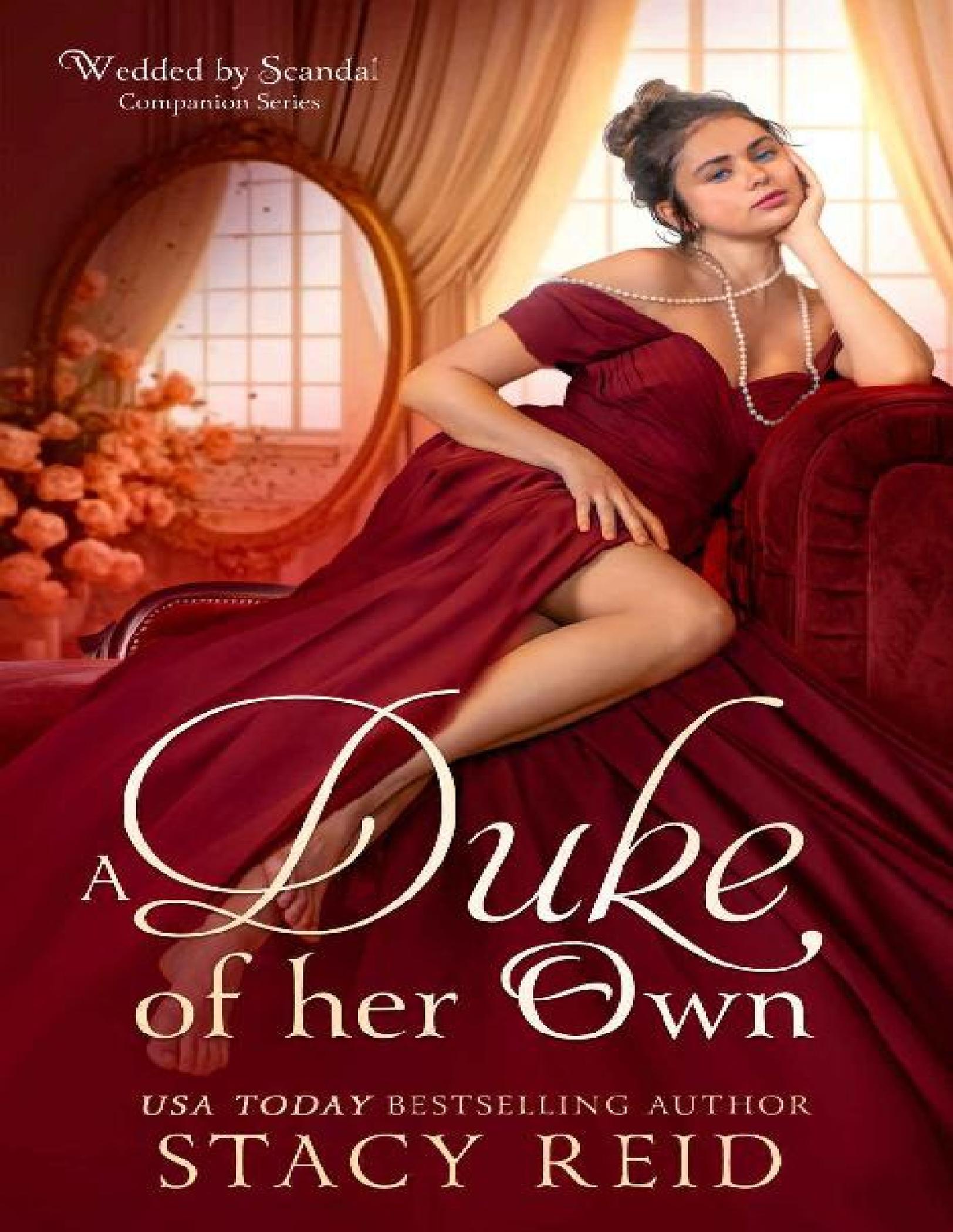


Wedded by Scandal
Companion Series

A woman with her hair in a bun, wearing a red off-the-shoulder dress and a pearl necklace, is sitting on a red velvet sofa. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background features a large window with sheer curtains and a circular mirror reflecting a room with a large bouquet of red roses.

A *Duke*,
of her Own

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
STACY REID

A DUKE OF HER OWN



STACY REID



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FOREWORD

Dearest readers,

*Welcome to the **Wedded by Scandal Companion Series**! Several characters whom you met in **Accidentally Compromising the Duke, Wicked in His Arms, How to Marry a Marquess, and When the Earl Met His Match**, will be featured in this series. Some of those characters include Evie's brother, Richard's daughter, and many more!*

*To everyone who read **Wicked in His Arms** and messaged asking for Francie's **Happy Ever After**, this sensually sweet novella is for you!*

*Love,
Stacy*

CHAPTER I



APRIL 1821

DERBYSHIRE, ENGLAND

Basket gripped in her hand, Lady Francie Walcott walked along the woodland path leading to a cottage and the enigmatic gentleman she had been friends with these last thirteen months— *Mr. Alexander Crawford*. The mere thought that she would see him soon quickened her heart. He was a friend, and she dearly treasured the connection they had formed.

Should Francie's family know she had befriended a gentleman, surely, she would earn their displeasure. Even her brother, the Earl of Blade, maintained that a man and woman could never own a genuine friendship. Francie slowed her steps and once again wondered if it was wise to call unannounced upon Mr. Crawford.

The letter from her mother, the Dowager Countess of Blade, summoning Francie to London and an uncertain future burned a hole in the deep pockets of her day gown. Unsurprisingly, the letter had upset her so much that she sought Mr. Crawford's company despite the threat of imminent rains and heavy winds. Her mother was a lady of uncertain temper, and always presumed she knew the best path for her children's futures. Her mother was indifferent to her daughter's torment, but Francie still missed her fiercely and

longed to be back with her family. The isolation she endured buried in the countryside was half self-imposed because she still blamed herself from the naivety in trusting a gentleman with no honor. The other was half punishment from her mother for nearly ruining her family with scandal. The irrevocable truth was that this loneliness was terrifying to Francie who had grown amongst love and laughter.

She was starting to feel threads of anxiety building up in her heart, and she shoved the feelings away. *Not today.* Francie inhaled deeply and smiled. She rather loved the forest and tranquil nature of the countryside. The glittering world of the *ton*, their harsh judgment and scandals was a place beyond these woods and seemed but a distant memory.

Sunlight filtered through the dark clouds, the interwoven canopy of ancient oaks and sycamores, casting warm light on the beaten path. The air was tinged with the perfume of blooming wildflowers intermingled with an aroma of the damp earth. Francie had always loved this boundless feeling of nature—the endless green, refreshing air, the scent of rain, and the birds that occasionally flew overhead. She hastened her footsteps as thunder rumbled. It would not do to be caught in the rain.

What if he is not at home?

It was not only the dread of receiving that letter from her mother that pushed her to seek out Mr. Crawford in the hopes she would not have to be alone today.

My three and twentieth birthday. I am to celebrate another birth celebration without my family.

Painful and familiar grief twisted through her. Francie had not seen her family in almost a year. Despite the many letters written to her mother asking for understanding and forgiveness, they remained unanswered. Only her brother, Tobias, the Earl of Blade and his darling wife, Livvie, the Countess of Blade, sent frequent letters to Francie. A lump formed in her throat. There was no communication from her mama, who remained deeply disappointed

and infuriated with Francie.

Because of a foolish mistake made in the name of rebellion and love.

That awful ache rose inside Francie's chest, and she forcefully shoved them aside, hating to recall the whimsical notions that had once filled her heart and led her to irrevocable ruin. She did not wish to endure the sting of pain and regret today. They would be awaiting her tomorrow, and that was enough.

Beyond the large cusp of trees ahead lay the promise of laughter, warm conversation, and a presence that would assuage her loneliness. Francie frowned, for she did not like the notion she might rely on seeing her neighbor to feel a measure of contentment. Their friendship was quite unorthodox because whenever they encountered each other, they did not speak of their past or futures, solely living within the present. Those rare instances always existed within these surrounding woodlands and the lake. Mr. Crawford had never invited her into his cottage, and Francie had never invited him into hers.

Her steps slowed as she emerged in the clearing, and the cottage came into view. Nestled amid towering trees, the large cottage exuded rustic charm. Its wooden facade and stone chimney blend seamlessly with the surrounding forest. Expansive windows overlook a tranquil lake, reflecting the ever-changing skies. There was an air of stillness about the area that suggested Mr. Crawford might not be in residence. Francie glanced toward the lake. It was empty. She canted her head and keenly listened for the sound of his dog, Samson.

Disappointment lodged against her heart. That she felt it so keenly shook Francie.

I've missed him terribly.

Despite all the reservations in her heart about getting too close to Mr. Crawford, she still felt herself pulled toward him. It had been a month since they sat in that small boat on the lake, laughing and chatting. She had wanted

to tell him so much but was afraid to reveal her connections and the terrible scandal she had left behind in London.

A most peculiar sensation rippled over her skin.

He is close!

Whenever Mr. Crawford was near, Francie felt different, certainly more aware of herself and alive. Though she did not trust this odd reaction to him, she enjoyed his company immensely.

Oh, why does this feel so perilous?

At this moment, she knew it was a mistake to have come. The comfort and conversation she hungered for would have to be delayed until her good senses and the walls she had placed around her heart reasserted themselves. Gripping the basket, Francie whirled around, intending to return to her cottage.

“Why do you leave?”

Her heart clenched with unexpected yearning at that query. Without glancing over her shoulder or turning around, Francie said, “I merely intended to strengthen my constitution with a bracing walk. However, rain seems to be imminent. I should return home.”

A fat drop of rain landed on her forehead as if to support her excuse.

“I see.”

Had he moved closer?

“I have never seen you stroll with a basket before.” An audible inhalation sounded. “Whatever it holds smells divine, Miss Walcott.”

Francie swallowed, gripping the basket even tighter. “It is a cake.”

“Coated with lemon frosting?” he asked.

Startled, she smiled. “No.”

“Must you keep me in suspense? Very wretched of you.”

Amusement rushed through her. “It has sweetened chocolate frosting.”

A small silence fell. “I thought the lemon frosting was your favorite?”

It is, she silently thought, but chocolate was his. Oh dear. She closed her

eyes tightly, feeling as if this situation had grown beyond perilous. How had she baked a cake with Mr. Crawford's preference in mind?

"I must go," Francie said in a desperate rush.

"You will not make it back in time. The walk is at least two miles. The rain will be here in minutes. Stay with me, please."

Shocked, she turned around at this. "I beg your pardon?"

Mr. Crawford was indecently dressed only in trousers and a shirt that was rolled to his elbows, revealing muscled forearms. His dark silver eyes stared at her with unswerving intensity. His raven black hair appeared windswept and in need of a trim. Mr. Crawford was a handsome gentleman with sculpted cheekbones, a strong patrician nose, and a sensual mouth. A mouth she had guiltily thought about kissing more than once. Flushing, she briefly glanced away from him.

"I am inviting you inside, Francie."

The intimate use of her name provoked that infuriating shiver in her heart. They had stopped being formal with their greetings several months ago. Still, somehow, they avoided using each other's intimate names. It felt imperative to try and keep a measure of formality at the moment. It was also undoubtedly silly, given the existence of their friendship had shattered all bounds of pretension and propriety.

"You have never invited me inside your home before, Mr. Crawford."

A shadow fell over his silver eyes, and his gaze grew unfathomable. A deceptively sensual smile played about his mouth. "Forgive my lapse. However, the situation had never called for it before. Permit me to mention you have never invited me to your cottage either."

They were woodland neighbors who had only met here in the opening, by the lake, or along the path he often bird-watched with his dog. Occurrences that had seemed coincidental now felt deliberate. Had they somehow realized the dangerous nature of being alone together and instinctively met outdoors? Francie bit into her lower lip. She was presuming Mr. Crawford lived alone.

They never seemed to discuss anything remarkably intimate or personal. However, she felt as if she knew him well.

Oh, Francie, do not be deceived.

She had already fooled herself once by falling in love with a man who had revealed himself to be a liar and a disloyal libertine. And Francie had believed she knew everything about him. She lowered her gaze, holding back her smile as she stared at Mr. Crawford's bare toes. *I cannot stay*. For a beat, she was completely despondent. "Regrettably, I cannot stay. I will hasten—"

"I baked a lemon cake," he said gruffly.

She snapped her gaze to his, pressing her palm against her chest as if that small pressure would suppress her suddenly fiercely beating heart. "You remembered?"

CHAPTER 2



Francie stared at Mr. Crawford, her heart a pounding mess.

