giggling wide-eyed debutantes. The dignified lords moved only slightly slower, nodding regally, even as they surrounded him. Young pups and ladies of all ages joined what rapidly became a crowd.

Acknowledging people with a subtle nod, he seemed to know everyone there, and everyone certainly wanted to know him. The group around him grew as people stood on the outskirts of the rapidly forming mass, watching him as if he was the sole performer on a theater stage. A powerful middle-aged duchess approached, cutting through the crowd with her two eligible daughters. She stopped directly in front of Bradenton, pulling her daughters on either side.

Priscilla was too far to hear the words exchanged, yet a ripple came through the crowd. Bradenton reached out...

And signed a dance card.

Then another.

And another.

She froze.

The duke was indeed searching for a wife.

Something flashed through her, an emotion she couldn't even name, before she forced it aside. It was inconsequential if Bradenton was looking for a bride. No doubt he'd control every aspect of the wife he would legally own, not allowing her to interfere with his activities or manage her own.

It wouldn't change their relationship.

She needed to turn away before someone noticed her perusal. Of course that wasn't a substantial concern when half the ladies were watching him, and the other half endeavoring to throw their dance cards at him. Yet through it all, she stood frozen. Her heart skipped a beat, then thumped, as she sucked in a breath. The once cool room seemed hot as the summer sun. Then... he looked up.

Their eyes locked.

The musicians finished the song, and suddenly the moment was broken. She heaved in a breath of air fragrant with dozens of cloying perfumes, from people in excited conversations about the duke. She swallowed the feeling of suffocation, glanced back to where he was holding court.

Only he wasn't there.

She turned around. Taller than most, he wasn't hard to spot. He was no longer stationary, but moving straight towards her!

By instinct she took a step, yet a second later, she forced herself to stop. She would not let him chase her down like some small animal. She looked straight at him, raised an eyebrow and turned her head away.

It was a clear dismissal. She never would've dared from close up, not when it would have left tongues wagging all over London. But they were far enough no one but the two of them would notice.

She dared a look back. His eyes were narrowed, his gait slower. Yet even as he stopped, he looked no less determined. He turned.

Then pivoted directly towards her mother.

Priscilla silently recited every oath a lady should never know. Then did so again as Bradenton engaged her mother in conversation, as her mother's already ruddy cheeks turned even pinker with delight. Bradenton gestured towards her as her mother nodded eagerly.

This. Was. Not. Good.

Then suddenly they were in motion, walking towards her once more. Priscilla glanced around, searching for a means of escape. She was not running, merely making a strategic exit. It was crazy, of course, hiding from the most eligible lord in the ton , but Bradenton was everything she couldn't have in a match. Powerful. Authoritative. Domineering.

Her greatest secret.

She edged closer to a potted plant, a clearly useless exercise. Bradenton's tall stride ate up the ground, as he greeted but did not stop for the many people approaching him. Her mother's eager gait made up the distance her much shorter legs lost.

Then he was right in front of her.

A broad chest. Muscular arms. A tall, powerful body.

Perhaps if she had a conversation with his chest, there would be less chance of him reading the truth in his eyes.

“Priscilla, look up,” her mother hissed, her tone a dizzying concoction of excitement, elation and exasperation. “You remember Bradenton.”

She was being ridiculous. He couldn’t possibly know the truth.

“It is a pleasure to see you again,” he spoke, when it became clear she would not.

“The pleasure is mine, Your Grace.”

“Is it?” He said it low enough to be out of earshot of her mother, who had edged back to provide them with a measure of intimacy. His lips quirked up at the sides.

Her mother, clearly sensing that things were not progressing as she’d hoped – since they were not yet betrothed, wedded and expecting her first grandchild – skirted forward. “The duke told me some exciting news. He is hunting for a duchess.”

Priscilla cringed. Only her mother, a duchess herself, could speak so unsubtly without reproof. She forced a smile to her face. “I wish you success, Your Grace. I suspect it will not be a difficult endeavor.”

“You flatter me.” His voice was as smooth as finely aged wine. “And exaggerate.”

