



A
Mistress
FOR
Christmas

JILLIAN EATON

A Mistress for Christmas

a spicy holiday romance

by Jillian Eaton

*This Christmas, the Earl of Wilshire is about to be seduced by the one woman
he cannot resist...his own wife!*

Consumed with work, Nicholas never leaves his study. Busy with her charitable causes, Lavinia rarely makes it home for dinner. What began as a love match that charmed the entire Ton has turned into a marriage between two strangers.

But Lavinia isn't ready to give up on the only man to make her pulse race and her toes curl. If Nicholas won't come to her, then she'll go to him...with a most unusual proposal!

Seven snowy days.

Six sultry nights.

If Nicholas cannot choose between his ledgers and Lavinia by Christmas Eve, then their marriage is truly over. But the Countess of Wilshire has a few tricks up her sleeve...or should we say skirts? This holiday season, one thing is certain: it's about to get hot.

A Mistress for Christmas is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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CHAPTER ONE



LAVINIA HALIFAX, COUNTESS OF WILSHIRE, sipped her wine and watched the snow fall. Light from the lamp posts lining the quiet Mayfair street reflected off the individual flakes, making them sparkle like white diamonds. Unconsciously, she ran her fingertips along the diamond necklace that she wore. A gift from her husband, Nicholas Halifax, the Earl of Wilshire.

She searched her memory for what occasion had prompted such an expensive gift. The jeweled pendant that rested in the hollow of her throat was the size of a silver schilling. An anniversary, perhaps? They'd been married five years this past October. A birthday? She'd turned seven and twenty in May. Or perhaps it was one of a hundred presents she'd found waiting for her on her pillow when she turned in for the night and her husband remained locked away in his study, pouring over his precious ledgers instead of making love to his wife.

Yes. That was it. Furs were for anniversaries, sapphires were for birthdays, but diamonds...diamonds were for appeasement. *I cannot be with you, but warm yourself with this beautiful choker, or bracelet, or tiara.* A tad ironic, as diamonds were widely considered to be the coldest of all gemstones. Then again, Nicholas wasn't exactly renowned for his romantic gestures.

On a quiet sigh, Lavinia took another sip of dark red claret and turned toward the room. Nearly fifty people, all members of the Grosvenor Square Society for the Betterment of Orphaned Youth and Widowed Women (she'd twice suggested a shorter name, and twice been voted down), were in attendance for the evening's fundraiser: a charitable dinner that had cost eighty pounds a plate. A small fortune for some, but a mere pittance for tonight's crowd, an exclusive who's who of High Society.

Lavinia had served as co-chairperson (a position that she reluctantly shared

with Lady Gertrude Godshall) of the Grosvenor Square Society for the Betterment of Orphaned Youth and Widowed Women for nearly a full year. Under her stewardship, the society had funded a new orphanage and gotten more than twenty widows and their children off the streets and into reputable boarding houses. She'd have liked to have done even more, but the Grosvenor Square Society for the Betterment of Orphaned Youth and Widowed Women was as much a political organization as it was a charitable one. Just taking a vote to shorten the name had involved months of petitioning, and then in the end it was all for naught. Lady Godshall had withheld her vote at the last minute and the measure had failed, much to Lavinia's annoyance, as she was the co-chairperson responsible for signing invitations to events such as this one.

How many times could a person write *Grosvenor Square Society for the Betterment of Orphaned Youth and Widowed Women* before they snapped their quill pen in half and threw the ink pot across the room in a fit of frustration?

Thirty-two, she'd discovered.

The number was thirty-two.

Finishing her wine, Lavinia snatched a second glass off the tray of a passing servant. Aside from her fashion, she normally wasn't prone to overindulgence. But what did it matter if she arrived home a bit wobbly on her feet? It wasn't as if Nicholas would be there to notice. Or if he *was* in residence, he'd almost surely be in his study with the door closed.

Not locked.

He never locked it, a point that he liked to make whenever they'd argue.

"I haven't seen you in a week, Nicholas! You're always in your study."

"You may enter whenever you'd care to, Nia. The door isn't locked."

The door isn't locked.

The door isn't *locked*.

As if it was *her* fault that during the span of their marriage, he'd spent more time in that bloody study of his than he had their bedroom. As if all she had to do to fix everything that was broken was to open a damned door. But they both knew, whether they chose to acknowledge it or not, that a lot more than a few inches of wood and a brass knob separated them. The divide was

as long and wide as a chasm...and Lavinia had long ago wearied of trying to build a bridge to cross it.

“Has the wine turned?” asked Lady Vanessa Maxwell, sidling up beside Lavinia and peering into her glass. A perfectly plump blonde with matching dimples and a cheerful disposition, Vanessa possessed a loathing equal to Lavinia’s for Lady Godshall’s domineering ways that had made them instant friends at last year’s benefit ball for—oh, heavens. She wasn’t going to spell it out again. Suffice it to say, the two women got along splendidly.

“No, the wine is fine.” To prove it, Lavinia took another sip. “Why do you ask?”

“Your face. It was all puckered.”

After casting a covert glance around the room to ensure there were no eavesdroppers present, she lowered her voice and said, “I was thinking about Nicholas.”

“Ah,” said Vanessa, nodding. “I see.”

To the outside world, the Earl and Countess of Wilshire were the ideal couple, and Lavinia took great pains to keep it that way. In a society that valued gossip as much as it did fortune, one could not afford to have their name besmirched. And nothing besmirched a name faster than whispers of marital discord.

Affairs, bastard children, separate households...those were all well and good, so long as the husband and wife presented a united front in *public*. But if that façade showed a crack, however thin, it wouldn’t be long before the vultures found their way in. Vultures that would coo with sympathy even as they raised a dagger to plunge into the middle of Lavinia’s back. Vultures that wouldn’t hesitate to remind her of where she’d come from and who she *really* was...the third daughter of an inconsequential baron that had caught the eye of an earl and plucked him out from under the noses of High Society’s most eligible misses before they knew what was happening.

How they’d hated her!

How they’d *loathed* her.

But it hadn’t mattered, because she’d loved Nicholas...and that love had drowned out all of the vitriol and catty remarks and sideways glances. That love had bound them together. That love had kept them strong. That love had

been *everything*.

Until the day it turned into nothing.

No, not the day, she thought, pressing the cool rim of the glass to her lips as she drank from the warm wine within. No, the indifference and the closed doors and the polite nods had taken weeks, months, even a year to accumulate. Like dust being swept under the rug. Just a little bit at first. Easy to hide. Easy to ignore. Easy to pretend it wasn't there, that it had all gone out the door. But as time went on, the pile got larger. And larger. And larger, until it couldn't be ignored.

Well, she amended, it *was* ignored. It was very much ignored. By both of them. The true state of their marriage was never discussed, not even in passing. On the rare occasions that they said more than few words to each other, the topic was generally the weather, or the creak in the third step going up the stairs, or the latest news from France.

Heavens, they'd rather converse about *politics* than their marriage, and wasn't that a sad state of affairs?

"How often do you have Lord Maxwell have relations?" she asked abruptly, referring to Vanessa's husband of nearly seven years.

Seven years.

Could she endure that length of time with Nicholas? Could she endure a lifetime with Nicholas? Her vows - the ones she'd made before King, country, and twelve dozen of their closest peers - said that she had to. But suddenly, Lavinia wasn't so certain.

If he had a lover, if *she* had a lover, at least the excuse would be there. Not to leave (no one left a marriage because of something as inconsequential as a mistress), but she'd have a *reason* for the wall between them. An explanation. Someone to direct her anger at. Someone to hate...besides herself. Because there was hate there, simmering under the surface of her carefully crafted smile and perfectly curled hair. Or, if not hate, then a general loathing for the woman that she was. The woman that was incapable of capturing the attention of her husband. The woman that must have had *something* wrong with her, or else why would Nicholas repetitively choose his books over the brunette waiting in his bed?

Unless the problem wasn't her.

Unless the problem was *him*.

A fact she'd considered, probably more than she should have.

But it was hard to hate the man that you loved.

Although admittedly not as hard as it used to be.

"R-relations?" Vanessa asked, coughing into her wine.

"Yes," said Lavinia, a tad impatiently. "Relations. Intimate relations. *Sexual* relat-"

"I understand." Vanessa coughed louder as she waved her hand in the air, the rings she wore on the outside of her satin gloves flashing in the candlelight. "We...he...ah...well...um...."

"A number will do."

"Three."

"Three times a year?" Lavinia said, feeling slightly better. "That's not-"

"Three times a week."

She almost dropped her glass. "Three times a WEEK?"

"Keep your voice down," Vanessa hissed, her cheeks turning red. "Why are we discussing this, anyway? And in such a public venue. It's shamefully embarrassing."