“Yes,” he said with a small smile. “I remember it is your favourite cake.”

The knowledge had a most disturbing effect on her heart. Memories of sitting by the lake, picnicking alone on her birthday last year, floated through Francie’s thoughts and the sweetest warmth pierced her.

“May I join you?”

Then, they had only known each other for a month. *“Your company would be delightful, Mr. Crawford.”*

“Good God, what do you eat?”

“A cake ... with lemon frosting.”

“That is not a cake. It is ... a ghastly mess. Who baked it?”

“I did.”

They had stared at each other, and then she had laughed, feeling the sadness leeching from her heart. A pleasant warmth had suffused her entire being when he bravely ate a slice of her cake. It had tasted awful, but he had eaten it all. It was at that moment some of the walls around her heart had lowered.

Francie looked beyond his shoulder at the cottage and the waiting lemon cake. “I presumed you baked it for me?”

He smiled, a lopsided quirk of his mouth, but his handsomeness fairly

stole her breath. Mr. Crawford padded over, and she almost expired from shock when he reached out and tucked a wisp of hair behind her ears. The fleeting brush of his fingertip against her skin had her pulse skittering.

“A blessed and happy birthday to you, Francie.”

“Thank you.”

“After baking your cake, Samson and I had planned to call upon you at your cottage and boldly invite ourselves in for afternoon tea.”

An indescribable feeling rose in her heart. “I would have allowed you inside.”

An unknown emotion flashed in his eyes before his expression veiled. Francie allowed him to take the basket and did not protest when he clasped her other hand within his. Mr. Crawford tugged her forward, and they silently walked toward his cottage.

It did not feel companionable. There was a seething undertone of something she did not understand. Perhaps it was in her imagination, but her belly knotted with tension, and her heart pounded with each step that took her closer to Mr. Crawford’s abode. They went up the steps, and he released her hand to open the front door. He stepped back, allowing her to enter before him. How could she enter a cottage, and be alone with a gentleman after everything that had happened to her? Yet, Francie felt safe and protected with Mr. Crawford. She was quite beyond redemption. Walking over the threshold, she discreetly scanned the room. The quality of the furniture and space of the front room informed her that Mr. Crawford was a man of some means.

How little we still know about each other.

Francie ventured further into the cottage. A few sofas were artfully arranged, the hearth kept a fire going, and a large walnut table with two chairs was positioned by the window overlooking the lake.

On that table was a cake, two small plates with knives, forks, and a decanter of amber liquid. An empty picnic basket was at the side of the

arrangement. Something savory lingered in the air, and she inhaled deeply.

“It is a stew,” he murmured. “It is on a low simmer and will be ready in a few hours.”

“*You* are cooking?” she asked incredulously, glancing up at him.

He wore an expression of mock sorrow. “After witnessing the tragedy of what you baked last year, I learned. How could I not?”

Delighted, she lightly laughed. Mr. Crawford watched her with an air of awareness never before present in their interactions. His silver gaze was far too piercing. He fascinated Francie and made her nervous in the same breath. What was he thinking?

“Please,” he murmured, waving his hand to the table.

Francie walked over, and he pulled out the chair for her to sit. Lowering herself, she untied her bonnet and casually tossed it on the sofa to the side. Mr. Crawford sat and cut a slice of cake for her and himself. She glanced at her basket. “Perhaps we shall have both?”

He arched a brow. “Living dangerously, I see.”

She choked back her laugh, recalling when she had mentioned her mother berating her for eating more than one slice of cake for the week. Those moments when she had prepared for her debut on the marriage mart felt like a lifetime instead of three years ago. Once she had two pieces of cake on her plate, Francie took up her fork and broke off a piece. Her eyes widened at the flavors that exploded on her tongue.

“Is it good?” he asked.

She nodded, unable to speak. Mr. Crawford smiled, pouring a generous splash of liquid in her glass. Francie spluttered a bit at the first sip, but she liked the heat that traveled through her body, relaxing her. “I cannot credit that you baked this. It is wonderful.”

“Ah, I knew number eleven would have done the trick somehow.”

The fork froze in midair. “You attempted to bake this ten times before?”

“Hmm,” he said around a mouthful of chocolate cake.

Her heart gave a frightful squeeze. He knew lemon cake to be her favourite treat and had practiced so diligently to make it for her. Nerves and a delight she had forbade herself to ever feel again plucked at her plucked at her heart.

“How many times before you perfected this divine treat?” Mr. Crawford asked, watching her with an intensity that felt almost alarming.

Almost. That distinction was important. *Oh, I am being excessively silly.*

Francie lowered her gaze to the dark cake layered with rich chocolate frosting. “I wish I could take the credit. Mrs. Benton assisted me.”

“I might have to ask her to marry me.”

“Mr. Benton would gladly chase you with his broom.”

Mr. Crawford chuckled, the sound low and sensual. That peculiar flutter went off inside her heart, and she looked away from his smiling mouth. Francie felt like a wonderful glutton as she ate the two large pieces of cake and drank three glasses of brandy. Her body felt flushed, and she felt a sense of happiness missing from her life for so long.

Thunder rumbled, and lightning forked in the sky in a spectacular display. The sun fought valiantly, but darkened clouds scuttled over its rays. Fat drops of rain slapped against the windows. Francie rose from the chair and tumbled onto the sofa, toeing off her walking boots to curl her stocking legs beneath her shin. Mr. Crawford arched a brow when she unpinned her hair, but he made no pithy reply at this shocking level of impropriety.

That they were alone and visited each other in privacy was scandalous enough that all other actions were deemed unshockable. If her mother saw her now, perhaps she would excise Francie from her heart, more so than she already did. The sole piece of communication from her mother resurfaced in her heart. She was summoned to town to remarry an earl to render herself respectable.

“Where did you go just now?” Mr. Crawford murmured, rising from the table to sit on the sofa facing her.

“I ...” her throat closed. “I merely thought of my mother.”

He stilled, then pinned her with a palpable stare. “Your mother?”

“Yes.”

“Does your father also live?”

They had never spoken of their respective families, and she could not help wondering what they each hid from, considering they barely shared the true matters of their hearts.

“No, my father died several years ago,” she said softly. “However, I have two older brothers.”

Though her mother did not accept Grayson in their lives, as he was the son of her husband’s mistress, Francie loved both brothers wholeheartedly.

“I have a younger brother, William and a sister, Henrietta,” Alexander said with a small smile, his silver eyes gleaming. “My father died two years ago.”

“I am deeply sorry,” Francie said, realizing that the lost look she had seen in his eyes when she first met him had been from grief. “Is that why you retreated to this cottage?”

The shadow of grief flashed in his gaze, and his body stilled. “Yes. My father enjoyed coming here. That lake ... that is where he taught me and my siblings to swim. Right by that fireplace on the rug, he taught us how to play chess and whist.”

There were times when Mr. Crawford had left for a few weeks, and she had wondered where he had gone but had not asked, given she was also very private.

“Somehow I believed this cottage was your only home.”

Though he had an elegance to his speech and mannerisms, Alexander Crawford always appeared simple and not given to the excess of many gentlemen of wealth and leisure. His small cottage was tastefully furnished, neat and tidy, and had no servants living there. Francie suspected he tended to this private space himself.

A smile touched his mouth. "This is just a small slice of my world. I feel here is one of the only places I can exist and be true to myself."

And so it is for me, she silently said. How odd that they also shared this love of nature between themselves. The fierce sense that she would miss Alexander once she departed Derbyshire lodged against her heart. Would she ever see this man again once she left? This was unsettling. They were gradually revealing more of their inner selves to each other. This was particularly significant because they had maintained such a cautious stance for a lengthy period, carefully guarding this aspect of their lives. Francie felt peculiarly uncertain and vulnerable. A massive bark sounded from outside.

"Ah, it seems Samson is ready to return inside."

Alexander stood and went to open the door, and his dog enthusiastically dashed into the cottage. Without missing a beat, Samson made a beeline for Francie. Almost as if propelled by sheer joy, the dog used his sizable frame to nudge against her and the sofa with a playful bounce. She laughed, patting his head. "How are you, Samson? I have missed you, too."

Samson let out a low, contented *chuff* before ambling away from Francie. He moved gracefully toward the hearth, where he lay down, stretching his body out in front of the warm, crackling fire. He lowered his head onto his front paw and closed his eyes, surrendering to the comforting heat.

"Is he sleeping?" Francie asked, her eyes widening in amazement.

Alexander chuckled softly as he returned to his seat on the sofa, which faced the one Francie occupied. "He had a busy morning, chasing several hares across the fields. I could hardly keep up with him."

"I have always dreamed of having a dog."

Alexander raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "What stopped you?"

Caught off guard, Francie hesitated. "I ..." She tilted her head to the side, her lips curving into a wistful smile. "I guess I was not brave enough to defy my mother's strong disapproval."

"Ah," Alexander nodded understandingly.

“My older brother, Tobias, however, did not have such qualms,” Francie continued with a smile. “He went against my mother's wishes and has two magnificent wolfhounds.” She laughed. “Unsurprisingly, Mama’s allergy seemed to have disappeared even though dogs were present.”

Alexander’s lips curved in a small smile. “Tobias sounds like quite the rebel.”

“In the best way,” Francie agreed, her mouth softening as she thought about her brother. “He has a son ... I hardly see my nephew, and though I receive frequent updates about his progress through letters, I wish I was there to see the first steps his mother wrote about.”

The awful ache for her own family echoed in her words, and she looked away from Alexander’s intent stare. Francie felt she was sharing too much. Samson let out a soft, sleep-infused *woof* from his warm spot by the fire.

“Why are you not with your family, Francie?”

Her heart thumped and she canted her head to the side, staring at him. “Why do you ask?”

“I am not satisfied.”

With the small piece of yourself that you give me, his stare seemed to silently communicate. An ache formed in her throat. There was no need to ask him to expound, Francie understood. “I...”

“I want to know more about you,” Alexander murmured, a far too dangerous gleam in his silver eyes. “Why do you live in a cottage by yourself?”

She froze, her heart pounding. Alexander had never before enquired why she lived alone. Many of their neighbors presumed she was a young widow. “Have you not heard I am a widow?”

“I have heard. Is that why you do not allow anyone too close?”

“Perhaps it was simply too risky.”

He arched a questioning brow. “Sometimes, taking the risk brings its own rewards.”

That aching emptiness in her heart yawned wider. “Yes,” Francie whispered, meeting his gaze. “Sometimes, it really does.” As she stared at the mysterious yet compelling gentleman before her, Francie could not help silently asking ..., *Dare I take another step toward you? What are your innermost secrets, and why do I even want to know them?*

CHAPTER 3



Miss Walcott's eyes held the depth of dark emeralds, catching glints of sunlight as she stared at him with that deplorable hint of sadness. Her beautiful eyes should only shine with delight, laughter, passion, and love. He wanted to wipe that sadness from her eyes. This awareness no longer shocked Alexander. Any such reaction to Miss Francie Walcott had faded several months ago. Alexander had simply accepted his extraordinary reaction to her lovely amiability. Still, he had done nothing to pursue the interest she stroked within his body and heart.

A fine tremor went through her elegant frame. Her eyes held too much pain, and Alexander himself grieved the death of his father and sought solace in the woodlands of Derbyshire. She had felt like a kindred soul when they first met. Someone in her life had injured her, and despite not knowing the situation, Alexander wanted to find that person and bury them. Earlier, when he had watched her walking through the woodlands dressed in an elegant yellow gown, Francie seemed like a creature born of the forest itself as she came toward him. His unwitting tormentor had tested his self-restraints these last few months.

A sense of surety overcame him as he watched her casually lean against the sofa. According to the multiple beseeching letters his mother sent him, he needed to secure an heir, and Miss Walcott could be that lady if she would

have him. She unexpectedly entered his life at a time when he was least prepared for it, leaving an indelible mark on his heart. Her charming amiability and kindness resonated with him, a soothing balm to grief that had haunted Alexander. Her compassion seemed almost boundless. Her wit was invigorating, spurring conversations that lingered in his thoughts long after they were over. And then there was her smile—genuine and filled with sparkling allure.

Every interaction with her pulled Alexander deeper. It was as if she cast a spell on him—one woven from strands of grace, good-natured amiability, intelligence, and warmth. Could he ask for his wife to possess anything more?

Now, the only things he needed to confirm were her background and connections to his world. Instinct warned him he would have to tread carefully. The lady may not be aware of it, but there were times she stared at him with wounded wariness. That very gaze regarded him now with a hint of fright and determination.

“You have a very expressive face, Francie. Please, speak whatever you are in doubt about.”