They both knew she didn’t. He had his choice of ladies, some of whom made an art out of swooning into his arms. Forty-three had already done so this season.

Not that she noticed.

“Your mother said you are enjoying your season.”

“Of course.” It was far easier to investigate the lords who voted against her causes, gathering information that would change lives. Yet he mustn’t know that. Every moment in his presence brought danger, only what would discourage him? Perhaps, she could be a little too excited. “I just love the season! Who wouldn’t enjoy all the shopping? I always say, you never can have too many gowns. I’d spend all day at the modiste if I could. Oh wait, I do.” She giggled merrily, looking at him from under hooded eyelids.

Her mother gave her the same look as when she’d been caught with fourteen of Cook’s tarts hidden in her dress.

“Is that so?” he drawled.

She hesitated, then nodded.

“You are far from alone in that passion,” he said graciously. “My sister regales me daily with tales of the latest fashions from Paris. Tell me, what is your favorite new style?”

New style? Despite her words, she spent as little time at the modiste as possible, usually only going when her mother commanded, begged or bribed (usually all three). She had no idea of the styles, old, new or otherwise.

But she had to say something. Her mind raced. “Sleeves!”

Um, what did she just say?

His lips twitched. “Sleeves?”

“Yes, exactly. The new sleeves are very fashionable. And the skirts. You know I wouldn’t be surprised if hoop skirts came back.”

The duchess choked. “My daughter is very accomplished,” she blurted out. “She excels in all the skills of a lady. She is talented with a needle, speaks three languages and sings beautifully. Of course, she reads and writes and does math well enough to take charge of any size household.”

Her mother was listing her attributes like a horse for sale. Soon she might gush about her straight teeth and invite the duke to take a look.

This had to end. Being in his presence usurped her discretion, and she couldn’t risk slipping. “I have the skills of the average lady.”

He cocked his head to the side. “There seems to be far more to you than you admit,” he murmured.

Her face heated.

“What are you hiding?”

She bit back a gasp. “Hiding? What do you mean?”

“Don’t play coy.”

Did he know?

They stared at each other for a minute. “I assume you are an excellent dancer as well,” he prodded.

She breathed out in pure relief.

“I would be honored if you would grace me with a dance.”

Relief died.

Yet for just a moment, something akin to excitement flashed through her. She forced it aside. She was not some naïve girl just out of the schoolroom. She knew the consequences of giving herself to a man like Bradenton.

“What a gracious honor, Your Grace. How I wish I could say yes, but all my dances are taken.”

Instead of disappointment, challenge lit his eyes. Focused. Unrelenting. Unstoppable.

“You appear to have several spots remaining.” He pointed to her card, which was hanging at an angle to reveal empty lines.

“I left those blank on purpose. I have something to do.”

“I see. If you don’t mind my asking, what do you have planned?”

Investigating. “I get a little tired after dancing and need a rest.” She batted her eyelashes. “Besides shopping, resting is my favorite thing to do.”

The duke’s eyes lit again. The schemes that worked so well with other men had little effect on the clever lord.

“That something you have to do is dance with the duke who was gracious enough to ask.” Her mother snatched the card off her wrist, her lips stretched in a smile so wide, it looked as if her face might crack. She handed the card to the duke. “Take as many dances as you would like, Your Grace.”

Priscilla fought not to grab the card back. Of course as a gentleman, he would just hand it back to her—

He scribbled his name across two lines.

Her mother's smile became twice as wide and a thousand times more genuine. She clapped her hands.

Priscilla counted to ten. One vase, two vases, three vases, four– “You signed two.”

He shrugged. “It gives us longer to converse. But don't worry, you still have plenty of time to rest. And perhaps you will even find the opportunity to shop.”

Why, that sneaky– “But Your Grace, if we dance twice in a row, people may get the wrong idea.”

Really?” He leaned closer. “And what idea might that be?”

Her heart slammed against her ribs. The scent of musk and oakmoss surrounded her.

“I don't see any problem at all!” her mother chirped, her eyes dancing with delight. “Priscilla is very pleased to enjoy your company. Aren't you, dear?”