No, what was shamefully embarrassing was that Vanessa was being pleased by her husband three days a week while Lavinia hadn't felt the touch of hers in over three months. Not in any way that counted. Not in any way that made her blood burn.

"Something has to be done," she muttered into her wine.

But what?

And more importantly, *when*?

Sooner rather than later, she decided abruptly. She wouldn't go through another Season like this. She wouldn't go into the New Year like this. If her calculations were correct, Christmas was precisely eight days away. It was a time for cheer. For celebration. For...reconciliation?

"Oh no," Vanessa said warily. "You've got that glint in your eye."

"What glint?" Finishing off the rest of her drink, she beckoned a servant over and held her glass steady while he refilled it.

"That glint. *The* glint." A line of worry creased Vanessa's fair brow. "The same one you had when you declared that you were going to marry Lord

Wilshire. And when you were going to challenge Lady Godshall's position as chairperson."

"I *did* marry Nicholas, and I *did* force Lady Godshall to give up half of her responsibilities."

"I know," Vanessa said with a serious nod. "That's what frightens me. When you set your mind to a task, you don't let anything—or anyone—stand in your way until you get what you desire. It's mildly terrifying."

"Good. I want him to be terrified."

"Who?"

Lavinia smiled as she sipped her wine. "My husband."

CHAPTER TWO



IF NICHOLAS HALIFAX, Earl of Wilshire, knew the magnitude of the snowstorm that was about to make landfall on his doorstep, he'd have been wise to batten down the hatches. But instead of watching for the impending cloud of doom (otherwise referred to as his wife's carriage), he was—per usual—in his study, a glass of brandy by his left hand, a quill pen in his right, and a scowl resting squarely in the middle of his forehead.

As an aristocrat of means, Nicholas didn't have to work for his supper. He didn't *have* to do anything. But he'd tried being bored. He'd tried different vices. He'd even tried learning dead languages. None of it kept his interest. None of it gave him a purpose. But plucking a company from the brink of ruin and turning a profit within two quarters, then selling it off for thrice what he'd paid...that was a reason to get out of bed in the morning. An addiction better than drink, or opium, or the legs of random women. That was a challenge worthy of pursuing. That was a channel to funnel the restless drive he'd always had inside of him, even as a child. That was *meaning* in a society that rewarded lazy excess and squandering inherited fortunes instead of multiplying them.

Nicholas didn't want more, he wanted the *most*.

And he had it.

He had it all.

The enormous manor, the beautiful wife, the immeasurable wealth.

Until the damned storm rolled in...and his entire life was turned upside down.

“NICHOLAS!” Lavinia's voice rang through the foyer, followed by the slam of the front door and the stomp of quick, angry footsteps. Footsteps that sounded like they were coming suspiciously close to his study. “NICHOLAS,

I WISH TO SPEAK WITH YOU!”

Flicking a glance at the long-case clock across the room to gauge the time—half an hour past midnight—he dropped his quill and picked up his brandy a second before the door sprang open and his wife crashed in.

“There you are,” she said, the accusation in her tone causing his brows to lift.

“Did you expect me to be somewhere else?”

“No.” She crossed her arms beneath her breasts, pushing the pale ivory globes up and nearly over her square-shaped bodice trimmed in green ribbon. Forcibly dragging his gaze to her face, Nicholas took note of the pink flush in her cheeks and the glaze in her eye. His mouth thinned.

“You’re foxed,” he said flatly.

“Yes, I am.” She raised her chin, defiance written across every gorgeous inch of her flawless countenance. Ribbons of silky mahogany had come loose from her coiffure to frame high arching cheekbones and a long, elegant neck. Her nose, straight in the middle and tipped ever-so-slightly at the end, was lifted. Above it her eyes, a silvery gray surrounded by thick ebony lashes, were glittering with anger. She must have dropped her cloak in the foyer because her shoulders were bare, exposing the slant of her collarbones and the diamond necklace nestled in her cleavage. Once again, Nicholas’s gaze dropped lower. Once again, he clenched his jaw and pulled it up.

Lavinia’s beauty was, without a doubt, what had initially drawn him to her. One look at the ravishing brunette across a crowded ballroom of bland, boring blondes and he’d quite literally stopped in his tracks, stunned by the vision in front of him.

She’d been a debutante at her first large social event.

He a somewhat cynical earl feeling the pressure to find a wife.

At the end of their first dance, he knew he could stop his search. Lavinia was beautiful, but she was also bright, witty, and charming. She hadn’t fallen over herself trying to impress him, but instead had left him with the vague notion that *he* ought to be the one impressing *her*. That her favor wasn’t something to be given, but rather an object to be won.

And he had.

With presents, and carriage rides through Hyde Park, and trips to the

theater, and a parlor filled with yellow roses (her favorite). Being with Lavinia, passing the time with her, had been easy. Falling in love with her had been a pleasure. Like the first decadent sip of drinking chocolate topped with freshly whipped cream.

They were wed on a wet, rainy morning in October and left on holiday for Bath that evening where they spent a luxurious fortnight soaking in the mineral waters by day and exploring each other's bodies by night.

He was Lavinia's first lover. She was his third. A small measurement, by the standards of a rogue, but Nicholas's head had always been more preoccupied with arithmetic than affairs.

After that, they'd spent the winter at Wilshire Estate in Sussex. Aside from a few spats here and there, the early months of their marriage had been blissful. Tranquil, even. Then came the Season, and London, and a new business venture that had, admittedly, required more of his nights than he'd have liked to give up. But Lavinia had busied herself with charitable causes and all had been well. They were each pursuing their own interests independent of one another, and wasn't that refreshing? To focus entirely on his work without worry of upsetting his wife.

Somewhere along the way, he had a bed placed beside his desk because it was easier to fall asleep two feet from his contracts than trudge all the way upstairs. A means of convenience, nothing more.

Lavinia began to stay out later. Entire nights spent out of the house. But she'd always come home, often in the wee hours of the morning, and place a kiss on his temple before disappearing into their chamber to sleep the day away while he toured abandoned factories and worked tirelessly on acquisitions.

He didn't know when, exactly, the kisses on his temple had stopped, but they had. Now he and Lavinia were more like ships than husband and wife, one gliding out of the harbor while the other came in.

Except for tonight.

Tonight, his darling wife had her cannons loaded.

And they were pointed straight at him.

"What is it that you want, Lavinia?"

"You, Nicholas. I want *you*."

His brandy froze halfway to his mouth. Surely he'd misheard her. But the way she was staring at him, the sheer *heat* in those magnificent gray irises, told him that he hadn't. Finishing his drink in a quick swill of liquid courage, he slammed the glass down with more strength than necessary and it cracked up the side, little splinters branching off in every direction. "I don't understand."

Her plump lips curled in a derisive sneer. "No, you wouldn't, would you? Because you don't understand anything if it's not in a neat, tidy row of numbers. And I'm not a number, am I, Nicholas? Or a ledger. Or a bloody *contract*."

"Of course not," he said, confused. "Why—"

"Maybe if I were those things, you'd look at me long enough to notice me." What remained of her coiffure came undone as she threw back her head, sending a cascade of coffee-colored locks tumbling across her shoulders. "I'm not happy, Nicholas."

Obviously.

"I want us to be like we were," she continued, stepping further into the room. She closed the door behind her. Not with a slam, but with a quiet, deliberate *click*, and that sound—the finality of it—made his bollocks tighten.

His voice was noticeably hoarse when he said, "What does that mean, Lavinia?"

Dark lashes skimmed across the top of her cheeks as she lowered her gaze. "Don't you know?"

Yes, he did.

He *thought* he did.

She wanted them back to Bath, where they'd made love too many times to count. On the bed. Against the wall. In the tub. Where intimacy was as natural as breathing and they hadn't been able to keep their hands off each other. Where he'd caressed her breasts and she'd grazed her nails across his abdomen. Where he'd licked the sweet nectar between her thighs and she'd run her tongue along his cock.

"Turn around," he demanded, and when she complied he went behind her and made rapid work of the pearl buttons that lined her spine. When the last snagged on a piece of thread he cursed under his breath and tore it loose, the

thin fabric rending easily and revealing her long, slender backside to his ravenous gaze.

When was the last time he'd seen her dressed in nothing more than the flimsy silk of her undergarments? When was the last time he'd peeled those undergarments away? First with his hands and then with his teeth, his impatience growing with every second that passed and she remained partially clothed.

There was anger still simmering there. He felt it as surely as he tasted the wine on her lips when he spun her around and kissed her hard and fast, then slow and deep, fingers sinking into all that heavy, voluminous mane. But under the anger was passion. Hot, wild, frantic passion that spread across their skin like the burning of an open flame when his tongue coaxed a moan from the depths of her throat.