Her eyes widened, and she laughed, sheepishly tucking a wisp of raven black hair behind her hair. “Some musings are just too mortifying to disclose,” she remarked, punctuating her words with a delicate chuckle. “Only a friend would be privy to such secrets.”

Alexander feigned a wounded expression. “That cuts deep. Are you implying that we aren’t friends?”

She wrinkled her nose endearingly as she responded, “Well, I could confide in a female friend, but sharing those particular secrets with you? That’s a different story!”

Alexander raised an eyebrow in bemusement. “Why the distinction? A friend is a friend, regardless of their gender. Surely the essence of friendship isn’t defined by whether one is male or female.”

She narrowed her gaze contemplatively on him. “I shared something very private and heartbreaking with a good friend ... and she betrayed my confidence.”

There was no mistaking the echoes of remembered pain in her tone.

“I’ll not urge you then,” he said softly. “Know that I would never betray your trust.”

His ragged sigh pierced her with warmth. “I believe you.”

“Good.” Somehow, Alexander could tell that she did not like that she so readily placed her faith in him.

Francie stared at him for several beats then her expression softened. “I was merely thinking about risks and the rewards that come with it.”

Ah we make progress.

“I also considered the heartache that could follow.” She blew out a sharp breath. “I received a letter from my mother today, summoning me to London.”

What an odd choice of word, as if she had no will to refuse this summons. “You do not seem happy to return. Do you not long for your family?”

“I do,” she said softly. “I know I *must* do what my mother asks to atone for all the hurt I’ve caused.”

Alexander found himself puzzling over what sort of anguish someone as compassionate and tender-hearted as Miss Walcott could possibly inflict upon her family. He was tempted to delve deeper into the matter, but he could sense the emotional barriers beginning to rise in her demeanor, making further inquiry seem intrusive. Francie leaned forward and plucked the decanter from the walnut table, and took a sip. Her eyes sparkled with such sadness he felt as if he wanted to slay the world. Inside he chuckled ruefully, though he accepted his reaction to her, that he could feel so deeply about a lady still had the power to astonish his senses.

She began to nibble on her lower lip, a behavior Alexander had come to recognize as a telltale sign of her nervousness. Over the course of their

unorthodox friendship , he had noticed this subtle gesture manifesting whenever she felt uneasy or uncertain, and it struck him once again how this simple act revealed a deeper layer of her emotions.

“Tell me what worries you, Francie.”

Her face flushed a becoming pink. “There is something I want to do before ... before I commit to the task my mother sets before me. Something that perhaps you might help me with, Alexander.”

Unexpectedly a hot clenching need knotted inside of him. It was damn peculiar how his mouth dried, and his heart rate increased. “I am listening.”

Francie pinned him with a fierce stare, and he got the feeling she was afraid.

Alexander leaned forward, squeezed her hand reassuringly then relinquished his hold on it before he did something foolish. “Why are you scared? There is no need to be with me.”

Her light laugh was nervous, her eyes soft and luminous. “I’m terrified of making reckless decisions once more, yet equally frightened that if I do not act on my feelings, I’ll be haunted by a lifetime of regret.”

“Ah, that’s quite the dilemma you’re in,” he murmured, wondering what reckless decision haunted her.

A pained grimace crossed her face. “Yes! It feels wretched and dreadful.”

“What is it that you want to do?”

She laced her fingers together and squeezed. Alexander arched a brow, noting the rising rosy pink in her softly rounded cheeks. He’d not think her a lady given to blushes so readily. Two in a matter of a minute. *What is going on Francie?*

Alexander waited, but she only stared at him like a deer about to bolt. “Tell me,” he urged, leaning forward, his heart jerking a harder rhythm.

Her throat worked on a tight swallow, and her entire body stilled. “Do not judge me, *please*.”

“Never would I judge you, Francie.”

For a breath of a moment, they stared at each other, then her mouth gently curved. That smile contained a sense of elegance and passion. Her green eyes sparkled, and she murmured, “I want to have a night of passion with a lover ... only a night.”

She held her breath as she waited for his response. Only silence lingered. Alexander was simply too damn shocked. This was the last thing he had expected. Had he squandered his opportunity to win her affections by proceeding too cautiously? Over the past several weeks, he had aimed to convey his feelings through attentive gestures and meaningful conversations, hoping Francie would recognize his intentions as extending beyond mere friendship. But had he been too subtle, leaving her unaware of the deeper regard he held for her?

“You wish for an affair?” he asked, a bit hoarsely. Alexander forcefully pried open his fingers from the death grip it had on his armchair.

“No,” she exclaimed, catching her breath as she spoke. “An affair suggests an ongoing series of encounters. What I desire is just a single experience of true passion. I want to seize that one moment for myself, to claim something that’s exclusively mine and not given because of duty and obligation. Have I appalled you?”

“Never.”

Relief flushed her cheeks with an even rosier glow. “I know it is very wicked and scandalous of me ... but I have been thinking about this for a few weeks. I know this want came from a place born of loneliness and forgotten dreams, but I pushed it away, determined to never be reckless again. Resisting my natural inclinations has been akin to a slow, torturous demise of my true self. Yet, I know that I must exercise restraint; otherwise, I risk plunging myself into a state of even more irrevocable ruin.”

Bloody hell. What experience had she lived through? “Francie—”

“I want to experience ... passion ... and desire!” A whimsical sigh left her, and she took another sip from the decanter before setting it down

forcefully on the walnut table.

“Eventually, you would experience this with your husband,” he said cautiously.

Her eyes widened, and a brittle laugh escaped her. “While I have no desire to subject myself to that horrid snare, it seems I have little choice but to endure it. Nonetheless, I am acutely aware that I will not discover any genuine passion within my marriage. I would only be fulfilling a duty and obligation.”

Horrid? Only duty and obligation? *By God, who hurt you?* “Loving your husband is a possibility; it does not have to be solely a matter of duty or obligation. Marriage can offer much more than just a contractual agreement or a social expectation. It can be a union of genuine affection, emotional support, friendship, laughter, and companionship. I know this because I witnessed it with my sister’s union and the love my father and mother shared. While fulfilling your duty as a wife is important, it’s worth considering that you could also find joy, love, fidelity, and passion within the bonds of matrimony.”

Her eyes widened and mouth trembled with the force of her emotions. Francie tipped her head back and stared at the ceiling for a brief moment. When she looked at Alexander again, doubt and pain glared from her eyes. “I would be a fool to ever think of loving someone again or expecting such a connection that you describe.”

Alexander’s chest felt tight and unknown emotions wrenched through him. “Again?”

CHAPTER 4



Tears sparkled in Francie's eyes but did not spill over. "I loved someone once ... and I thought he loved me."

He devastated me, remained unsaid, but glared from her eyes. "I am sorry he proved himself to be insincere," he said gruffly.

Her brows drew together in an agonized expression. There was a sorrow that carried a sense of reluctance in her gaze then her lashes lowered, hiding her emotions from him. "It was three years ago. I do not think of that man anymore. Nor do I care to foolishly yearn after or hope for a second chance with love."

Her revelation had implications for his planned courtship that Alexander couldn't ignore. Francie was not the kind of woman who would readily lower her emotional defenses. She had clearly constructed barriers around her heart from her past experiences and an innate sense of caution. His courtship would need to be crafted with patience and understanding, a gradual dismantling of her defenses rather than ruthlessly pursuing her as was his nature. He would have to show her that his feelings were both serious and sincere.

Moreover, Alexander would need to be attuned to her vulnerabilities, recognizing the moments when she might be willing to take a small risk in opening up to him. It was a delicate balance: pushing too hard could cause her to retreat further behind her walls, yet failing to act decisively might

mean missing opportunities to deepen their connection.

Bloody hell. He scrubbed a hand over his face. *When have I ever shied away from a challenge?*

There were many ladies on the marriage mart who would readily marry Alexander. But it was this lady before him who seemed to like and appreciate him without knowing of his wealth and power in the *ton* that he wanted. What if she knew he was a duke? Would Francie still speak so frankly and endearingly with him? His gut said yes. She was too genuine to act with artifice.

“I never suspected you would feel like this, Francie.”

Her expression grew stark, and their gazes collided. “You would not know of it, would you? Have we not been very careful to only speak about mundane things? Do we truly know each other?”

Alexander stared at her, wondering if she realized the wall had been fortified by her. Each instance when he had probed for more details about her life, Francie would retreat and stare at him with pained wariness. She would then change the conversation to impersonal matters, and he had allowed it. Could he stand to continue doing so when she spoke of taking a damn lover?

Something harsh burned at the back of his throat. “We do not speak of many things, but I know you.”

A complicated look flashed across Francie’s eyes, “I—”

“I have seen you many times in the woods walking with your face buried in a book. You delight in the written words, and you do own to a romantic nature, for I have seen you twirling and laughing when something good happens in your story.”

Her entire body faltered into stillness.

“You have a yearning for travel, do you not?”

Something tender and shockingly vulnerable settled on her face. “I have never said so!”

“Does this not reveal the tacit understanding we seem to have of each

other?”

Her chin jutted, and she stubbornly said, “It does not.”

Alexander narrowed his gaze on her and said, “I have sensed a yearning within you, a deep-rooted desire for exploration and adventure that I hear whenever you speak about the untouched beauty of the Aegean Sea, a place you’ve yet to see. Your eyes widen in wonder as you contemplate the ancient monuments of Egypt and the historic ruins of Rome. You read many travel books even though they are not as exciting as the gothic romances you like to devour. It’s as if your soul is restless, curious, and longing for the unfamiliar. Each travel book you read, you read as if you envision the possibilities for yourself, and each place represents a unique story yet to be explored.”

She waved a hand, as if dismissing his words. “You cannot know that!”

“Your sighs and delight as you read is enough to convey your feelings to me. You are captivated by the idea of standing on soil you’ve never touched, breathing in air tinged with the scents of foreign lands. You fantasize about bustling markets in distant cities and discovering cultures rich in history. You close your eyes, Francie, and see yourself sailing aboard a ship, trekking through vast wilderness, or finding solace on a secluded ocean at the edge of the world. You have never said these words to me, Francie and I ask you now, am I wrong in my assessment?”

Her eyes glistened fiercely with unshed tears. “No,” she said huskily, pressing her fingers over her mouth.

And I vow once you are my wife, I will show you the world, he silently promised her.

“Your compassion is evident, too. When little Tommy twisted his ankle and was terrified of being left alone in the dark forest, you did not hesitate. You carried him on your back for miles, straight to his mother’s doorstep.”

“Tommy is only six years old,” she responded, her eyes shining with emotion. “He wasn’t heavy.”

“Yet you were so exhausted by the ordeal that you did not stir when I

carried you back to your home,” Alexander said.

He noticed her pulse quicken, her eyes betraying a rush of memories. She had only extricated herself from his arms when they had reached the threshold of her cottage, her cheeks flushed as she thanked him and retreated into her home.

“You trust me,” he said, his voice tinged with a bold assurance. “You rely on me. You consider me a friend—perhaps even more. When you were worn out and emotionally drained, you asked Mrs. Benton to summon me. The moment you saw me, your eyes sparkled with a sense of relief, and when I held you, you immediately fell asleep. The chocolate cake you baked for your birthday told me more about your selflessness than words ever could. And when Mrs. Portman was in labor, you stayed by her side for three sleepless days and nights. Even though you were emotionally overwhelmed—you broke down more than she did—you stayed because she needed you. We may never discuss our pasts or articulate our hopes for the future, Francie, but we know each other. We understand one another.”

Alexander’s words hung in the air, letting her realize their attachment went beyond mere acquaintance or friendship—they truly had a bond built on trust and a deep understanding of each other. As if she could not bear his stare, Francie lurched to her feet and rushed to the large windows. The sky had darkened, and the winds and rains raged outside. Even if she felt the urge to run away from this encounter, the storm would not allow it. And by God, nor would Alexander allow it.

A fine tremor cascaded down her back, and she leaned her forehead against the cool windows. Alexander rose and walked over, standing a mere breath behind her.

“Would you take a lover with no cares for your reputation?”

“What reputation?” she murmured wretchedly.

“What do you mean by that?”

Instead of answering she said, “I am not a fool, Alexander. I planned to

be discreet.” Her slender shoulders trembled under the weight of her emotions.

“Do you have someone in mind?”

This time her entire body shook with her shaky inhalation. “I ... I thought about Sir Hanley. He called upon me a few times, and I have detected his interest. I must return to London in a few days, and I ... I wanted this moment before I departed because once I am there ... I can never think of doing something so reckless again.”