Priscilla clenched her teeth. “Of course.”

She hadn't a choice. She couldn't outright insult the duke. At least two dances would give her enough time to convince him to discontinue his pursuit.

She wouldn't think about the consequences if she couldn't.

“I look forward to it.”

By now, several people had approached, more eager mamas with more eligible ladies. Bradenton nodded at Priscilla, “Until our dance.” With one last nod, he bid her

goodbye.

He was stealing two dances, but she would not allow him to sabotage her investigation. Lord Roxbury, the ball's host, always voted against measures that aided the lower classes, convinced others to do the same. If she could find something that would change his mind, it might just be worth scandal. The risk to her person?

Still worth it.

But now Bradenton scheduled two dances in the span she'd allotted for sleuthing. Was there enough time before then? She couldn't be late, because he may start searching for her if she didn't show. Yet if she hurried...

She turned around. Roxbury was standing in a corner, arguing with his wife. Lady Roxbury's face flushed with anger, and with an angry gesture, she stomped off.

Priscilla stood up straighter.

Her last success with changing votes had been through a lady. With all their talk about how ladies were not their intellectual equals, men were often easily swayed by them. Perhaps if she could talk to Lady Roxbury, she might be able to convince her to influence her husband.

She took a deep breath. Her chance was now. With one last quick glance around the ballroom, she turned towards the door.

Time for Lord P to do some investigating.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:27 am

ESCAPING THE DUKE 2

Dear Your Grace,

Congratulations on yet another success. Respectfully, I must decline your request to share my identity. For reasons I cannot divulge, it is best I remain in the shadows. And if you are keeping count, you have inquired 1,842,843 times.

I do wish to thank you for your earlier recommendation on visiting the new exhibit at the museum. It was as fascinating as you said it would be.

Yours,

Lord P

Where was she going?

Edmund narrowed his eyes as Lady Priscilla slunk from the ballroom, in the opposite direction of any room opened to guests. Her movements were casual, yet measured. Was she meeting someone?

The thought brought an unexpected surge of displeasure. She was on his list of potential duchesses, and her mysterious behavior during their brief interaction made him want to discover more. It would not do for her to find someone else before he had a chance to explore the possibilities. By her surreptitious movements, she wanted to be unnoticed. He stood up straighter...

And followed.

It took but a minute to realize she was following someone herself, trailing a person too far in the distance for him to recognize. His curiosity grew as they travelled through a cavernous hallway lit by few candles, creeping down the darkened interior, slipping past doors, descending deeper into the private areas of the home. Finally, she turned...

And slipped outside.

He frowned as he strode forward. Whomever she was chasing, she entered danger, for any woman alone could be subject to scandal, or worse, an event unsavory enough to cause it. He pushed the wide door open, wincing as it creaked. He hoped to wield an element of surprise, yet it didn't truly matter.

He wouldn't allow her to escape.

He entered a lush, emerald world lit by a brilliant full moon and twinkling lanterns. Lord Roxbury liked to spend money, and it showed in a garden rife with exotic plants. A thousand scents surrounded him, from roses, gardenias and an array of colorful flora. Rumors were Roxbury had a whole collection of towering statues, most depicting nude subjects, but none were visible here.

Lady Priscilla was nowhere to be seen.

But she was here. Hushed breathing broke the silence, low, shallow and fast. Had she heard him, realized she was being followed? He crept through towering vines and around hedges, following the sound of the breathing.

Her form became visible through a green screen of leaves. Victory surged as he blocked the exit to her hiding place, cutting off any and all escape.

“You’ve been captured.”

A gasp sounded.

He walked around the wall of green. Lady Priscilla was folded against the leaves, her chest rising and falling, a look of almost panic on her face. Then she saw him, and clear relief transformed her expression.

“Were you expecting someone else?”

She tensed again.

Her discomfort bothered him, yet he wouldn’t show it. He had to impart the danger of her ill-begotten wandering and ensure she never did it again. “What are you doing out here by yourself?”