Their momentum carried them to the desk that dominated the room, scattering his carefully organized papers to the wind as he lifted her onto the edge and she wrapped her thighs around his waist. She yanked at his cravat, half-strangling him in her attempt to divest him of his clothing. He sucked in a greedy mouthful of air when she managed to rip the thin ribbon of fabric free of his neck, only to expel it on a hiss when her thighs tightened, drawing his loins into her soft, moist center.

Never in all his life had Nicholas taken his trousers off as quickly as he did in that moment. Had he shears at his disposal, he would have cut them to rags. As he just had his hands, the best he could manage was pulling, and tugging, and then kicking the offending garment to the side.

Pants?

Who the devil needed pants when you had a glorious mermaid sitting naked on your desk? For in the flicker of torchlight, with her tumultuous curls unbound and her eyes heavy with lust, Lavinia *looked* like a water nymph sprung from the mysterious pools of Atlantis. That being said, Nicholas far preferred his wife to have legs...and a silky wet quim that clenched around his finger when he gently eased inside of her.

A pot of ink rolled along the flat surface of the desk and then fell to the ground with a splatter of black dots when he toyed with the curls between her thighs and she leaned back, shamelessly parting herself for him whilst he

petted and stroked her pink, plump flesh.

Aside from their initial wedding night, Lavinia had always been a creature of desire. Those first few months had been spent in all manner of positions and Nicholas had taken dark, secret pleasure in the fact that his wife, so properly composed out of bed, was an absolute harlot when she was in it.

When had they stopped?

Why had they stopped?

A few days hadn't seemed like that many. Until those days had turned into weeks. And what was three months when two had already gone by? He'd had his hand for when the need arose and couldn't be ignored. A hand that hadn't required emotion. Or asked questions. Or filled him with guilt. But now that he had Lavinia sprawled in front of him, her head lolled to the side and her magnificent breasts thrust into the air, he was forced to acknowledge that his hand was a pitiful substitute for the real thing.

He kissed her again, his tongue plunging in unison with the fingers he had positioned to slide in and out of her. She lifted her hips off the desk, thrusting herself in the heel of his palm as a whimper stole from her lips, revealing that she was already close.

The storm grew, invisible snow lashing at the windowpanes of the study while the fire within it erupted into a blazing inferno. On a growl, Nicholas grabbed Lavinia by her waist and turned her around, fingers digging painlessly into the curve of her hipbones as his cock, already damp with seed, nudged at the hot, slick seam in the middle of her legs.

Casting her head to the side, Lavinia braced herself on her left hand while she reached behind her and wrapped the right around his pulsing member, summoning a groan of sheer bliss. She guided him into her, her thumb and index finger wrapped firmly around the base of his cock as her bottom went back, allowing him to slide a few scant inches into her tight little sheath before she arched forward, permitting only the tip. Back and forth she went, using his staff as a toy. A plaything for her own personal pleasure while Nicholas's ardor grew to a fever pitch.

He nipped the nape of her neck, teeth closing around the slight rise of a delicate vertebrae before he plunged forward, burying himself to the hilt whilst simultaneously yanking her against him. She cried out, her entire body

shuddering in a crashing wave of sweet release that spurred his own glorious climax. Anchoring his chin on her shoulder, he came with a hard thrust, stars dancing behind his eyelids from the sheer ferocity of his orgasm.

Turning her chin, he claimed her lips in a final, bruising kiss before disentangling himself and blindly searching the ground for her clothes. Panting slightly, eyes wide and mane wild, she accepted her shift, slender arms trembling as she slipped it over her head and it fell past her waist to skim the top of her calves.

“Should we...should we retire?” she asked huskily, causing his blood to quicken all over again.

He started to nod until his gaze inadvertently flicked to the desk behind her, and the mess they’d left in their wake. Scattered papers. Spilled ink. An entire day’s worth of carefully sorted correspondence and contracts...ruined.

Following the direction of his stare, Lavinia stiffened. “Nicholas—”

“You go ahead,” he said, pulling on his trousers. “I’ll be up in a few minutes.”

Her eyes flashed a warning. “*Nicholas—*”

“A few minutes,” he promised. “No longer.”



TWO HOURS LATER, Nicholas was still in his study, this time sitting behind his desk instead of bending his wife over the top of it. He had a merger in the morning, an offer to purchase a fledgling railroad company, and he never entered a negotiation without having memorized every word in the contract ahead of time.

Upstairs, Lavinia laid awake staring at the ceiling, the pleasant haze from the wine she’d imbibed and the breathtaking pleasure that followed having been replaced with a cold resolve. A resolve as icy and chilled as the silver icicles that clung to the eaves outside the window.

She would not be trapped in a loveless marriage, even one filled with occasional passionate nights. And she hadn’t come this far to be second.

If Nicholas couldn’t choose her first...then he couldn’t have her at all.

CHAPTER THREE



LIKE A CAT WITH A MOUSE in its curled little paws, Lavinia waited until breakfast to pounce. Breathing in the fresh smell of pine from the evergreen boughs draped along the mantle in the dining room, she methodically filled her plate with a poached egg, roasted potatoes, a slab of bacon, and a thin slice of honey cake before joining her husband beside his customary seat at the head of the long table.

He was already reading the newspaper, the pair of thin wire-rimmed spectacles perched on the edge of his nose giving him a scholastic charm that she did her best to ignore. She did not want to be *charmed* by Nicholas. Or coerced. Or convinced that the plan she was about to present to him was ridiculous. She was not going to allow her wits to be dimmed by wine–coffee only this morning, thank you very much–or her eyes to be distracted by a set of kissable lips and a stomach that could have been used to scrub clothes clean. No, on this morning–this oh so important morning–she was going to remain alert, poised, and determined.

“Ahem,” she said, laying her linen napkin across the skirt of her dress, its festive color matching the greenery scattered throughout the house. “Ahem.”

“Hmm?” Lowering the newspaper, Nicholas peered at her over the top of it, his vaguely surprised expression revealing that he hadn’t even noticed she had sat down next to him. And wasn’t that exactly the problem? Neither of them *noticed* each other anymore. The tingling awareness they’d once had whenever one of them had entered the room was gone. In its place was a mild apathy. An acceptance that this was their marriage now, for better or worse. But Lavinia *wanted* the tingling. She wanted what they’d had last night, but she wanted it to be the rule, not the once-every-six-months exception.

“You didn’t know I was here, did you?” she asked, her arched brow daring

him to lie.

“I thought you’d left already for the hospital breakfast.”

“The hospital breakfast was last week.”

“Another breakfast for charity, then.” The newspaper dropped another few inches as his gaze focused on her. “You look lovely today, Lavinia.”

Yes, she did, but that was beside the point.

Or maybe that *was* the point.

They’d gotten so accustomed to ignoring each other, mending any temporary rift with a mindless compliment, and then moving on that it no longer felt isolating or strange, but it *was* those things. It was both those things, and more. It was being lonely when she was sitting right next to him. It was feeling lost when she wanted to be found. It was longing for what they’d once had while being completely baffled by how they’d gotten to where they were.

And she was putting a stop to it.

This morning.

This very minute.

Now.

“There is a matter that we need to discuss, Nicholas.”

Behind the clear round glass of his spectacles, his eyes—the rich, dark brown of coffee before a swirl of cream was added—grew wary. “If this is about last night—”

“It is about last night,” she interrupted, putting her hands flat on the table. “But it’s also about the night before that. And the night before that. And the night before that. It’s about all of the nights, Nicholas. And all of the days. All of the *time* that we’ve spent apart.”

“We weren’t apart last night,” he said, the corner of his mouth twitching ever-so-slightly.

Lavinia kept her own lips pressed firmly together. “But we were. Afterward, when it was done and you were going to come upstairs, we were.”

Nicholas grimaced. “I had every intention of joining you, but the contract for—”

“I don’t need to know what contract it was for. It doesn’t matter. Because there’s always a contract.” She hesitated, instinctively loathe to take on self-

responsibility, but if she wanted this to work, to *really* work, then she had to. Their very marriage depended upon it. “Just like there’s always a charity breakfast. Or a dinner. Or a merger. Or a meeting. We may be married, Nicholas, but we’re not together. We haven’t been for a while.”

His countenance shuttering, he dropped the paper and reached for his coffee. “What do you propose, Lavinia?”

“A test.” She glanced at the set of maids hovering by the side table and signaled their exit with a curt nod. Waiting until the door had closed quietly behind them, she gave her full attention to her husband and drew a deep breath. While she may have appeared composed on the outside, on the inside her heart was beating so rapidly she half-feared it was going to shoot up and lodge itself in her throat. “There’s seven days between now and Christmas. I’ve counted them. I’d like to spend those days together.”