Something cold and savage moved through Alexander's heart. He closed his eyes, shuddering inside, holding back the tide of feeling. “Look at me.” The world leaped from him like a snarl.

“No,” she said softly.

“Why not?”

“I am afraid of what I will see in your eyes.”

He peered at her nape, leaning so close he was certain she felt the warmth of his breath on her skin. Her elusive fragrance of lavender filled his lungs. “I would not judge you for wanting to take a lover, Francie.”

A shaky laugh that ended in a hiccup left her. “Most would think me a wanton, ungovernable tart for admitting it.”

How vulnerable she sounded. Her delicate body was still trembling faintly.

“I am not most,” he said, just as softly. “Nor do I ascribe to the hypocritical notions many hold. You confided in me your desire for a lover, knowing full well I would never betray your trust or think you an ungovernable tart.” *How silly you are*, the thought, almost fondly, the savage feeling dampening the humor in him. “Now, look at me.”

She lifted her forehead from the window and turned to face him. Francie leaned her back against the windows, tilting her face upward to meet his stare. Her mouth quivered, and her green gaze seemed uncertain. Her eyes searched his face for long moments, and whatever she saw eased the tension

from her shoulders and the wounded look in her eyes.

The arch of her eyebrows, the color of her eyes, the shape of her lips, and the gentle curve of her cheeks—each detail of her had been imprinted in his mind and heart this past year. Unable to resist, Alexander reached out to touch her. His thumb gently traced the delicate curve of her lower lip, and as if responding to his caress, a captivating blush spread across her face, reaching down to her neck.

“I have never realized how pretty a blush could be.”

Her throat worked on a swallow.

“I wonder, do you blush all over?” “Alexander?” Her voice was husky with nerves.

He moved his thumb up to rest against the tender curve of her throat, where he could feel the frenzied rhythm of her heartbeat pulsing beneath his touch.

“Do not ever mention to me about taking Sir Hanley or any man as your lover again.”

Shocked at the evident throb of menace in his tone, her eyes widened, but she nodded. Alexander pressed a kiss to her brow, and her lashes fluttered close for a long moment. Slightly lowering his lips to the corner of her mouth, he said, “If you are to have a lover, that man will only be me.”

CHAPTER 5



I *f you are to have a lover, that man will only be me.*

Those shocking words settled between them, and Francie dazedly wondered if *this* was the outcome she had secretly hoped. When she read the letter from her mother urging her to marry a gentleman willing to overlook her scandal and ruined reputation, Francie felt a keen sense of loss, even though she would gain from her mother's machination.

Marrying the Earl of Beresford, a gentleman who was thirty-five years her senior, would help Francie reclaim her position in society and grant her the comfort of children. But she would lose this attachment with Mr. Crawford. A singularly improper yet wonderful connection. The delightful walks in the woodlands, rowing on the lake, playing with Samson and birdwatching would be no more. Such a friendship would not be tolerated by her new husband. That sense of loss had driven Francie here while thoughts of a passionate night before submitting to duty had whirled in her thoughts.

If you are to have a lover, that man will only be me.

Another never-before-felt delicate tendril of heat spun through Francie's body, and her heart shuddered in warning. A helpless feeling of desire coursed through her body, and she stared at him helplessly. He kissed the corner of her mouth, and his rousing scent invaded her lungs. Unfamiliar emotions twisted through Francie, and she pressed a hand against the cool

glass of the windows. She was sharply aware of him in a manner she had never felt before.

You trust me ... you rely on me ...

The truth of his words had petrified her. Francie never wanted to be vulnerable with another man again, especially one who provoked new and unexplored feelings. She forced another breath into her lungs. Alexander's silver eyes were exceptionally focused and burned with passion as he stared at her.

There was a shocking surety in his gaze, and her heart started beating more unevenly.

He wants me. How did I not see this desire before? Or had she not wanted to see it?

Humor and tenderness darkened his silver eyes. "I will not let you return to your cottage tonight. Stay with me, and I will keep you warm while the storm rages outside."

A heady feeling rushed through her, a hot and delicious tingle low down in her body. Her throat tight, she whispered, "Yes."

He cupped her chin and lifted her face up to his regard. "Why do you still look scared?"

Oddly, she could not bear lying to him, so she confessed, "Because I realized how much I have wanted you, and that deep in my heart I wanted this one stolen moment to be with *you* ... someone I foolishly trust though I know I should not."

A rough, low, and hungry sound spilled from him. The warm, strong hands cupping her cheeks trembled. "I'll prove to you that you can trust me without fear, Francie."

She wanted this one night to fill all the places that had longed for so many things but had remained unfulfilled. Then, the warm memory of it will keep her contented for many years to come.

Please ... let this moment forever live within my heart.

Alexander lowered his head slightly and pressed his mouth to hers. Her stomach fluttered with nerves, but her heart ached with passionate desire. A nip at her lower lip, then she parted her lips in a soft moan of complete surrender, and his tongue slipped into the depths of her mouth. A small noise of shock and pleasure broke from her throat.

This kiss felt indecent ... lascivious ... yet so perfect. Francie accepted the sweet carnal glide of his tongue against hers. She had been kissed several times before by the gentleman she had eloped with to marry and only met with heartbreak. Francie thought desire had felt warm and pleasant with a heady feeling of anticipating the unknown.

How wrong I have been.

Alexander tastes like a summer storm and dark passion. Her dazed thoughts burned away under the lash of desire. He kissed her with scorching expertise, sucking on her tongue before releasing her mouth from his provocative assault. His lips seared a path down her neck and her shoulders. She arched her neck, allowing him to suck at the skin right above her pounding pulse. Alexander stepped away from her, and she held his gaze. His cheekbones were flushed, and the primal look in his eyes had her heart thumping. Francie felt weak with longing for this man.

He stooped and reached under her dress. She pressed the flat of her palms against the cool windows as if the feel of the glass would center her against the sensations coursing through her veins.

Can he hear my heartbeat?

She bit her lower lip harder, moaning softly at the decadent heat his fingers evoked as they trailed up her legs to her shin and higher to unpin her garters. He rolled down her stockings, slowly and sensually, and tugged them from her feet. Her knee-length drawers were removed next and tossed to the side. Alexander lifted one of her feet and kissed the spot right behind her knee. Francie was painfully aware of their wanton pose against the windows. Her body blushed brightly when he pushed her dress upward and kissed her

quivering belly. He nudged her legs open, dragged his mouth down and kissed her sex. Her body responded violently with a shudder of alarmed delight.

Is this possible?

How wicked it felt ... that slow, hot glide of his tongue over her folds. Unbearable heat twisted low in her belly, and the very place he licked *ached*. His teeth scraped against that secret spot before he tenderly sucked it. Francie cried out, pressing her back against the glass as if to escape the piercing sensations in her clitoris. His fiendishly clever tongue pleased her until she convulsed, waves of pleasure tearing her body apart.

Goodness gracious. I never knew it would be like this ...

He did not let up his carnal ministrations, skimming his fingers up her thighs to touch the intimate core of her before slipping that finger deep inside. It felt strange yet so wonderful. He moved that finger, and something twisted low in her belly. A second finger joined the first, stretching her almost painfully. Francie gasped, then shivered under the lash of heat. His mouth moved over her clitoris in tandem with his fingers, wreaking delightful havoc in her body.

“Alexander,” she gasped, her entire body shaking.

The pleasure was too much. The sensations burst over her—bliss so intense that she wildly cried out. Francie distantly became aware he stood and removed her dress and chemise. They fell away from her body. He lifted her into his arms; she gripped his shoulders and buried her blushing face against his throat as he walked with her a few paces to the next room. Alexander carried her to the bed flush against the corner wall opposite the low burning fireplace. It was a little darker there, but she could see the possessive glint in his beautiful eyes and feel the thrum of lust surrounding her like a caged storm waiting to be unleashed.

He set her down gently in the center of the bed, then retreated to remove his clothes. She stared at him with increasing wonder as he took off each

article. His body was lean but corded with such beautiful muscles. His manhood appeared flushed and thick, stirring uncertainty they would fit together comfortably.

Alexander padded over, and she reached for him as he came onto the bed, his powerful body coming down on hers. He braced his weight on an elbow and, with the other hand, cupped her cheek, kissing her with passionate tenderness.

She gripped his shoulders, and instincts made her hitch her legs around his thighs, returning his kiss with breathless fervor. His lips released hers and seared a sensual path down her neck, over her breast, to suck her aching nipple into his mouth. Fancie cried out at the heated sensation. Instinctively, her body arched more to him. Alexander reached between them, and a hard pressure entered where the ache of want was most terrible. Unbearably aroused, she clasped his neck, meeting his mouth for a kiss that felt wild and desperate. His hips pushed, and her body was wet and yielding to his slow but deep invasion.

She pulled her mouth from his, gasping at the sharp pain.

“I am sorry,” he murmured against her mouth, kissing and distracting her from the awful sting. “The pain will soon pass.”

She touched his mouth with trembling fingers. “You feel wonderful.”

“By God, how is it I lasted so long without seducing you?” he asked raggedly, lowering his head.

She sighed his kiss, holding him close to her. He flexed his hips, pushing deeper into her body. Francie’s flesh burned as she adjusted to the thick invasion of his body into hers. Her lover started to move, and she moaned at the pressure. He reached between their bodies and rubbed his thumb over her clitoris. The pleasure was striking. Her body grew even more pliant, mortifyingly wetter, and accepting of his manhood within her body. His hips withdrew and thrust forward repeatedly. She rocked against him, breathless cries echoing from her lips.

Francie lifted her legs and wrapped them higher around his hips, unintentionally driving him even deeper. She moaned, her nails biting into his sweat-slicked shoulders as he moved deeper and faster within her. Sensuality hazed through her mind, and she kissed him with more passion, eager for the sweet delight whispering through every part of her. They moved to a beautiful carnal rhythm, his manhood drawing out, then plunging deep. Again. And again. And again, until she lost even the ability to moan.

Relentless waves of pleasure engulfed her entire body. Francie wrapped her hands tightly around his neck. Each deep thrust ignited a burst of fire deep down in her stomach until sweet, mind-shattering ecstasy crested, and she unraveled with a sharp cry. With a deep groan, Alexander pulled from her before releasing on her quivering stomach. Panting, he dropped his forehead to hers, pressing a kiss to the bridge of her nose.

Unknown emotions swelled within Francie's heart.

So this is pleasure and lust and madness ...

Never had she dreamed this was possible with two people coming together in intimacy. She lifted trembling fingers to touch the corner of his mouth. "Thank you, Alexander. This ... it was *wonderful*."

"You speak as if it is over," he murmured tenderly.

Francie blinked. "It isn't?"

"No." Then he kissed her until her mouth felt bruised. "We are just starting."

After several moments, he climbed off the bed, and the flickering fire cast dancing shadows over his naked form. He left the room and returned rather quickly with a damp washcloth and cleaned her gently. A fiery blush covered Francie's entire body, and he smiled. Alexander left the room once more, and when he returned, he held the decanter of brandy. A harsh rumble of thunder sounded, and she jerked. He came down on the bed and assumed a sitting position with his back pressed against the headboard, tugging her into the curve of his arms. The emotions tearing through her were wholly unexpected.

A part of her heart that had been closed felt as if it had been forcefully wrenched open, and complexed emotions battered her—tenderness for this man and such longing it felt painful.

“You are shaking,” he murmured. “What are you thinking about?”

How could she reveal the weight of her thoughts—that she was on the brink of marrying a man she felt no love for, merely to salvage her tarnished reputation and restore her mother's good opinion and support? The notion gnawed at her, especially in the wake of the intimacy they had just shared, a connection that had felt as genuine as it was electrifying.

I only want you, Alexander, with every emotion in my soul. It is you I want. How could it be possible to feel this intimacy and pleasure with another in this lifetime?

Feeling frustrated yet eager to be closer to Alexander, Francie shifted her position within the comforting yet confining embrace of his arms. She maneuvered herself so that she was sitting on his lap, her knees flanking his hips in a posture that felt simultaneously vulnerable and assertive. It was as if she wanted to physically hold on to the moment, to keep them both locked in this ephemeral bubble of closeness before reality shattered it.

She gently cupped his cheeks, her fingers lightly touching him as though she were holding something fragile. *Why does it feel like I'm falling ... in love with you?* The awareness reverberated in her heart, and a rush of confusion assailed her. Francie had been here before—she'd felt the stirrings of love in the past, the sense of being emotionally tethered to another. But this was different. The emotions coursing through her now seemed to possess a depth and intensity she'd never experienced before, and it was rather frightening.