Her eyes darted to the shrubs on either side of her. Was she looking for whomever she had followed? She notched up her chin. “I have an explanation.”

His admiration for her rose, yet he kept his voice serious, firm. “I should hope so. Do you have any idea of the danger you are in? Lord Roxbury is not one to trifle with. If he caught you, he’d—” He stopped abruptly, his jaw tightening. “Let’s just say it is fortunate I found you first. Why were you hiding from me?”

“I wasn’t hiding.”

“You were pressed against the hedge,” he pointed out. “Hiding.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I was simply... relaxing.”

He just managed to thwart the smile. It was an unusual feeling. “Relaxing?”

“That’s right.”

“Try again.” He stood up taller, gave her the look that he usually reserved for political opponents.

“It’s true.” She nodded. “But obviously this was a mistake. I never meant to come here.”

“Where did you intend to go?”

“I– I got lost on my way to the ladies’ retiring room!”

He gave her an incredulous look. “You mistook the gardens for the ladies’ retiring room?” He gestured to her hiding spot. “Was the entrance to the cloakroom behind that hedge?”

She blushed. “Of course not.” She edged forward, accidentally brushed against him.

Attraction surged within him.

She felt it, too, as fire blazed in her emerald eyes. For one brief instant, the urge to push forward surged, but she was an innocent, and he was a gentleman. So he steeled himself and remained where he was. She tried to move forward again.

Again he stayed still.

As a gentleman, he should have moved aside and allowed her to leave. Yet she was clearly hiding something, and the thought of it involving danger compelled him to learn more.

She clenched her fists. “Obviously I did not believe this was the ladies’ retiring room. I must have missed it in the hallway, and I thought the gardens would provide a

quicker path back.”

She was lying. Even if he didn’t know she’d been following someone, it was obvious. Her expression was convincing, yet returning through the hallways would clearly have been the swiftest way back. “Then why did you enter the maze?”

“This is a maze?” She blinked. “I mean, of course it is.” She smiled. “I thought it might be interesting. I enjoy gardens.”

“Truly?” He folded his arms across his chest. “What do you like best about them?”

This time she had a reply ready. “The statues, of course.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You know about Roxbury’s statues?”

“Of course.” She looked around, stopped and pointed to a statue peeking through the leaves. “I particularly enjoyed that one. It was so realistic. I could just spend hours looking at every detail.”

“Really?” If it was the type of statue Roxbury had, Edmund very much doubted she was telling the truth. He walked back to the edge of the hedges until the statue came into view, with her following close behind.

He froze.

And she whispered, “Oh, bollocks.”

Literally.

It was a statue of the human form, only with the head and most of the limbs missing. What mainly remained was the torso and... what she said.

Their gazes met.

She opened her mouth.

Nothing came out.

His lips twitched.

“I think...” She took a step back.

“Your Grace...” She took another step.

“That it is quite...” She fluttered her eyelashes up and down.

“Something.”

He coughed.

She squeezed her eyes shut. Opened them, and rushed out, “Thank you for your concern. I better go!”

She took a step.

He matched it.

She moved to the side.

He blocked her.

“What are you doing?” she hissed.

“Discovering what you’re doing.” He straightened to his full height. The difference in

their sizes was considerable, yet she held her petite form with strength. “We need to talk.”

“We don’t need to talk,” she ground out. “I’m sorry for inconveniencing you, but I would like very much to leave right now. Please move aside.”

He moved forward into the intoxicating scent of gardenias. “As a gentleman, I am required to help all ladies in need. If you are having a problem, I would like to help you.”

“I appreciate the chivalry,” she said tightly. “But it is completely unnecessary. As you can see, I was alone and not in any peril.”

“I am more interested in your purpose.” He edged closer, flexing his muscles. “Why are you really here, Lady Priscilla? Were you meeting someone?”

“Absolutely not!” Her vehemence took him by surprise. It seemed the obvious motivation since she had followed an unknown figure, yet she’d reacted quickly, and genuinely. For now, he would not reveal what he knew.

“I was hiding because I figured you were Roxbury and didn’t want him getting the wrong idea. I was going to hide until he left.”