“We are together,” he said blankly. “You’re sitting right next to me.”

“No, we’re not. Because you’re already thinking about that contract you spent last night reviewing and my mind is on the menu I have to put together for the Grosvenor Square Society for the Betterment of Orphaned Youth and Widowed Women’s luncheon on New Year’s Day.”

Nicholas blinked. “Good Lord. Weren’t you going to shorten the name?”

“I lost the vote.” She waved her hand in the air. “But that’s neither here nor there. The *point* I am trying to make is that even though we’re here, our minds and hearts are elsewhere. And that’s no way to conduct a marriage, Nicholas. That’s no way to make a life.” She looked out the window. The sky was gray and had a brittle quality to it, hinting at snow on the horizon. Thus far winter in London had been mild and damp, with more wet than white. They were due for a storm. “For seven days, a full week, I want us to put away our distractions. No contracts. No charities. Nothing but us. The way we were at the beginning.”

His brow furrowed. “I have an important merger this morn—”

“Cancel it.” She stood up from the table. “Or have your solicitor do it for you. Because I’m leaving, Nicholas. In an hour. For Woodridge.” A three hour journey north by carriage, Woodridge was a cozy eight bedroom cottage tucked away at the end of a long, forested lane. Historically used as a hunting lodge, it had been gifted to them by Nicholas’s parents as a wedding present

and had sat largely vacant over the course of their marriage. “I’ve already sent word to have it opened and prepared for our arrival. I’ll be spending Christmas there, and I’d like you to come with me.”

“Go with you to *Woodridge*?” By the incredulity in his expression, she might as well have asked him to accompany her to the moon. “I cannot go to Woodridge. Not today. I understand that you’d like to spend more time together, and I agree that it would be good for us. But this week won’t work, Lavinia. After the holiday, when my railway deal has been completed, we can travel to Woodridge.” He smiled coaxingly. “We can travel wherever you’d like. Just not today.”

She returned his smile. Hers was sharp enough to slice through glass. “I’m leaving for Woodridge, Nicholas. Not tomorrow. Not next week. Not after the holiday. Because there have already been too many *after*’s. I cannot make you go with me. I cannot *make* you do anything. But I’d like you to come. I’d like us to take the next seven days and try to mend what’s been frayed. Because if you don’t, if we don’t, there won’t be an us to come back to.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “What exactly are you saying, Lavinia?”

Plainly, then.

In terms he could comprehend.

“If you do not come with me to Woodridge, our marriage is over.”

“Are you giving me a bloody *ultimatum*?” he snapped, yanking off his spectacles and throwing them halfway across the table in a rare display of genuine emotion. And even though it was done in anger, part of her was glad to see it, because it meant that he at least felt *something*. Even if that something was fury directed straight at her.

“No, Nicholas. Not an ultimatum.” She lifted her chin a notch. “A promise.”

“Don’t make a mistake you’re going to regret,” he said through clenched teeth.

“The only thing I regret is not doing this sooner.” When an unexpected rush of prickly hot tears threatened to disrupt her composure, she darted back from the table toward the door. “I have to go pack. I hope you do the same. As I said, I’m leaving within the hour. I hope you come with me, Nicholas. Truly.”

He didn't say anything. He didn't *do* anything but stare at her, those dark, unreadable brown eyes burning a hole into her back as she squared her shoulders and strode from the room.



AN HOUR LATER, Lavinia stood frozen in the middle of the foyer, paralyzed by the decision that awaited her. Three steps forward would take her through the front door and into the carriage that waited in a lightly falling snow. Three steps back would take her...well, it would take her back. Back to the life she knew. Back to the marriage she'd settled for. A marriage that wasn't terribly bad, all things considered.

Nicholas did not beat her. He did not yell at her. He did not parade mistresses in front of her face. She had financial security, a generous allowance, a full staff, a title, and the respect of her peers. What else could a woman in her position want? What else *should* she want?

Society told her nothing.

Society told her that she ought to be pleased with what she had.

Society told her that she had more than most.

And while that was all true, it was *also* true that settling for less than what her heart wanted was committing a disservice to herself. Money, houses, fancy clothes—those were well and good. But without love, passion, or devotion they were as meaningless as the ruby bracelet Nicholas had given her after he spent her birthday at a business meeting.

“Any word?” she asked softly of the maid waiting beside her.

“No.” The maid, a quiet young woman named Alice, paused before she added, “I’m sorry, my lady.”

Lavinia smiled stiffly. “There’s nothing for you to be sorry about. You had my trunks packed in record time, and for that I’m grateful. You can take the next week off to be with your family. You have a little boy, don’t you?”

Alice’s face all but glowed. “Aye, my lady. Thomas. He’s eight months old. But I couldn’t disregard my duties for an entire *week*. My wages—”

“Will be paid in full,” Lavinia cut in. “My gift to you, Alice, for your service and your loyalty. When I return...when I return, things will be different. I may initially require more of your time than usual, so take it now

to spend with dear Thomas and enjoy Christmas with your loved ones.”

“I’ll do that, my lady.” Alice bounced excitedly on her heels. “*Thank you, my lady.*”

“You’re quite welcome.” *All right*, Lavinia thought silently. She’d wasted enough time. Nicholas wasn’t here, and there were no signs that he was coming. No signs that he was even in the house. No signs that he cared. About her. About their marriage. About *them*.

Three steps forward.

Three steps back.

Drawing up the hood of her cloak, Lavinia walked out into the snow.

CHAPTER FOUR



THE JOURNEY TO WOODRIDGE was uneventful, if a bit jostling now that a light layer of snow blanketed the road north, leading to larger ruts and wider ditches. Thrice they passed a vehicle that had taken a turn too sharply and cracked an axle as a result, but Lavinia's driver was careful, and they arrived at their destination without incident.

Well, they *almost* arrived.

"Are you certain this is as close to the house as we can get?" Lavinia asked, biting her bottom lip in concentration as she navigated the narrow, slippery steps leading down from the carriage. Shivering when an icy gust of wind cut through the blanket of trees surrounding the entrance to Woodridge, she stomped her feet to warm them and buried her hands in a thick muff made from mink fur and lined with swansdown.

Through the forest and the falling flecks of white, she could hardly make out the outline of the cottage some two hundred yards off the main thoroughfare. When she'd last visited, a few summers before, she'd found the isolated location a delightful reprieve from the hustle and bustle of London. But now, with darkness rapidly encroaching and a daunting walk ahead of her, she wondered if it was quite as wonderful as she recalled.

"I'm sorry, my lady," said Bartholomew, the driver, inadvertently echoing Alice's exact words from earlier. "With the weather being like it is, there's too high a risk that the wheels will get stuck. We'll have to go on foot from here."

"But my things," she said, looking at the top of the carriage in dismay where her belongings—dresses, undergarments, stockings, shoes, and more—were packed away in an orderly row of three massive leather trunks lined in strips of brass. It had taken two footmen, the driver, *and* Alice directing to get

the trunks onto the roof. How in the world were she and Bartholomew going to drag them half a mile along a bumpy, snow-filled lane by themselves?

“I can try to bring one, my lady,” said the driver, although he sounded dubious.

“No, I don’t want you to injure yourself.” She tugged ruefully on the skirt of her heavy maroon traveling habit. Beneath it, she wore a plain blue dress with long sleeves designed for warmth over comfort as the current style demanded half-capped sleeves that didn’t extend past the elbow. But she hadn’t come to Woodridge to impress or dazzle. She’d come to rest, to think, to relax. No one would see her here. Not even her own husband. “I suppose what I’m wearing shall have to do for now.”

Looking visibly relieved, Bartholomew nodded in agreement and proceeded to lead the way toward the cottage, forging a path through snow that had been nothing more than a dusting when they’d departed London but was now nearly over the top of Lavinia’s sturdy ankle boots.

“Oh my goodness,” she gasped, stumbling gratefully through the front door when they finally reached the house. “That was exhausting. We’d never have made it with the trunks.” Prying off her leather gloves, wet with snow and slowly turning her fingers to icicles, she pivoted in a circle, ready to be greeted with hot milk and a plate of ginger biscuits. Instead, the only thing that acknowledged her presence was a sharp warning squeak from somewhere under the stairs, followed by an alarmingly loud rustle.

“Bartholomew,” she said cautiously, her gaze pinned to the stairwell.

Behind her, the driver stomped snow off his boots. “Yes, my lady?”

“How large are mice, exactly?”

“Small, my lady.” *Stomp stomp*. “And harmless, unless you’re a piece of cheese.”