She found herself doubting, questioning the authenticity of her own feelings. Could this really be love when it felt so vastly different from what she'd known before? The connection with Alexander felt as if it touched unexplored and unsounded depths of her heart. It was bewildering and exhilarating all at once.

This wasn't just an emotional flutter, a temporary liking that would eventually wane and settle into something more mundane. No, this felt like something that had the power to upend her life and redefine her understanding of love itself. And that knowledge also petrified her.

"I can feel your heart beating faster and faster, Francie," he murmured.

Her eyes met his, and she hesitated, seeking the courage to voice her own truths. Could she find the strength to be honest, not just with him but also with herself, in this critical moment?

"Alexander," she began tremulously.

His thumb gently brushed against her mouth, which trembled.

"Yes?"

"I know you as well," she said softly. Her lips met his in a tender kiss, and as she pulled back, her words brushed gently against his mouth. "You are a man filled with compassion, humor, and an extraordinary capacity to love. Yet, you also possess a steely resolve when the situation demands it."

Another deep kiss before she continued, "I was there when you confronted that unpleasant lord who almost ran over Mr. Merton with his carriage. The viscount might have considered the butcher beneath him, but you defended him without hesitation. Not only did you admonish a lord, but you also helped Mr. Merton back into his shop."

"So you've been watching me outside of the forest, hmm?"

She laughed lightly and kissed him deeply for several seconds. Breaking their embrace, she blushed when she felt the sudden hardness of his manhood brushing against her inner thigh. She continued, "And then there was the time Mr. Jackson fell ill and could not work his fields. You discreetly covered their rent for an entire year and made sure their larder was never empty. His eldest daughter couldn't stop talking about your kindness. She adored you and made your kindness known to everyone who would listen. Whenever I ventured into the woods and wished for company, you would drop whatever you were doing and join me without a second thought. Your selflessness and

attention have never been lost on me.”

A slight blush tinged her cheeks as she concluded, “And as a lover, you are simply sublime.”

He plunged his fingers into the silkiness of her hair, pulling her toward him with a blend of urgency and tenderness until their lips met in a fiery kiss. Francie’s heart pounded against her ribcage like a frenzied drum. A sense of vulnerability filled her, and it felt as though her heart had cracked open, spilling forth a torrent of pent-up longing for him.

How many nights had she lain alone in her cottage, denying the feelings creeping upon her for this man? How many nights had she wished she was a young lady of society with a good reputation and he was a gentleman who could court her? A yearning so powerful opened, and it felt like an almost physical ache coursing through her veins, flooding her senses.

Somehow, her lover reached between the tight fits of their bodies and positioned his length at her opening. Once he was tucked at her sex, he moved his hand in a warming caress to her hips, gripped her flesh and urged her downward. The penetration was deep and immediate. Francie moaned into his mouth at the erotic bite of pain swirling within the deep pleasure. She instinctively lifted her hips and glided back down on his manhood. His groan vibrated inside her, and she broke their kiss to gasp at the sensation.

“Ride me,” he growled.

“Help me,” she whispered achingly.

He wrapped his arms around her, caging her into his embrace, and used his strength to rock her hard and deep onto his cock. He did so over and over until Francie trembled with the force of passion sweeping her upward. They burned with raw passion for several minutes before another powerful wave of pleasure shattered her senses. Alexander moved, spinning her so that her back pressed into the bed, thrusting deep a few times before pulling from her to release his seed.

Their harsh breaths sounded faint in the background of the rain that still

sleeted down outside. He rolled and hugged her against his chest, and she contentedly listened to his heart.

CHAPTER 6



Francie and Alexander lay sprawled on a blanket, surrounded by the natural beauty of the lakeside setting. The sun painted the sky with warm hues while the lake shimmered as if sprinkled with diamonds. A gentle breeze whispered through the trees, and the occasional chirp of birds created a peaceful symphony.

Between them lay Alexander's sketchbook, its pages filled with detailed drawings of birds he had observed in the surrounding woodlands.

"These sketches are absolutely stunning, Alexander," Francie said, her eyes widening in admiration as she flipped through the pages of his sketchbook. "This one is my favorite." She stared at the lifelike drawing of a pair of birds huddled together. "I cannot explain it, but it seems as if they are connected."

"A love story between birds," he murmured, his eyes gleaming.

"A love story?"

"When it comes to courtship, birds go to great lengths, employing intricate and flamboyant displays to both allure a prospective partner and outshine their rivals. Some are very loyal to each other when they get together to mate and build their nests."

Francie smiled and turned the page. "There are dozens of different birds here. I would not think there are so many in England."

“In my travels, I also take time to visit nature and engage in birdwatching. I sketch and paint as much as I can,” Alexander said, a note of fond remembrance entering his voice. “This right here is a pair of swans, and these are goldfinches.”

Francie turned her head slightly to give him a sidelong glance, her interest piqued. “Have you ... traveled to many places?”

“OH, A FAIR NUMBER, I’D SAY,” Alexander said, his mouth curving in a smile. “From the cloud forests of Costa Rica to the rugged landscapes of Australia, and even the tranquil shores of the Mediterranean. Each place offers a unique backdrop for observing different species of birds.”

Francie’s eyes widened. Somehow, she had never thought he would be so capable in his traveling? He has always seemed a very simple and straightforward country gentleman, even if he owned to elegant manners. She wondered at Alexander’s background and connections. It hovered on her tongue to query, but the fear that he might query about hers stopped Francie. Instead, she asked, “What is the most exotic bird you’ve ever seen on your travels?”

Alexander chuckled softly. “That’s a tough question. But if I had to pick one, I’d probably say the Resplendent Quetzal. I saw it in Guatemala. The vibrant colors and long tail feathers are lovely. It’s as if someone dipped a bird in a palette of greens, blues, and reds.”

She could almost picture it in her mind, a dazzling bird set against the backdrop of a lush forest. “That must’ve been an incredible sight to witness.”

“It was,” he confirmed. “Look at it here.” Alexander reached over and turned his book several pages.

Francie stared in breathless wonder at the image depicted. It was just as he described. “Your talent is beautiful,” she whispered, awed. “I wish I could have seen this myself.”

“The beauty of birdwatching is that you don’t always have to go to far-off places to find something remarkable. Even local woods and parks can be treasure troves for bird enthusiasts. I will show you one day.”

Francie smiled. *If only this could be true.* “It sounds like a beautiful way to interact with nature and a chance to find something extraordinary every day.”

“Precisely so,” Alexander said, his eyes meeting hers. “And sometimes, the most extraordinary experiences come when you least expect them, like stumbling upon a rare bird—or meeting someone your heart constantly longs for.”

Her heart stuttered, and they stared at each other for a few beats. Memories of the long hours loving each other rose in her thoughts. The wicked gleam in his silver gaze assured Francie he thought of the same. Blushing, she glanced down at the book, turned the page, and arched a brow. “Why does this one have a fish in its mouth?”

“Ah, that is a kingfisher. He is trying to entice a mate.”

She laughed. “Truly?”

Alexander reached out to tuck a wisp of her hair behind her ears. “The courtship among kingfishers is notably straightforward and devoid of extravagant displays. When a female kingfisher lands on a perch within a male’s designated area, the male assesses her presence. If he finds her a suitable mate, he embarks on a succinct yet poignant courtship gesture. He takes to the air, skillfully catches a fish, and then flies back to present his catch to her. The offering of the fish serves as both a gift and a testament to his hunting prowess—a promise of reliable sustenance for the potential offspring. If the female is receptive to his advances, she makes her intentions known by inching closer to him along the perch. If she is disinterested in his efforts, she will not move. Once the female takes the fish from the male’s beak, she is accepting his courtship.”

“I wish I could make these observations myself.”

“One day you will.”

The promise in his tone shocked her, and for a moment, she did not know what to say. Feeling suddenly nervous and uncertain, she directed her attention to the book. He said nothing at her sudden fluster, merely smiled, and shifted closer to flip the pages.

Alexander pointed at one sketch. “This is the Northern Flicker. And over here,” he turned the page, “is a Black-capped Chickadee.”

Francie listened intently, enchanted both by the intricate sketches and the way Alexander’s face lit up as he talked about them.

He picked up a pair of binoculars from beside the blanket. “Would you like to do some birdwatching? The late afternoon is a great time to spot some interesting species.”

“Is that the reason your cottage is so far from everyone else? I am your closest neighbor, and I am a few miles away.”

“I’ve always found solace in observing the natural world, and birds, in particular, fascinate me. I also enjoy being alone. Usually, I am very busy and have an active social life. The pace of the countryside is a soothing balm.”

An active social life? “Are you a businessman?”

“Of sorts.”

Why was his response so mysterious?

He handed her the binoculars, and as she took them, their fingers brushed. As if he had been waiting for this moment, he tugged her closer and kissed her. It was shockingly tender and sweet. Tears burned the backs of her eyes at the awful longing she felt for him. She broke their kiss. “Alexander?”

“Yes?”

“I ...” Do you plan to ever marry? Francie wanted to ask, even if it was pointless to wonder. She had to marry a man of reputable connections and wealth. Her mother had already made arrangements that she could not disappoint. Francie felt as if she had been too long out in the cold, and she wanted to be with her family without worrying about wagging tongues and

condemning stares. Her chest hurt with the effort to keep her thoughts private. Instead of asking, she kissed him deeply and passionately.

“Are we to have more than one moment then?” he murmured against her mouth.

Francie nodded enthusiastically, and he chuckled, dragged her onto his chest, and kissed her again.

I am foolish enough to want forever with you.

The realization shocked her, and inside, she grew angry at herself. As if he sensed the shift of her emotions, he ended their kiss and peered into her gaze.

“Let’s find those birds,” he said gruffly.

They took turns using the binoculars, and Alexander pointed out various birds perched on the branches of distant trees or soaring high above the lake. Every now and then, Francie would spot a bird, and Alexander would identify the species.

After some time, Alexander locked eyes with Francie. “I want to do something; will you join me?”

Francie raised her eyebrows, curious. “What’s that?”

“A swim,” he declared, a sensual glint in his eyes.

“In our clothes?”

“We are alone for miles. Naked will do.”

Though she blushed, Francie laughed at the audacious suggestion. Alexander sprang to his feet and extended his hand toward her. With a laugh, Francie took it, and together, they ran toward the lake. Without a moment’s hesitation, they leaped into the water.

The lake welcomed them with a refreshing embrace, and she allowed the water to close over her head for several beats before she surfaced.

“Who taught you to swim?”

“My brother, Tobias. Mama disapproved, but he finally gave in to my wheedling.”

“As all older brothers should.”

As they swam, Francie laughed and chatted with him, feeling as if the outside world had paused just for them, allowing her one night of passion to stretch on indefinitely.

“I will be leaving tomorrow,” she said softly. *I might never come back.* However, she could not bring herself to say so.

“To London?”

She swallowed tightly. “Yes.”

“I have business there in the upcoming weeks.”

Her heart lurched. “Please do not suggest that we might see each other there!”

Alexander stared at her intently before he drew her into his arms. “I do not like this look of fright and sadness that enters your eyes, Francie.”

Oh!

“I do not like to feel it in my heart either,” she said, wrapping her arms around his nape.

“Will you tell me what it is that hurts you so?”

She stiffened and tried to move away, but he held her hips, anchoring her in place. Her heart tumbled over painfully inside his chest. “Perhaps one day,” she said.

Alexander cupped her face and brushed his mouth against hers. He did not use words to tell her she could trust him even with her darkest secrets, only kisses and gentle touches. She melted against him, flowing with his direction to wrap her legs around his waist. One of his hands brushed lightly over the curve of her hips, then delved underneath the water and the space between her thighs, finding a spot so sensitive that she gasped. He notched his cock at her already slick entrance.

“Hold me tight, and do not let me go, Francie,” he whispered roughly against her well-kissed and swollen lips.

Why did she feel as if he spoke beyond this moment? She tightened her

arms around his nape and held on when he gripped her hips and dragged her down even as his hips surged upward. His hard and deep possession made her sex ache, but it also felt glorious. They moved passionately, the water lapping around their bodies. Each desperate stroke pushed Francie closer and closer to bliss. She sank her teeth into the muscle of his shoulder as exquisite sensations sliced through her body, and the tight coil in her belly broke as waves of pleasure shook her. He groaned, thrusting his fingers through her wet hair to slant his mouth over hers with lustful greed. Alexander kissed her deeply, his other hand wrapped tightly around her back as he poured his release deep inside her body.

Their coupling was fast and wild, very different from the leisurely way he had taken her to pleasure in the cottage. He broke their kiss and stared at her. “Did I hurt you?”