That did make sense and explained the relief in her eyes. Roxbury was a brute, who would have no qualms about taking advantage of a vulnerable lady. The thought of him touching her sparked something inside him. “I may not know the truth – yet – but you were neither lost nor resting. No matter the reason, you will not do it again. You do not know Roxbury like I do. Do not wander again on his estate, or anyone else’s.”

She straightened, pure feminine power. “You’re the one stopping me from returning to the party. For the final time, let me pass.” She took a step forward. If he didn’t retreat, she would crash directly into him.

“I will discover the truth.”

She stopped, looked at him sharply. He allowed triumph to color his gaze. She had all but confirmed his suspicions.

“The only truth is I am leaving. Good—”

“Agnes, where are you?” A booming voice carried across the gardens. “Agnes!”

Edmund recognized the low and gravelly voice at once, and judging by Priscilla’s response, so did she.

“Agnes!” The voice came once more, louder, closer.

“It’s Roxbury,” he whispered.

“He can’t catch us here!” she hissed.

“On this, we agree.”

If they were found together, scandal would occur. Then the inevitable:

Betrothal.

“We need to hide!” Her voice was low, yet frantic, and shattered any thought she had arranged any sort of entrapment.

He looked around, yet there was nowhere to go. Roxbury would see them if they tried to leave. Even if he revealed himself, the lord may still discover Priscilla. He would not take that chance.

He immediately took control, gently but firmly propelling her against the wall of

leaves as far from the entrance as possible. He moved next to her, inadvertently brushing against her.

He could not miss her harsh intake of breath.

Roxbury stomped through the ground, louder, louder, louder. He was almost upon them...

“What are you doing out here?” Lady Roxbury’s shrill voice pierced the air. “You should be at the party.”

“I can’t be at the party without you,” Lord Roxbury growled. “Everyone will notice you missing. What should I tell them?”

“Tell them you had the audacity to invite your mistress to your ball!”

“I told you I didn’t invite her. She just showed up!”

“Do you think that makes it better?” she huffed. “I’m staying out here until the party is over.”

The footsteps sounded again. They were coming closer!

He should have been furious, when after years of matchmaking attempts, he was inches away from the parson’s noose. Yet the pungent suffocation of entrapment was shockingly absent. Moments from a forced betrothal, he was uncharacteristically calm, satisfied even.

Of course, it was simply because Priscilla was on his list, so he already knew she would make a perfectly suitable duchess.

And if it felt like something more, he would ignore it.

Flushed, visibly frightened, she clearly felt different. Yet she was fighting fate with weapons she didn't possess. If they were caught, she would not have a choice for her future. If they were not caught...

She may still not have a choice.

Priscilla paled. She spoke lowly, so only he would hear. "Do not announce a betrothal! We'll explain instead."

He stared at her. "You can't be serious."

"We'll tell them I got lost on the way to the retiring room, and you found me!"

He showed her the full force of his disapproval. "Do you think I'm the sort of man who would allow a lady to face ruin alone?"

Angry voices sounded again, closer this time.

Priscilla's breaths came quickly, shallow. "But you haven't compromised me. We haven't done anything wrong."

Edmund shook his head. "They're not going to believe that any more than they'll believe I just stumbled upon you."

She gaped at him. "You were following me?"

"I noticed you leaving the ball and wondered where you were going. If they discover us, they'll immediately assume we snuck off together. The outcome will be set."

"But nothing happened." She wrung her hands. "Once you claim we're together, there will be no turning back. Somehow I'll find a way to avoid ruination and betrothal. Let me handle it. Everything will be fine."

“It will be fine because I will control the situation.”

“I will not be forced into a match when we didn’t do anything!”

And he would not allow her to accept ruination alone.

She opened her mouth, yet no words emerged. Then it was too late.

The bottom of Lady Roxbury’s dress became visible at the end of the green corridor. Priscilla gave a sharp intake of breath, thankfully at the same time Lord Roxbury spoke. Her chest rose and fell far too rapidly.