“I see.” Her gaze left the stairs to travel around the foyer. There were candles in the windows and the chandelier above their heads, constructed of bony antlers, had been lit. But the entire house smelled of must, as if the windows hadn’t been opened for a very long time, and there were white linens covering most of the furniture. Dust coated the bannister and the floors, comprised of wide wooden oak planks, were in need of a good sweeping. There were no wreaths on the doors, or evergreens on the mantles,

or mistletoe tied in red ribbon hanging discreetly from the eaves. By all outward appearances, Woodridge had sat vacant for quite a while, and aside from a few candles flickering here and there, nothing had been done to prepare for her arrival. There wasn't even a fire in the hearth.

Lavinia's shoulders slumped. How different it all was from the way she'd pictured it! In her best dreams, she'd envisioned Nicholas carrying her over the threshold into a warm, cozy cottage overflowing with Christmas cheer. She'd sit on his lap while they ate sweets in the parlor, and they wouldn't even go upstairs before they started to take off their clothes. In the golden glow of the fireplace, on a blanket made of soft fur, they'd spend the rest of the night making love and wake the next morning wrapped in each other's arms. They would eat breakfast in bed and then play outside in the snow like children, shrieking with laughter as they rolled across the fresh blanket of white. They'd do all that and more...if Nicholas were here.

But he's not, she told herself harshly. *He chose his ledgers over you, his business partners over his own wife, and now you're here by yourself, just you and whatever's living under the stairs, with no heat, presumably no food, and no trunks.*

"I'm a fool," she said softly. "A silly, stupid little fool."

"What was that, my lady?" Bartholomew asked.

Lavinia attempted a smile. "I said let's return to London. I never should have come here to begin with."

"But we can't, my lady. Not until the morning, at any rate, and maybe not even then if the road isn't clear. We might be snowed in here for a few days, even a week."

"I'm sorry?" she said politely. "I believe I misheard you."

The driver shuffled his feet. He was an older man, into his fifth decade if the white peppering his hair was any indication, with kind brown eyes and pock marks on his cheeks. "No, Lady Wilshire, you didn't. It's the wheels on the carriage, you see. They're too thin. More than a few inches of snow and they start to slide. It wouldn't be safe."

"But...but we can't stay here." She pointed at the stairs. "There's *mice*, Bartholomew!"

"Better a few mice than freezing to death in the cold, my lady."

When he put it that way....

“I’ll take my chances with the cold,” she said, only half-jesting.

The corners of the driver’s eyes crinkled. “I will prepare a fire, then put the horses away so they’re fresh and ready to depart in the morning if the snow allows.”

Lavinia sighed. From attending a lavish ball to sharing a cottage with rodents. If that wasn’t humbling, she didn’t know what was. “While you’re doing that, I’ll poke around the kitchen and try to find us something to eat.”



“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, SHE’S GONE?” Glowering, Nicholas removed his hat and tucked it under his arm as a footman closed the front door behind him. His stomach growled, reminding him that it was already half past one and he hadn’t eaten anything since the night before. His appetite had a habit of abandoning him right before important meetings and then returning with a vengeance once the meeting was over. “Gone where?”

The maid who had delivered news of his wife’s departure paled and took a step back. “To—to Woodridge, Lord Wilshire. Didn’t she...didn’t she tell you?”

“If you do not come with me to Woodridge, our marriage is over.”

Bloody hell.

He hadn’t known she was *serious*.

All right, maybe he had. When his wife got an idea in her head, she was like a dog with a bone. But he hadn’t thought she’d actually go through with it! Which was why he hadn’t bothered to tell her that he’d closed Woodridge over the summer, choosing to send the already skeletal staff to Wilshire House, their 500-acre country estate, where they’d be more useful. All that remained at the hunting cottage was an old Scottish groundskeeper hired to keep the lights burning to prevent vagrants from moving in.

Nicholas spun around and glared out the window where a pristine layer of white covered the pavement. People walked by in cloaks and hats, laughing gaily as they gathered what little snow there was into tiny balls and threw them at each other.

Here, in London, where the coastal air sweeping in off the channel often

turned snow to rain before it could hit the ground, snow was something to be celebrated. But further north, where Woodridge was, larger accumulations could easily prove dangerous if a household wasn't ready to receive them.

"How long?" he snapped.

"How long what, my lord?"

"How long ago did my wife depart?"

"Right—right after you did, my lord," the poor, confused maid stuttered. "Half an hour, maybe less. I wasn't...I wasn't keeping track."

"Ready my carriage. Wait. No." He looked out the window again, tracking the falling snow. "A horse. A single horse. I'll take Dominion, he's the sturdiest. And a sack of food. Candles. A spare tinderbox with an extra flint."

"Yes, my lord. Right away, my lord." Grateful to have something to do other than stand in front of the earl and bear the brunt of his ire, the maid scurried away while Nicholas began to think of all the ways he was going to punish Lavinia for actually leaving him...starting with a spanking.

CHAPTER FIVE



AS DARKNESS DESCENDED over Woodridge in an inky cloak of black interlaced with flecks of white, Lavinia sat curled in front of the crackling fire in the drawing room, eating a stale piece of bread. She watched the flames leap hungrily across the dry logs that Bartholomew had managed to procure from a shed beside the cottage and was grateful for the warmth even as she scolded herself for her stupidity.

Honestly, what had she been *thinking*, to come traipsing all the way out here in the middle of winter? To a cottage built for burly men hunting stag, not a delicate lady that squealed at the sound of mice scurrying about in the walls. The ultimatum she'd given Nicholas—for it was, at its heart, an ultimatum, no matter what she'd said to the contrary—had been a mission of madness.

And she was paying the price.

Taking another bite of bread before setting the loaf aside, she forced herself to chew the hard, brittle texture until it became palatable enough to swallow and then rose to her feet to browse the bookshelves on either side of the hearth, searching for something to keep her mind busy while she waited for the snow to stop and sleep to claim her. Bartholomew had chosen to remain outside with the horses which left Lavinia inside by herself. She'd thought she was used to being lonely. But there was a marked difference between being alone in a house attended by servants and being alone in a house attended by no one.

The silence was deafening. Every *pop* of the fire made her pulse leap. Every blast of wind against the windowpanes made her heart jump. Trailing her fingers across a row of leather spines, she struggled to maintain a sense of calm even as all the nerve endings in her body demanded that she flee. But

flee where? The sky was dark. The road was covered in snow. She was as trapped in this cottage as she was in her marriage. Because despite her threats to the contrary, she couldn't *really* end their union. She hadn't the power. A marriage was just another contract. A contract that viewed her as nothing more than property.

Setting her jaw, she blindly plucked a book from the shelf and flipped to the first page but the tiny rows of text blurred through a sheen of tears. With a small, self-pitying snuffle, she started to put the book back, only to freeze with her arm in midair when she heard a loud, sudden *bang*.

Mice, she told herself. *It's just the mice.*

But since when did mice open doors that creaked or wear big boots that clomped?

"Bartholomew?" she called nervously, clutching the book to her chest like a shield as she whirled to face the door. "That's you, isn't it?"

Clomp.

Clomp.

Clomp.

Lavinia held her breath.

The door to the drawing room slowly began to open.

Her mind conjured a towering mouse with whiskers as long as her legs and sharp, glinty teeth.

"GO AWAY!" she shrieked, throwing the book across the room with all her might.

"*Oomph*," the mouse grunted when the heavy tome glanced off the side of its head and landed on the floor. The oversized rodent staggered sideways, holding its cheek. Lavinia looked wildly around for another weapon to throw. Her gaze landed on a bronze statue of a hunting dog on the mantle.

"I'm warning you." She hefted the heavy sculpture over her shoulder. "There's no cheese in here. Leave while you still can!"

"Put that damned thing down before you hurt yourself," a deep, unmistakably familiar voice growled from the shadows. Still cupping his jaw, which was already sporting a blackening bruise, the Earl of Wilshire stepped into the ring of light cast by the fire and Lavinia's eyes went huge.

"*N-Nicholas?*" she said faintly.

“Who the devil did you think it was?” her husband scowled.

A giant six foot mouse hunting for cheese.

“I...I wasn’t sure.” A muscle pinged in her arm, reminding her that she was still holding the bronze dog. Returning it to the mantle, she turned to stare in astonishment at the last person she’d ever expected to see. “What... what are you doing here?”

“What am *I* doing here?” Nicholas’s black greatcoat was covered in snow. More of it was in his hair, glinting like miniscule diamonds in the firelight. His nose and cheeks, save the spot where she’d accidentally hit him with the book, were bright red from the cold and his hands, devoid of gloves, were of a similar color, the knuckles slightly swollen. “What the hell are *you* doing here?”