“No,” she said softly, her cheeks heating.

He eased from her body, and she leaned against his chest. Francie laughed when he dropped back into the water, floating with her laying atop him. They stayed like that for a long time before a yawn caught her by surprise.

“Let’s go back inside. I will cook for you,” he murmured.

“Another stew?”

“I will roast a quail.”

Finally, they swam back to the banking, and he helped her from the water. Alexander clasped their fingers together and tugged her toward the cottage.

“I ... I must go home,” she said.

He peered down at her. “Stay with me for another night. Or I can stay with you at your cottage.”

She was suddenly filled with a desperate longing that threatened to overwhelm her good sense. “I have a cook and a maid.”

“Ah, the dreaded fear of servants’ gossip. Even so buried in the

countryside, they have such powers.”

Francie bit into her lower lip. “Yes.”

“Stay with me.”

“It was meant to be one night,” she whispered.

“Is that enough for you?”

Her heart jerked, and something hot and turbulent went through her body.

“No.”

A slow, lazy smile swept across his face. “It is not enough for me either, Francie.”

He laced his fingers through hers, his thumb stroking across her palm. Her throat tight with emotions, she held his hands as they went inside his cottage. One more night, she promised herself, and then she would leave for London and resolve never to see him again.

CHAPTER 7



F rancie's stray strands of hair had somehow made their way into Alexander's mouth. With a smile, he delicately removed the few errant locks, taking care not to wake her as he gently shifted her off his shoulders. Despite his caution, she stirred, muttering a vague protest as though aggrieved by the disruption of her peaceful slumber.

For a long moment, Alexander found himself captivated by her sleeping form. His heart pounded in his chest, fueled by an awareness so intense it felt almost like physical heat. It was her, and the realization washed over him with the finality of an irrefutable truth—it could be no one else.

Sure, there were mysteries yet to unravel, depths of personality and layers of experience that they had yet to explore in one another. But as he watched her sleep, he was consumed by a comforting thought—they had an entire lifetime ahead to dig deep, to learn, to challenge, and to grow together with shared moments of passion and laughter. He would not allow her to leave without knowing his feelings and his family's background. Perhaps then she would open up to him about the sadness in her eyes.

The distant clatter of carriage wheels grew increasingly louder, causing Alexander to frown. He wasn't expecting any visitors, and only a select few—primarily his family—were privy to the fact that he occasionally sought refuge in this secluded cottage to escape the clamor and demands of his daily

life.

Careful not to disturb Francie, who lay entangled in the sheets, her face a portrait of serene sleep, Alexander eased himself out of the bed. He swiftly pulled on his trousers and moved stealthily, his feet making minimal contact with the wooden floor as he approached the front door of his rustic hideaway.

As he opened the door, he was greeted by the sight of a grand carriage parked just beyond the threshold. The vehicle bore his family's emblem, and a team of four strong horses stood at the ready, their breath visible in the cool air. Almost immediately, his brother descended from the carriage, alighting onto the ground with an air of urgency.

The unexpected arrival of his brother signaled that something significant was afoot. While part of him was annoyed at the intrusion into this time with Francie, another part couldn't help but feel a surge of curiosity and concern. What could be so important as to warrant such an abrupt visit? Thankfully, his brother did not seem overly worried.

Alexander closed the door. "What are you doing here, James? Is all well with Mother and Henrietta?"

His brother arched a brow and pointedly stared at the door Alexander closed behind him. Of course, he would not allow his brother inside the cottage, especially when Francie still deeply slept, exhausted from their night of glorious excess. His brother reached into a satchel he carried on his shoulder and removed a folded piece of paper. He came forward and held them out to Alexander.

"What is this?"

"The report you wanted on Lady Francie Walcott."

Alexander stiffened. "*Lady?*"

"Yes," his brother said tightly. "A lady."

Naturally, Alexander should have recognized that she was a lady. It had been evident in the very fabric of her behavior. Her manners were impeccable, each gesture executed with a grace that spoke volumes. And then

there was her walk—a unique blend of poise and sensuality that commanded his attention without demanding it.

Silver eyes, very much like his own, narrowed. “I thought it a mere slip when you asked for information on Miss Francie Walcott. She is the daughter of an earl. Her brother is the current Earl of Blade.”

Alexander looked behind him at the door. She was the daughter of an earl. A wide smile touched his mouth.

“Do not think it,” his younger brother warned. “There is a reason I traveled to meet you instead of waiting for you to come to town and see this report. The lady is not suitable!”

“You do not know what I think in regard to her,” he said icily. “Do not be presumptuous.”

“I will damn well be presumptuous. Clearly, you did not re-read the letter you sent. You extolled her beauty and wit and smiles for the entire damn page. I had to hasten here to warn you that her reputation is sullied beyond repair, and you cannot associate with such a lady.”

A cold feeling lodged inside his chest. “What did you say?”

“She is damn well ruined. She left a huge scandal in town and—”

A sound from beyond the door froze him and cut off James’s words.

“Someone is here?” James said, his expression a mask of astonishment. “This cottage is your treasured space. You have never taken anyone here ...”

“Wait here,” Alexander commanded, opened the door, and went inside.

His lover stood there, her bare toes curled onto the wooden floor. Francie’s lips were delightfully swollen from his kisses, and her dress seemed as if it was hastily put on.

“You are awake,” he said gruffly.

“Yes. Who were you speaking with just now?”

Alexander stilled and stared at her. Her eyes were wide and had a vulnerable and heartbreaking look. They also burned with unshed tears and mistrust. *Bloody hell*. She heard their conversation. Alexander raked his

fingers through his hair. “It is my brother, James. Francie—”

“He was speaking about me.”

“Yes.”

“You investigated me?”

He took a steady breath. He would not lie to her. “Yes.”

She clasped her arms across her middle as if they were the only things holding her together. He could see the curl of fright in her eyes and something more unfathomable. “You know about my scandal and that I am irrevocably ruined in society’s eyes.”

“Yes.”

A low sound of hurt came from her, and he closed his eyes. “Francie—”

“If you wanted to know something about me, Mr. Crawford, you only needed to ask! Not pry into my private life.”

He raked his fingers through his hair. “The information gathered was mostly public knowledge. My man would not have deeply intruded in your life.”

She flinched, and he silently cursed. He was making a mess. “Allow me to explain—”

She tossed him a glare of such anger and hurt that his words died away. Francie rushed to pluck up her shoes, then hurtled by him as if the devil chased her. Once outside, without acknowledging his shocked brother, she ran down the few steps and into the woods like a gazelle.

“Francie!” Alexander chased after her.

“Xander,” his brother shouted, calling him by his monicker.

Alexander ignored his brother, sprinting down the muddy path toward his lover. He slipped, virulently cursing when he dropped on his arse into the mud, splatters landing on his naked chest.

Francie froze, glancing over her shoulder, indecision flashing in her eyes.

“Please do not chase me,” she said, her voice carrying clearly to him. “It does not matter if you investigated me. Now you know about my disgrace.”

This ... whatever we shared has happened, and I must move on. Thank you for all our incredible moments. I ... they were wonderful, and I would not trade them for anything.”

“Do not leave.”

Her expression crumbled for a moment. “I am going to London because I am to marry soon.”

Shock stabbed his heart. “You are engaged?”

“Yes,” she said after a moment’s hesitation, whirled around and rushed away.

I received a letter from my mother today, summoning me to London. Understanding of why she chose those words dawned on him. It was the way of society to render ruined young ladies respectable with arranged marriages. Francie's family had arranged her marriage, and now their time of bliss had come to an end. Anger and denial roared through Alexander, and he pushed to his feet. *Francie.* Her name was a silent whisper of hunger in his thoughts. Though he wanted to, he did not chase her any further. His heart drummed as he went back to his brother, who watched him with a stupefied expression in his eyes.

“You were just chasing a lady,” James said incredulously.

“Tell me everything you learned about Lady Francie,” Alexander said tightly, ignoring everything else.

James’s eyes widened, and he looked off into the woodland. “Was that *her?*”

“James!”

His brother’s eyes flashed with blatant disapproval. “I do hope it is not her.”

“Why the hell does it matter?” he snapped.

“Because I have never seen you look at a lady like that before, much less chase after her. And if that woman is Lady Francie, let me assure you, brother, you absolutely cannot marry her. Our mother would faint at the very

notion.”

Everything inside him stilled. “Are you presuming to tell me what I can do?”

His brother sighed. “The rumor says the lady is already married.”

The shock of those words was like a punch in Alexander’s gut. Instantly, he dismissed those assertions. He clenched his jaw tightly and did his damndest to retain his composure. “She is not.”

“I tell you that she is!” James waved the sheaf of paper. “It is all here from what I have gathered. Read it.”

Alexander took the papers, but instead of looking through them, he tore them into several small pieces.

“What are you doing?”

“I should not have damn well asked you to pry into her life. Whatever is there is clearly painful, and I should have been more patient. I wanted to know her background, to see if she was suitable to be my wife, and that is why I foolishly asked you to have her investigated. I should have damn well waited and allowed for her to tell me what she wants me to know.”

“Most of what is there is all public knowledge,” James said tightly. “Her brother is the powerful Earl of Blade. Even with his influence, he has not been able to suppress the rumors and scandal attached to her name. You did nothing wrong, and now you know she cannot become your duchess. The rumor is that no one would have her, even with her brother’s connections.”

Now he understood the wistfulness, hunger, and sadness he saw in her eyes when she watched the children playing in the village square. Almost all young ladies of society entered the marriage mart to find a husband and build their own family. His sister Henrietta often dreamed about her debut in society and the match she would one day make. How it must have pained Francie’s heart to have that future ripped away in a cloud of scandal. The *ton* could be ridiculous in how they examined and dissected those they believed offended their sensibilities.

He recalled that she said a friend betrayed her, and Alexander suspected it had to do with her ruination. By God, how she must have been deeply wounded. A tight feeling twisted in his chest, and an odd sense of urgency pushed Alexander. “I need to return to London right away. There can be no delays.”

“By God, do not say you are still chasing her!” James said. “Who are you? Where is the cold, proud fellow that I know and love?”

Ignoring his brother, Alexander rushed inside to dress properly for the journey ahead. He did not care about her scandal. He only cared that he did not lose this woman from his life.



ONLY AN HOUR after reaching back to her cottage, Francie had asked for the carriage her brother provided for her use to be ready. After a hasty bath, she departed from the small, idyllic village she had been obscurely living in for almost two years. Her throat burning with unshed tears, she lowered the carriage curtains and stopped looking behind her. While her presence had been somewhat of a mystery to the residents, Francie had lived without undue scrutiny and speculation into her life. She had even formed a few odd friendships.

Francie had always kept back a part of herself, fearing to reveal she was the daughter of an earl and had powerful connections to high society.

Well, now he knows ... and that I am considered a disgrace.

Several times she had grappled with telling Alexander and Mrs. Benton and a few others. It was likely that her neighbors would have grasped the circumstances of her situation, as it was a common practice for daughters of high society who had faced scandal to be exiled to the countryside until their indiscretions faded from public memory. Alternatively, they might regain their standing by marrying someone influential, compelling society to

reluctantly overlook their past errors.

Perhaps she would never have told Alexander about the scandal. After all, they were not from the same world. She frowned. Then how had he learned about it? Francie leaned against the squabs, wondering why she felt so wretched and mortified that Alexander had learned about her past. Why did she feel this sense of betrayal that he had pried into her privacy? Worse, why did she feel so mortified that he knew she was ruined? She swiped the tears that ran down her cheeks, hating the sense of hollowness creeping through her heart.

Was I silly to run away without hearing his explanation? What if....

Francie bit into her lower lip. What would be the use of wishing for things that were impossible? It was already a miracle the Earl of Beresford was willing to overlook her tarnished reputation. Her brother had expended great effort to restore the honor of the Blade title after the multiple scandals the previous earls created. Many had wagered among themselves that Tobias would also be a disgrace to the title. But he had surprised everyone, and soon their respect had grown.

It was Francie who had disappointed his hard work and created a scandal of such magnitude it felt as if she could never recover from it.

Oh, why had I been so foolish to elope?

CHAPTER 8



The grand ballroom of Marchioness Darnley was a dazzling tableau of splendor and sophistication. A sea of glittering gowns and finely tailored suits filled the expansive space, moving in intricate patterns around the polished marble floor as couples danced. The evening would undoubtedly be hailed as a crowning success for the Marchioness. Her standing as a premier hostess would be cemented, and invitations to her future events would become even more coveted.