If she didn’t calm down, she would give them away. Moving on instinct, he pulled her near, capturing her tight against him.

He leaned down to whisper in her ear. “All will be well. No matter what, I will take care of you.”

Her eyes widened. If the Roxburys caught them, it wouldn’t matter whether they were touching or not, the end would be the same.

The dress remained visible, but the Roxburys didn’t move closer as they argued.

“That’s it,” Lady Roxbury screeched. “You go back to the party. I’ll be looking at your disgusting statues!”

She started to move into the opening...

“Wait!” Lord Roxbury growled. “What about that ruby necklace you were eyeing at the jeweler?”

For a moment there was silence. “The one with all the diamonds?”

Lord Roxbury groaned. “Yes, the one with all the diamonds. Would that placate you enough to return to the party?”

Lady Roxbury sniffed. Yet a moment later, the edge of her dress disappeared from view. “Fine. But get rid of the whore.”

“Do not worry. I will make sure she never bothers anyone again.”

Edmund looked at Lady Priscilla. She looked sickened.

“Now let’s get back. My friends must be frantic with worry over my absence.”

Heavy footsteps reverberated through the air, then the door back to the home creaked open. A second later, it slammed shut.

An instant from ruin, they had been spared.

“We’re safe.” Priscilla whispered.

He said nothing. She didn’t realize she wasn’t quite safe from him.

“They didn’t discover us, but we’ll be missed if we don’t return to the ball as soon as possible,” he pointed out.

“Of course.”

He gently grasped her arm as he brought her out of the hiding spot. She stared at him warily, yet a spark of defiance lit those beautiful eyes. The duke’s daughter had far more fire than she let on.

He couldn’t wait to uncover what else she hid.

“Are you all right?”

She smoothed down her dress, stood taller. “Yes, thank you.”

He waited for more, but she stayed silent. If she wasn’t going to mention the incident, neither would he, yet he would not forget about it. Just like he hadn’t forgotten the mystery of her wanderings.

Despite her denials, the only logical explanation was she was meeting someone. But whom? A suitor? Annoyance raced through his blood. “Do you realize how dangerous it is to sneak off to meet a man?”

Her eyes flashed. “I told you before – I was not here to meet a man.”

True, yet there was no other logical explanation.

“Suitors can be persuasive, yet hidden agendas often lurk beneath innocent facades. If another man had been here, the outcome might have been very different.”

Likely the suitor had hoped to be discovered.

Priscilla looked like she had sucked on a lemon. It was strangely endearing. “You could not possibly be more wrong. As I said before, I thought–”

“This was the way to the ladies’ retiring room.” He leaned in. “We both know you are far smarter than that, Lady Priscilla.”

She narrowed her eyes before straightening. “While I appreciate your discretion today, you have no right to dictate my actions. I am not one of your subjects. I will do as I wish with whomever I choose. Now I must return to the party.”

“What do you think your father would say if he learned of this?”

She blanched. “You wouldn’t.”

“I take my role as a duke very seriously. If a lady is putting herself in danger, I have no choice but to take action.”

“How dare you! After all the times we’ve—” She stopped abruptly.

He opened his mouth to retort, stopped. She no longer appeared angry – she seemed positively panicked. Her words indicated some sort of shared experience, experiences, yet except for the occasional greeting, they’d barely spoken a word. “After all the times we’ve...” he prompted.

She smiled. “You’re right, Your Grace. I shouldn’t have strayed so far from the party. I promise to be more careful next time. Now I really must get back. You don’t want someone finding us here, of course.”

He should’ve agreed immediately, yet instead he merely raised an eyebrow.

She licked plump lips. “Yes, well, let’s just forget this ever happened, shall we? I am going to leave now. If you could wait a few moments before following, I would be eternally grateful.”

He hesitated, but then gave a curt nod. He would not find answers now. But he would find them.

With one last look, she turned, then started to walk away. Yet he didn’t miss the tint of regret as she glanced around the garden. His suspicion returned full force. Priscilla Livingston was definitely hiding something.

He wouldn’t stop until he discovered what it was.