Thrust and parry.

Parry and thrust.

It seemed that was all they did.

All they knew *how* to do when they weren’t ignoring each other.

“I told you I was coming here.” A few minutes ago, she’d wondered how she was ever going to fall asleep in this too-quiet place. Now, she felt weary all the way down to her bones. “I waited for you, Nicholas.”

“I had a meeting.”

“You *always* have a meeting.”

“That’s because I work, Lavinia.” A tendon pulsed in his jaw as he removed his coat and laid it over the back of a chair. In the fireplace, a log shifted and sparks flew, but this time Lavinia didn’t flinch. “I have a responsibility to the companies I’ve started and to the employees depending on me.”

“What about your responsibility to your *wife*?” she cried, flinging her arms out the side. “Your responsibility to our *marriage*?”

“Have I not provided?” he shot back. “Have I not given you everything that you’ve ever wanted? Let’s not forget that your dowry was a piddling sum, and my father squandered away most of my inheritance on cards and brandy. Were it not for my meetings that you so detest, and the contracts that you abhor, we’d be having a very different conversation. I provide for us, Lavinia.”

“Yes,” she agreed, because it was true. “Yes, you do. You have. And I’m grateful for it. For your knack with numbers. For your business sense. For your ability to take a failing company and turn it into an empire. But when is it enough, Nicholas?” Her hands dropped, nails digging into the flesh of her palms. “I don’t have your head for ledgers, but I can tally a simple sum. I’ve an idea of the fortunes you’ve built, and we couldn’t spend what you’ve made if we had a dozen lifetimes. A *hundred* lifetimes. So when is it enough? I have what I want, Nicholas. The clothes. The houses. The servants. The jewels. But what about what I need?”

“What *you* need,” he said flatly. “What about what *I* need, Lavinia? A wife that doesn’t run off in a huff when she doesn’t get her way.”

“That’s not what I—”

“A wife that’s home at a decent hour, not stumbling in half-foxed at a quarter past midnight.”

“I can’t help what time the—”

“A wife that is not consumed by her frivolous social events!”

“The Grosvenor Square Society for the Betterment of Orphaned Youth and Widowed Women is *not* frivolous!”

“To hell with the Grosvenor Square Society for the Betterment of Orphaned Youth and Widowed Women,” shouted Nicholas. “The name is absurd and the people that run it spend more time congratulating themselves on their piety than they do helping the orphans!”

Lavinia gasped. “You take that back!”

“Or what?” he challenged, his eyes flashing black in the dim glow of the hearth.

“Or...” Her mind went blank. What recourse did she have, truly? “Or...”

“*Or this.*” Nicholas knocked a chair off its legs in his haste to get to her. Fury rolled off him in a wave, but right underneath of it...right underneath of it was the potent call of desire. He snatched her by the arms, his fingers cold against her skin, but when he kissed her...oh, when he kissed her, she felt nothing but heat.

His tongue swept between her lips, demanding that she open for him, and on a half-growl, half-groan, she softened her jaw and invited him in.

A bold stroke, a playful nip, a soothing caress...kissing Nicholas, being

kissed by Nicholas, had always been a delightful exercise in passion. When lust was their only concern, they fit together perfectly. Two pieces of opposing puzzles that clicked into place when turned just the right way.

In his office, he pushed her up against the desk. In the drawing room of Woodridge, with the fire roaring at their backs and snow falling outside the windows, he laid her out on the floor, taking care to arrange a bed of blankets before he stripped her dress away and her undergarments along with it. Once nude, she reclined on her elbows, shamelessly exhibiting every curve, hilltop, and cavern to his hungry gaze.

“Gorgeous,” he rasped, his guttural tone making it sound more like an accusation than a compliment before he stretched out beside her, similarly naked after having divested himself of his clothing, and began to trace a wandering fingertip from her neck to her navel.

She instinctively tensed when he reached the ebony thatch of curls at the apex of her thighs, her stomach muscles fluttering in anticipation. Her body was already aroused, her face already flush, her breasts already heavy, her quim already wet. He kissed her nipples as he slid a finger inside of her. Circling the hard points with his tongue as his wrist worked back and forth, back and forth, coaxing her hips off the blankets on a whimpering sigh when he filled her with a second finger.

Stretching her.

Teasing her.

Tasting her as he went down her body and replaced his hand with his mouth, lapping at the damp, pulsing seam of her womanhood while a cloud of sweet delirium surrounded Lavinia and made the entire room spin on its axis.

She grabbed fistfuls of his hair, yanking tufts of ebony silk by the roots as he continued to pleasure her lick by lick, an act that he hadn't performed in ages. But if his enthusiasm was any indication, he'd missed as much as she had. More than that, she'd missed *this*. The connection they achieved when their bodies were entwined. When their hearts beat in unison and her ecstasy was his own.

She came on a keen cry of release, her slender frame quivering with sheer, overwhelming passion. Lifting her legs and setting her small heels on his

broad shoulders, he entered her swiftly, commanding that she take every inch of him.

Her nails raked across his back, her head thrashing side to side as she struggled to accommodate such a bold request, for never let it be said that Nicholas was a man of small proportions. Clamping her knees to his waist, she arched upwards while he thrustured down, and they moaned in unison when he sheathed himself completely.

The fire snapped and hissed, the shadows of orange flames licking across ivory skin as Nicholas made love to Lavinia. He kissed her fiercely, and she tasted her own bitter sweetness on his tongue. When she came again on a burst of indescribable sensation, he followed mere breaths after, and cradled her head in the nook of his shoulder as they both collapsed onto their backs to stare in dazed bliss at the ceiling.

Neither spoke.

Neither *wanted* to speak.

When they were here, nothing was broken.

When they were here, nothing had to be fixed, or repaired, or rebuilt.

When they were here, everything was perfect.

...but perfection never lasted for long.

CHAPTER SIX



SNOW.

Snow everywhere.

A habitually early riser, Nicholas woke before Lavinia. Lounging on his side, he studied her for a few moments, observing the way the muted dawn light made circular dapples across her smooth skin and illuminated the notes of chestnut in her mane of mahogany. She slept peacefully, her breathing steady and even, her lashes fans of ebony across the top of her sculpted cheekbones.

He considered what she'd said last night before passion had quelled their words. About want versus need. And although he was reluctant to admit it, she was right. His business ventures, his mergers, his companies...those were wants. Ambitious wants. Competitive wants. But he didn't *need* them. Not any longer. His empire had been built. His name had been branded. He could hand over the reins to any number of competent men and control his interests from afar.

But he couldn't hand over Lavinia.

At the mere thought of losing her, his chest tightened and he lightly ran his knuckles along the delicate curve of her ear, brushing a stray tendril away from her face. What would be the worth of all his work if it came at the expense of the one thing money could not buy?

When is it enough, Nicholas?

Now, he told himself grimly. It was enough now, because it had to be. Because he wouldn't forsake the woman he loved for a business without flesh, or blood, or bone. The woman he'd taken for granted. The woman he'd consistently placed second. Third. Fourth.

Last.

The woman he'd braved a bloody snowstorm to find, because in the end... in the end, Lavinia was all that mattered.

When had he forgotten that?

When had *they* forgotten that?

Drawing a blanket over her shoulders, he placed a tender kiss on her brow and then set about restoring the fire to a cheery blaze. Once the flames had caught hold, he arranged a platter of food from what had been packed for him—a hunk of cheese wrapped in beeswax cloth, thickly sliced slabs of bacon, dried figs—and then went to check on the horses and Bartholomew, whom he'd met in the barn shortly after his arrival.

It was hard going. The snow had continued to fall through the night, and while the skies were clear this morning, the sun shone down on a veritable mountain of white that reached past Nicholas's knees as he carved himself a path from the cottage to the barn.

Short of breath by the time he reached the double set of doors, he locked his shoulder into one and managed to pry it wide enough to stick his head inside.

“Bartholomew? I've brought you some food.”

The driver emerged from a stall, bits of straw clinging to his clothes. “Thank you, my lord,” he said, accepting the tidy package Nicholas held out with a grateful nod. “It's much appreciated. How can I be of service to you and Lady Wilshire?”

“Keep tending to the horses,” Nicholas instructed. “We'll need them hale and hearty if we're ever to get out of this mess. I take it that enormous lump of snow I passed on the way here is our carriage?”

“Aye,” Bartholomew said ruefully. “It wouldn't fit inside the barn. Not that it matters much, as we'll not be traveling anywhere until the road is clear.”

“How long will that take, do you think?”

“It's hard to tell. A few days? A week?”

Nicholas frowned. “We've only enough food to see us through to tomorrow.”