This was Francie's first ball since her return to London. As she navigated through the throng of people, she couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by the sensory overload. The air had grown thick and oppressive, almost as if the atmosphere was saturated with the weight of luxury and excess. The mingling fragrances of lavender, rose, and bergamot. A dozen other scents swirled around her, each perfume vying for dominance in a battle that seemed to materialize at the back of her nostrils, threatening an imminent sneeze.

The press of bodies made the room uncomfortably warm, and she felt a thin layer of perspiration forming on her back and temples. Occasionally, she caught snippets of conversation that were as perfumed as the air—polite platitudes, social niceties, and rehearsed flattery that seldom veered toward genuine sentiment.

Francie stood on the sidelines, wishing she was back in Derbyshire with

Alexander and Samson. At his cottage, she had felt unburdened by social pretense. She felt oddly disconnected amidst all the glamour and extravagance—like a spectator in a theatre, watching a grand spectacle unfold but not feeling part of it.

This was all a part of her mother's plan to assimilate back into society's fold. A place Francie had hungered to be since her reckless elopement was leaked to gossipmongers. Yet this life ... it did not feel like it belonged to her anymore.

A good number of her erstwhile friends now conspicuously snubbed her, going out of their way to publicly display their disapproval to invite gossip from onlookers. The experience was both wearying and irksome, made all the more painful by the memory of how these women had once greeted her with genuine warmth, only to now turn their backs in frosty disdain.

"You are sad," a soft voice murmured.

Smiling, Francie turned to face her sister-in-law, Lizzie, the Countess of Blade. She was resplendent in a dark golden gown, her red hair piled atop her head in a riot of becoming curls.

"Oh, Lizzie, I have missed you," she murmured.

"You need not have missed us," Lizzie said in her forthright manner. "Tobias and I invited you to live with us, and you refused!"

Francie sighed. "The scandal—"

"Hang the scandal! Have you forgotten that Tobias once tossed me over his shoulders and walked with me that way from a crowded ballroom? We are already infamous."

Francie smiled and did not bother to protest that a scandal attached to a gentleman in comparison to one attached to a lady carried vastly different consequences.

"The Duke of Merrick!"

The announcement echoed through the ballroom, eliciting a buzz of excited whispers among the attendees. The men straightened their posture

while the ladies fluttered their fans more vigorously, each speculating what could have brought the duke to this event.

“Why is everyone suddenly restless?” Francie asked.

“Hmm,” Lizzie said, elegantly unfurling her fan to hide a knowing smile. “Society’s most elusive and sought-after duke has decided to grace us with his presence, has he?”

“Why is he reclusive?” Francie inquired, her eyebrows arching with curiosity.

“The duke is a complicated man, it seems, or so the whispers say,” Lizzie explained, leaning in as if sharing a secret. “You’ve been in Derbyshire, so you would not be familiar with him. He’s an incredibly handsome man, the kind that has young ladies practically hurling their handkerchiefs at his feet in hopes he might retrieve them and grant them a dance. But he’s notoriously cold and aloof; the man rarely, if ever, dances at these events. So, one does have to wonder—what brings him here tonight?”

Just as Lizzie finished her sentence, a tangible ripple of gossip surged through the crowd. As much as she wanted to consider herself above such idle chatter, Francie couldn’t resist the temptation. She craned her neck subtly, trying to get a glimpse of the man who had stirred such excitement. And there he was, stepping into the room as if he owned it, capturing the attention of every eye yet seemingly indifferent to the collective gaze. His clothes were faultlessly tailored to his lean, graceful physique, and he cut quite a dashing figure in his black trousers, well-fitted matching jacket, and an exquisitely designed silver and blue waistcoat. Midnight black hair complimented his lean, strong features, and unfathomable silver eyes scanned the crowd.

“Oh my,” a lady Francie recognized as Lady Clara murmured admiringly, “He is quite handsome, isn’t he?”

A wave of confusion swept over Francie, momentarily clouding her thoughts. It took several heartbeats for her to accept that Mr. Alexander

Crawford, the man she'd given her body and love, was none other than the elusive Duke of Merrick. Emotions swirled within her—alarm and hurt being the most prominent, burning in her chest like hot coals.

Why would he hide his identity?

Before she could spiral further into her thoughts, she caught herself.

Have I not done the same? Have I not kept my own secrets?

Yes, she had withheld parts of herself from him for reasons she considered valid. Could she then blame him for doing the same? Perhaps Alexander had his reasons, just as she had hers. And yet, despite this rational line of thought, a lingering sense of hurt refused to dissipate entirely.

Francie realized everything she thought she knew about Mr. Crawford—or should she say, the Duke of Merrick—had irrevocably changed in just a few moments. The ground beneath her seemed to shift, throwing into question everything Francie thought she understood about Alexander.

I know you, she had said to him. But did she really?

A duke lived in grand townhouses and country estates with grand halls, gilded mirrors, elaborate tapestries, and a battalion of servants ready to cater to every whim. His cottage appeared like a humble dwelling, the interior adorned with simple yet elegant rustic furniture and rugs. It was cozy and inviting but startlingly simple for a duke.

Even there in the country, in her modest cottage, she maintained a staff—a cook, a housemaid, and a footman. The duke and his loyal companion, Samson, appeared to manage everything themselves.

He even cooked and baked for me.

Her heart pounded so hard she felt faint. Francie knew firsthand that nobility carried its share of responsibilities. Estates had to be managed, tithes collected, and workers paid. Then there was the matter of politics—the never-ending game of alliances, rivalries, and appearances that needed to be maintained. As a member of the House of Lords, the duke would be involved in legislative affairs, drafting and voting on various bills and motions. The

demands on his time should have been unyielding.

So how could he afford to sequester himself away in a secluded corner of Derbyshire, far removed from the hustle and bustle of London?

And he cooked for me.

Francie simply could not recover from her astonishment. Perhaps it was Alexander's capacity to live humbly, to distance himself from the distractions of high society, that made him seem so shockingly fascinating, more so than usual. She did not know this cold, arrogant gentleman Lizzie mentioned. Only the tender and passionate lover and friend. Suddenly Francie wanted to know *everything* about him. Sorrow clutched her throat, for she knew it would be impossible.

"You are shaking, Francie," Lizzie said worriedly.

"I need to leave," she said.

At that moment, her gaze collided with the duke, and Francie squeezed the champagne glass tightly.

"Good heavens, I will take this," her sister-in-law muttered, prying the champagne glass from her hand.

The gentleman beside the duke Francie recognized as his brother. Their resemblance was striking. She swallowed tightly. Now that he knew the full damage to her reputation, what would he think? Francie bit her lower lip until it ached when he turned away. There had been nothing tender or familiar in his gaze.

"Are you well?" her mother asked sharply, walking over to stand beside her. "You've gone pale."

"A slight headache, Mama," she murmured.

"Stiffen your spine and bear it," the dowager countess said. "Lord Beresford will arrive soon. You are to dance two dances with him. This will signal to society there is something more there, and you are not totally ruined."

Lizzie's eyes flashed with anger, and Francie subtly shook her head. Her

sister-in-law was fiery and outspoken, but Francie wanted to fight her own battles. She would also choose the ones she would fight. Francie felt brittle as if the slightest motion would cause her to shatter. She could not understand why her heart ached in this manner.

“The duke is coming over,” Lizzie gasped, her eyes widening.

“Why?” Francie choked out, anxiousness searing her entire body.

The dowager duchess’s lips pursed, and she frowned. As he drew closer, Francie became painfully aware that his gaze was wholly on her. Alexander stared at her with such naked longing and tenderness that she felt faint. The stutter of her heart drowned out the ballroom noise.

The duke stopped before them, his presence drawing much attention in the bustling ballroom. With an air of smooth elegance, he executed a flawless bow before Francie’s mother and Lizzie.

“Lady Blade,” he said, directing his courteous salutation to her mother. Turning to Lizzie, he continued, “Countess Blade.”

Formalities were smoothly reciprocated, and then his gaze fell solely upon Francie, capturing her attention as if they were the only two people in the room.

“Lady Francie,” he began, his voice resonant yet intimate, “would you do me the honor of sharing the next dance with me? I have heard from reliable sources that it will be a waltz.”

A collective murmur rippled through the crowd, punctuated by a few audible gasps. In the backdrop of this social theater, Francie saw her mother’s eyes widen momentarily, her brows lifting in silent inquiry. How could her daughter be acquainted with a duke, her expression seemed to ask.

However, Francie could only stare at Alexander’s unfathomable expression. Was it mere kindness or more? Francie knew she couldn’t decline a dance with a man of his rank, not without causing a stir. More importantly, she didn’t want to. His invitation presented an unexpected but fortuitous opportunity. Accepting it would not only silence the wagging tongues but

also confer upon her a kind of social vindication that was desperately needed at this juncture.

With a heart pounding both from anticipation and the weight of the moment, Francie dipped into a curtsy and rose on unsteady legs. “Your Grace, it would be my pleasure to join you for the waltz.”

Her mother recovered from her surprise and beamed approvingly. The duke held out his arms. Her fingers, which were lightly resting on his sleeve, trembled. As they made their way to the dance floor, the gaze of the *ton* crawled over her skin like ants, but at this moment, Francie did not care. The waltz started, and they started to soar across the expanse of the ballroom. His touch was warm, reassuring, and felt so right.

“You are a duke,” she said.

“You are a lady.”

Was there anymore to say?”

“You look beautiful, Francie.”

She snapped her gaze to his, her heart shaking at the emotions brightening his silver gaze.

“My brother mentioned that you are married.”

She jerked.

“I did not believe it for a moment because the woman you are is loyal and values trust and fidelity. You would not break your vows.”

Francie trembled, but he kept her moving, and the *ton* who looked so determinedly at her waiting for a mistake did not see.

The strength of his trust in her humbled her, and her eyes pricked with tears. “Thank you, Alexander.”

“Never thank me for trusting you. You are my treasure, and it is what I should do. I love you, Francie.”

This time the sob tore from her, and she struggled to keep a calm composure.

“I knew it months ago, but you seem so wounded I wanted to give you

time. I was wrong for investigating you. I was too impatient, and in my haste, I wounded you. I did not read the report my brother brought, and I do not know the full truth of your scandal. It does not matter because it has no bearing on how I feel about you or what I want more than anything else, which is to marry you.”

Shocking tears coursed down her cheeks, and from the frantic look on her mother’s face, it was evident for everyone to see and speculate upon. Even Lizzie, who watched from the sidelines, seemed worried.

“If you will permit me to announce our engagement tonight, I will make a request of the marchioness.”

“That will start a scandal,” she said shakily.

“I am a duke,” he said arrogantly. “I can shelter us from any scandal. They will merely wonder where we met, and any fool can see that I am damn well in love with you.”

“I love you, too, Alexander, so very much,” she said shakily. “I want ... I want a courtship for a few weeks. Then I want a grand wedding in Hanover Square.”

His silver eyes gleamed with pleasure. “Done. However, I ask that you marry me by special license in a couple days. We will keep it secret from the world, and then we will have a grand wedding.”

Francie smiled as he twirled her around. “Why?” she asked when he drew her close again.

“I do not want you to slip from me.”

Her heart twisted. “I promise you it is not possible. I love you. But I want you to wait ... for you to woo me and understand my scandal so you do not regret choosing me.”

“Have you murdered someone?”

Horrified, she said, “No.”

“I would still marry you even if you were a murderess, so that is solved.”

Francie giggled, then sobered. “I ... a few years ago, I ran away with my

brother's steward to Gretna Green. We got married over the anvil ... and I thought we were married. I spent a night alone with him in a cottage before my brother found us."

He lifted a brow. "You were a virgin, my love."

She blushed and glared at him, to which he ruefully smiled.

"That I spent the night alone with him under the same roof was enough to ruin me. I truly cared for him and was excited at the notion of being his wife. Luckily, I was not very passionate about our few kisses to consummate our marriage. I wanted to wait until after a proper wedding before a priest. He hurt his ankle and was not very persistent in seduction hence our union was not consummated. My brother found us ... and ..."

Her words broke off, and they danced for a few beats in silence.

"You do not have to speak about it, Francie."

"I just feel mortified about how silly I was and the mess I created," she said softly. "The man I eloped with was already married, and the marriage was fake."

"That cowardly snake," Alexander snapped.

"What devastated me was knowing I could have been so wrong about his character. I thought he was smart and compassionate, but a kind man could not have left his sick wife alone to care for their children while he pretended to wed another."

"Ah, Francie, I am so damn sorry."

"What hurt more was that I shared these pains with a friend ... and within a few days, the whispers started. She betrayed my confidence and gossiped about me. The scandal was so terrible there was even a mention in the scandal sheets. Though my brother rallied around me, the wagging tongues would not cease, and I grew discomfited whenever I ventured out. My mother had no choice but to send me away."

"Wrong," he said, a dangerous glint in his eyes. "She should have used the force of her reputation and influence to protect you at all costs. I will not

forgive those who hurt you.”

She smiled tenderly at him. “Would you have fallen in love with me if we met in society?”

He frowned, then he smiled down at her. “Yes.”

His surety shocked her, and happiness swelled inside Francie’s chest.

“I am sorry I did not tell you of my background.”

“I did not tell you of mine either, Alexander. How can there be sorrows between us? We have a lifetime to learn everything about each other.”

“By God, I want to kiss you so badly.”

Francie laughed.

“Finally,” Alexander said.

“What?”

“There are no more shadows in your eyes.

A lump grew in her throat. “I love you so.”

Their dance ended, and he escorted her over to her mother’s side.

“Lady Blade, your daughter has made me the happiest man by consenting to be my duchess. I wanted to importune on the marchioness to make an announcement of our recent engagement; however, Lady Francie would much prefer a public show of wooing. I shall call upon her brother tomorrow to make the necessary arrangements.”

Her mother’s lips parted in shock, and no words emerged. A light, airy laugh escaped Lizzie, and she winked at Francie, leaned close and whispered, “You must call upon me tomorrow and tell me how you both met.”

Biting back her smile, she nodded enthusiastically, wanting to scream her happiness.

The orchestra began the opening strains of another waltz. Taking Alexander’s proffered hand, she stepped onto the dance floor, her eyes lifting to meet his. What she found there mirrored the depth of her own feelings—tenderness and deep love. They began to move, and it was as though Francie was floating. Their connection did not go unnoticed. An unmistakable

murmur spread across the ballroom. Eyes widened, eyebrows lifted, and several fans fluttered faster in the hands of astonished ladies. Even without a formal declaration, the room seemed to grasp a startling but increasingly obvious reality—the elusive Duke of Merrick, long considered one of society’s most elusive catches, had found his match.

Francie was acutely aware of the stir they had caused, yet she found that she cared very little for the speculation and the gossip. For once, public opinion held no sway over her happiness. All that mattered was the man whose arms were securely around her, whose eyes spoke volumes, and whose presence filled her world. As the final chords of the waltz filled the air, she felt a sense of completeness she had never thought possible, knowing deep down that her life had just turned an irrevocably wonderful corner.

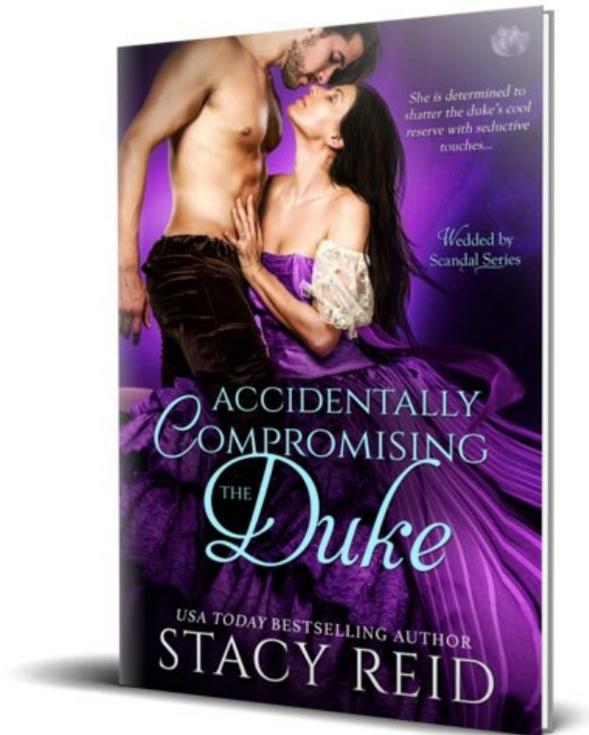


THANK you for reading Alexander and Francie’s journey to Happy Ever After. If you enjoyed their story, please add to my pot of gold by leaving a review on Amazon or Goodreads.

Love,

Stacy

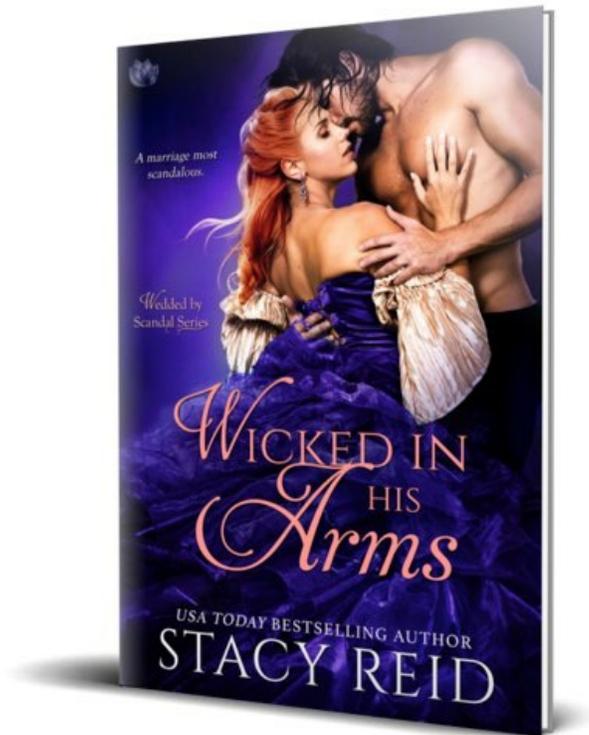
Explore the companion series *Wedded by Scandal...*



Accidentally Compromising the Duke

England, 1817. Miss Adeline Hays is out of options. Determined to escape marriage to a repugnant earl, Adeline plans to deliberately allow herself to be caught in a compromising position at a house party with the much kinder man she'd hoped to marry. Instead, Adeline accidentally enters the wrong chamber and tumbles into the bed of the mad duke.

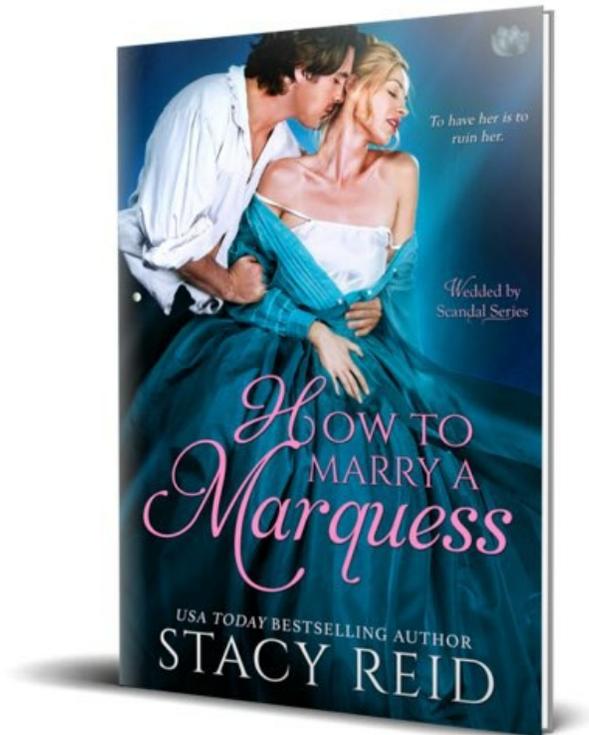
Edmond Rochester, the duke of Wolverton, is seeking a wife to care for his two daughters. A young lady of sensibilities, accomplishment, and most importantly, one who he is not attracted to—a complete opposite of the bewitching beauty who traps him into marriage. But despite the lust he feels for his new duchess, Edmond is resolved to never allow them intimacy, refusing to ever again suffer the tormenting loss of a loved one.



Wicked in His Arms

TOBIAS WALCOTT, the Earl of Blade, has learned it is best to exercise rigid control over his passions and emotions in all that he does. Uncaring that it makes him seem cool and aloof to most in the ton, he is content with his desire to only woo agreeable and demur females. Then unforeseen circumstances see him trapped in a closet at a house party with the last woman he would ever make his countess.

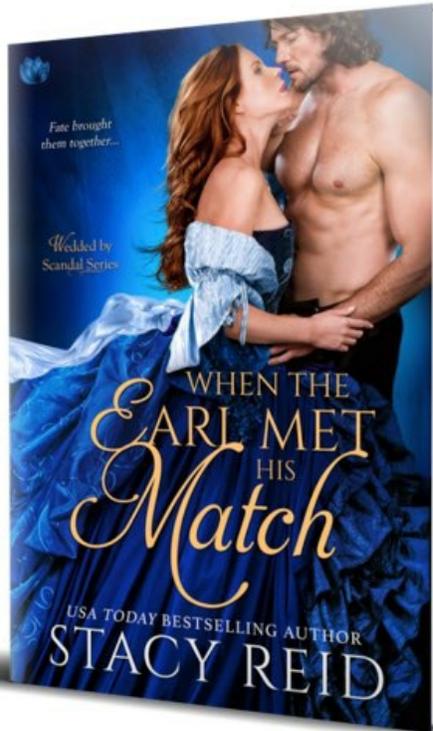
Lady Olivia Sherwood is everything he should not desire in a female—unconventional, too decisive, and utterly without decorum. But passion ignites between them and they are discovered. Honor demands they wed, and while Tobias finds himself unwillingly drawn to the bewitching beauty, he must do everything not to tempt the passion that burns in him for her, lest it leads to disastrous consequences.



How to Marry a Marquess

Lady Evie Chesterfield is a darling of the ton who refuses to become engaged. She's been desperately in love with her brother's friend, Richard Maitland, Marquess of Westfall, since forever. But the dark, dangerous marquess only sees her as a friend and refuses to marry any woman. When circumstances change and Evie has no choice but to take a husband, she decides to convince London's most notorious gentleman to marry her by seducing the scoundrel.

Richard Maitland decided long ago that he wanted nothing to do with love. So when the gorgeous, off-limits Evie asks him for lessons in seduction, Richard knows he's playing with fire. Despite Richard's determination to protect her from his dastardly reputation, he is tested at every turn by his need for the infuriating, but enticing, Lady Evie. Before too long he is faced with making an impossible choice...



When the Earl Met His Match

When Hugh Winthrop, the future Earl of Albury, decides to advertise for a wife in the London paper, he never expected an anonymous response from a woman who matches him wit for wit. Their back-and-forth letters on the true nature of love, something they disagree on wholeheartedly, leave him shocked—and intrigued. But then the woman he’s been corresponding with shows up on his doorstep, enticingly beautiful and offering a marriage of convenience in exchange for his protection...

Lady Phoebe Maitland expected to marry for love and nothing else, until the man she gave her trust betrayed her. The more intrigued she becomes by the mysterious and devastatingly handsome Hugh, however, the more she realizes he’s holding back from opening his heart due to long-held secrets she struggles to understand. As passion flares wickedly between them, their marriage bed is quick to heat up. But when Phoebe’s past threatens to destroy the fragile bond they’ve formed, even a budding belief in love might not be

enough to save them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank God every day for my family, friends, and my writing. A special thank you to my husband. I love you so hard! You encourage me to dream and are always faithful in your incredible support. You read all my drafts, offer such amazing insight and encouragement. Thank you for designing my fabulous cover! Thank you for reminding me I am a warrior when I wanted to give up on so many things.

Readers, thank you for giving me a chance and reading my book!

Thank you!

Stacy

ABOUT STACY

Stacy Reid writes sensual Historical and Paranormal Romances and is the published author of over sixteen books. Her debut novella *The Duke's Shotgun Wedding* was a 2015 HOLT Award of Merit recipient in the Romance Novella category, and her bestselling *Wedded by Scandal* series is recommended as Top picks at Night Owl Reviews, Fresh Fiction Reviews, and The Romance Reviews.

Stacy lives a lot in the worlds she creates and actively speaks to her characters (aloud). She has a warrior way “Never give up on dreams!” When she’s not writing, Stacy spends a copious amount of time binge-watching series like *The Walking Dead*, *Homeland*, *Altered Carbon*, watching Japanese Anime and playing video games with her love. She also has a weakness for ice cream and will have it as her main course.

I am always happy to hear from readers and would love to connect with you via my [Website](#), [Facebook](#), and [Twitter](#). To be the first to hear about my new releases, get cover reveals, and excerpts you won’t find anywhere else, sign up for my [newsletter](#), or join me over at [Historical Hellions](#), the fan group for my historical romance author friends, and I!