“There's a manor not far from here. Lord and Lady Appleton. I doubt they're in residence, but they keep a full staff regardless. My cousin is their

butler. If I leave now, I can be back by nightfall with supplies.” Bartholomew looked at the stall behind him where a handsome bay gelding was watching their exchange with a bright, alert gaze. “Even faster if I take Dominion.”

“Take him.” Nicholas knew of Lord Appleton, an earl nearly twice his age with a fondness for hunting. He’d make sure to send him a note of gratitude, along with a new hound pup to add to the earl’s renowned collection of springer spaniels.

After seeing Bartholomew off, he returned to the cottage where Lavinia was awake and waiting for him. Wearing a white cotton long shift and a blanket draped over her shoulders, she greeted him with a small, hesitant smile.

“All is well with the horses?”

Nicholas nodded. “I sent Bartholomew for supplies. It appears we’ll be snowed in for a while.”

“Until Christmas?”

“At least.”

Silence came again, interlaced with a brittle tension that hadn’t been present last night. Knotting her hands around the ends of the blanket, Lavinia brought it to her chin as she glanced down at the floor. Shifting his weight, Nicholas scratched his jaw where a shadow of whiskers had emerged without his valet to shave them. From somewhere in a neighboring room, a clock’s pendulum swung from side to side.

Tick, tock.

Tick, tock.

Tick, tock.

He cleared his throat. “I—”

“We—”

They both stopped.

Lavinia gave a nervous titter of laughter. “If we’re going to be here until Christmas, we should gather some decorations.”

“Decorations,” he said blankly.

“Yes.” She began to tick off her fingers. “Evergreen boughs for the mantles. Wreaths for the doors. A Yule log for the hearth.”

“A Yule log.”

“And wreaths. Holly berries, if we can find them.” When she raised her head, there was a light in her eyes that he hadn’t seen for a long time. Either because it hadn’t been there...or he hadn’t taken the time to notice. “I’ll get dressed. We’ll need something to carry everything on. A flat slab of wood that we can tie a rope to. I’m sure that’s an object suitable in the barn. Like an old door, or some wooden boards we can lash together.”

“Lavinia, wait.”

The light dimmed. “Yes, Nicholas?”

If they were in London, here was where he’d tell her that he had a meeting. And by the time he was back home, she would already be gone to a ball, or a dinner, or a party. But they weren’t in London. And there weren’t any meetings. Or social events. Or anything at all to keep them from each other.

“Before you get dressed,” he said huskily, “I can think of one thing that wasn’t on your list. And it doesn’t require clothes...”



HER CHEEKS STILL PINK and rosy from the not one, but two orgasms courtesy of her industrious husband and his magical mouth (along with another, even more magical part of his anatomy), Lavinia pointed a gloved fingertip at the tree in front of them.

“That one!” she declared excitedly.

Nicholas didn’t bother to disguise his groan. “Haven’t we enough?” he asked, peering back at the pile of evergreens they’d gathered. Contributing to their collection was a Scots pine, a holly bush, and the spiky branches of a juniper tree. But they were still missing a Yule log, arguably the most important Christmas decoration of all.

“This should be the last,” she said, her arms swinging back and forth as she waded through a patch of waist-deep snow. She’d lost all feeling in her toes some time ago, and her skirts were soaked through to the skin. But she was invigorated, both by the spirit of the impending holiday and the joy that came from being with her husband who, admittedly, didn’t appear to share in her Christmas enthusiasm.

“The last,” he said dubiously, dropping the rope he’d been using to haul around their bounty and stretching his hands to the sky. “That’s what you

said about the *last* tree. And look at this one, Lavinia. It's a bloody monster."

"It's perfect! You'll just need to cut it down, strip the branches, make a notch, and haul it back to the cottage."

His eyes narrowed. "Is that all?"

She bit her bottom lip. "Unless you think we should have *two* Yule logs—"

"This one's fine," he said hastily, and she hid her grin with an expertly timed cough. "Stand back in case it falls sideways."

Stepping obediently out of the way, she clasped her cold hands together as she watched the mighty business titan hack away at a stubborn old oak tree with a string of curses and a dull axe she'd found in the woodshed.

Honestly, she preferred him this way. Holding an axe instead of a quill pen, his muscles rippling under his shirt with every swing of his arms. Sweat gleamed on his temple and his hair was raked back, the shaded beard on his angled jawline making it easy to imagine him as a hearty woodsman instead of a cool, analytical earl whose world was defined by numbers and sums.

She also felt different. Out here, in the woods and the snow, she didn't have to bite her tongue or play silly social games. She could be herself. She could *find* herself. Because somewhere along the way, in-between becoming a wife and then co-chairperson of the Grosvenor Square Society for the Betterment of Orphaned Youth and Widowed Women (Nicholas was right, the name was absolutely absurd), she'd gotten lost.

The tree came down with a loud crash that was swallowed up by the blanket of white, and it took both of them and a horse from the stables besides to haul their bounty back to the cottage. There was more cursing when the felled oak wouldn't fit through the door, but in the end, Lavinia got her Yule log along with enough branches to make a dozen wreaths and over the next few days, that was exactly what she did.

While Nicholas tended the fire and helped Bartholomew clear off the carriage and a path leading to the main road, she braided branches together, tied ribbons around berry stems, and covered every conceivable surface, including all of the windows and doors, with holiday cheer. Intermittently, she and Nicholas would go for walks in the woods, or read in front of the fire, or play countless games of cribbage on an old board discovered in a cabinet in the parlor. They also made love. In the morning. In the afternoon. At night.

There was no schedule. No waiting for the ball to end or the meeting to be over. There was only them, and the cottage, and a general lack of inhibitions that had led to any number of delightful new positions.

Then, before she could blink, it was Christmas Eve. And with it, the uncomfortable knowledge that this was the date she'd given herself—the date she'd given *them*—to either fix what was broken once and for all or abandon whatever tentative truce they'd built over the past few days.

“Are you ready?” Nicholas asked, entering the drawing room where she sat on the floor in front of the hearth, arms looped around her legs and chin resting contemplatively on her knees. Outside the cottage, evening had fallen in a whisper of obsidian. Inside, candles and firelight ensured a cozy glow while the scent of evergreen floated pleasantly in the air. It was the exact picture of what she'd envisioned when she first came to Woodridge. Of what she'd hoped would happen. But now that it had, now that it was all that she'd dreamed, why was she so afraid to wake up?

“The road is almost clear,” she said quietly, gazing into the flames. “We'll be able to return to London tomorrow.”

“That's what Bartholomew thinks as well.” Nicholas sat behind her, his strong thighs enveloping her hips as he leaned her back against his chest. “I assumed you'd sound more pleased.”

“I am pleased,” she said automatically.

“But?”

“But I don't want to lose this,” she admitted, speaking around the sudden lump in her throat. “I don't to lose *us*. The *us* that we've found here. Away from my obligations. Away from your work.”

“Lavinia, we're not going to lose anything.” He wrapped his arms around her, drawing her into a firm, protective embrace. “I'm not going to lose *you*. Not now. Not in ten years from now. Not ever again. Being here, this time we've spent together...it's shown me what's important. And it isn't money. It isn't meetings. It's my goddamned wife. That's what is important. That's what I want to hold onto. What I *will* hold onto. Nothing is going to change that. Do you understand?”

On that fateful night in Nicholas's study, her tears had been born of hurt and frustration. Tonight, tucked safely in the arms of her husband, they were

made of pure happiness.

“I do,” she whispered, twisting in his embrace so that she could look him in the eye. “I do understand. And I know it will take commitment from both us. I know there will be times that we falter. Even times when we fall. But so long as one of us is there to pick the other up, we’ll always find our way back to where we’re meant to be. I love you, Nicholas.”

He kissed her. “I love you, Lavinia. Merry Christmas Eve.”

“Merry Christmas Eve,” she whispered back.

“Should we light the Yule log?” He kissed her again, then murmured against her lips, “I didn’t almost break my back getting this tree in here not to follow tradition.”

“You’re right,” she said seriously. “I believe you chopping down the Yule log should be our *new* tradition. Next year we can find an even bigger one.”

“Wait.” Sheer panic flashed in his gaze. “That’s not what I—”

“Unless you’d rather we do something else first.” Twisting around on his lap, she cooed a suggestion in his ear that made his whole body turn rigid.

“For that alone,” he said hoarsely, “I’ll get you as many Yule logs as you want.”

In the end, it wasn’t the Christmas Eve that Lavinia had imagined...it was even better.

EPILOGUE



Twelve Days after Christmas

IT WAS THE MERGER of a lifetime. If Nicholas could combine the railway company he'd recently acquired with the might of Conway steel, he would be unstoppable. Even the giants in the industry wouldn't be able to compete with the bids he'd be able to put in. The only problem was that the other party had insisted on meeting at their private residence to sign the contracts, and that private residence was on the other side of town.

"Clear my schedule," he ordered his solicitor, who had just brought news of the merger in a hastily written note. "I'll attend the meeting with Brawn and Goldway tomorrow. This takes precedence over everything else."

Thrusting his arms into the sleeves of his greatcoat and yanking a hat on his head to ward off the chill of January, he was halfway out the door when he heard a sound that stopped in his tracks. A whisper, really. More a prickling of awareness at his nape than anything else.

Lavinia.

Dressed in beautiful blue, she stood at the bottom of the staircase, her head canted to the side. "You're going out?"

"Yes. Conway steel just contacted me. They've reconsidered my original offer." Since returning to London on Christmas day, Lavinia and Nicholas had made it a point to have dinner together every single night. While they ate and drank, they told each other about their days. She'd recently shared that she was starting her own charity, with a much shorter name, and he'd told her all about his efforts to draw Mr. Conway and his board to the bargaining table. "But they've put a deadline on it. I have to leave now if I'm to make it across London in time."

“With Bartholomew driving, you’ll make it.” Something flickered in her gaze. There and gone again before it could take hold. She smiled. “I’ll give our theater tickets to Lady Maxwell. We can go another day.”

Nicholas could have kicked himself. “Lavinia, I’m sorry. I completely forgot.”

“It’s all right. It *is*,” she assured him when he gritted his teeth. “I know how much this merger matters to you. How hard you’ve been working.”

Yes, it did matter.

It mattered an extreme amount.

But there was someone that mattered even more.

“Go in my place,” he told his solicitor without taking his gaze off of his wife. “Sign the contract in my name. If that’s not good enough for Mr. Conway, then kindly tell him to go to hell. Because I’m going to the theater.”

And taking Lavinia by the arm, he proceeded to do precisely that.

FROM THE AUTHOR



I hope you have enjoyed the time you spent with Lavinia and Nicholas! While this story takes place during the Regency Era, it's very much a present-day reminder to take time the time to appreciate your loved ones. Particularly during the holiday season.

Keep reading for an exclusive first chapter sneak peek at the first book in my brand new, full-length trilogy with Dragonblade Publishing! *The Duchess Takes a Lover* will be available in Kindle Unlimited, paperback, and audio this spring.

May your New Year be bright, cheerful, and filled with love!

Warmly,
Jillian

THE DUCHESS TAKES A LOVER

Prologue

*Lily & Grove Dress Shop
London, England*

“Have you heard the news?” Lady Harmsworth asked in a hushed tone that was not very hushed at all. A loud, boisterous woman whose voice was outsized only by her bosom, she was incapable of whispering. Or of keeping any tidbit of gossip, no matter how small or inconsequential, to herself. As it so happened, there was nothing small *or* inconsequential about the rumor that she had been itching to divulge ever since she and the hard-of-hearing (for obvious reasons) Lord Harmsworth had arrived in London in advance of the much-anticipated Season.

“What news?” Lady Topple was quiet and as flat-chested as a piece of parchment, but she did like a good piece of tittle-tattle. Teetering on the verge of spinsterhood at the age of five and twenty with no prospects on the horizon (for obvious reasons), she lived vicariously through the scandalous lives of others . . . when she wasn’t tending to her alarming number of felines.

“Is this in regard to that governess running away with the vicar? Because if it is, I’ve already heard it.” Standing on a dais in the middle of the dress shop with her arms raised above her head as a seamstress circled around her with pins, Lady Farthing—the eldest of the trio—snapped her fingers and pointed at breasts that both time and six children had dragged down to an intolerable level. “Higher, dear. If they’re not touching my chin then you’re doing it wrong.”

Lady Harmsworth gave a loud, vaguely insulted sniff. “*Everyone* has heard about the governess and the vicar. But what about the Duchess of Southwick?”

“The Duchess of Southwick?” Lady Topple repeated, looking confused. “What about her?”

“You’ve mixed up your names again,” Lady Farthing said derisively. “The only thing interesting about the Duchess of Southwick is that she managed to land a duke. That girl is even more boring than Lady Topple, if such a thing is possible.” She paused. “No offense meant, Lady Topple.”

“None taken,” Lady Topple mumbled, glancing at her lap and very much wishing she had thought to bring one of her cats.

“For your information, I *haven’t* confused my names.” Lady Harmsworth crossed her arms. “I have it on excellent authority that the Duchess of Southwick will be in town for the Season this year.”

“That isn’t *news*,” said Lady Farthing. “That’s what is expected of her. The bare minimum, really. And don’t get me started on her wardrobe. Those bland colors she prefers never fail to make me nauseous. Why a woman married to the wealthiest man in England would willingly choose to subject herself to beige with *that* hair color is beyond me.”

“She’ll certainly never be renowned for her fashion,” Lady Harmsworth agreed. “But maybe *this* will get her noticed.” Her mouth curled in a conspiratorial smile. “The Duchess of Southwick is coming to London . . . and she plans to take a lover.”

In the stunned silence that followed, someone could have heard a pin drop from the line of stitches that the seamstress was desperately making in an attempt to heave up Lady Farthing’s bosom.

“That’s absurd,” Lady Farthing said at last, but there was just enough doubt in her tone to allow Lady Harmsworth’s words to take root. For that was how gossip grew. In twisting vines and leaves, it slipped into whatever crack or crevice it was able to find. Then it stretched, and it expanded, until even the strongest, sharpest spade couldn’t dig it out.

“She wouldn’t dare,” Lady Topple gasped. “She’ll be ruined. The scandal —”

“Will be gargantuan.” Lady Harmsworth licked her lips in anticipation. “I dare say even larger than when the Earl of Hollinbrook married his scullery maid after her belly began to swell. As if we were supposed to believe that she’d suddenly taken a liking to chocolate.”

“*Higher*,” Lady Farthing instructed the seamstress before she sighed with exasperation and yanked the needle and remaining pins out of the poor girl’s

hand. "Here, I'll do it myself." She ran a new piece of thread before turning her attention back to her friends. "Her husband would never allow such a thing. The Duke of Southwick, made a cuckold? When pigs take to the air, perhaps."

"He has a mistress," Lady Topple pointed out. "The French stage actress. I can't recall her name."

"By the time you do, he'll have already moved on to the next," Lady Farthing said with a touch of bitterness that did not go unnoticed by those in the room, all of whom were privy to the not-very-secret fact that Lord Farthing had a mistress of his own. "Because that is the privilege of men. To do as they please, with whom they please, whenever they please it. But a duchess should know better."

Lady Harmsworth shrugged. "Maybe she assumes that no one will find out. *I'm* not going to tell anyone. You know how I abhor gossip. Such a fickle business, spreading unsubstantiated claims of wrongdoing before they've even occurred. You can ruin someone's life that way."

"But . . ." Lady Topple picked at a scab on her neck where one of her beloved cats had scratched her. "You just told us."

"Yes, but I'm not going to tell anyone *else*." With a sniff, Lady Harmsworth turned up her nose. "Honestly, who do you take me for?"

By noon, the news of the Duchess of Southwick's pending affair had traveled through seven notable households and a teahouse on Brunswick Street. The brewing scandal was on the tip of every tongue, and it was a horserace to share the titillating gossip with anyone that hadn't heard it yet.

By the dinner hour, there was hardly a person in Grosvenor Square and the surrounding boroughs that hadn't learned of the duchess's daring plan.

She was going to take a lover!

She was going to demand a divorce!

She was the king's secret mistress!

All right, no one *really* believed the last one. Mostly because King George was both blind and mad, and a little bit because it was well known that the

Duchess of Southwick hadn't ventured away from her husband's country estate for the better part of eighteen months.

But the wild speculation was half the fun.

By half past midnight, the rumors had reached all the way to March House, a prestigious gentleman's club that specialized in high stakes gambling, beautiful women, and discretion. It swept through the elegant mahogany bars and across the felt card tables like wildfire, leaving a myriad of reactions in its wake.

Amazement.

Disbelief.

Shock.

One gentleman in particular, however, had a distinctly *different* response.

Tall and black-haired, with blue eyes that could slice like a knife and a mouth capable of great cruelty, the Duke of Southwick merely lifted a brow when word of his wife's planned indiscretion traveled to the far corner of the club where he was lounging against a wall, drink in hand.

"You don't say," he murmured, and the Earl of Calvern, who had divulged the news, paled considerably when he realized to just whom he was speaking.

"I—I . . . please forgive me, Your Grace."

Southwick—better known to what close friends he had by his Christian name of Ambrose—sipped his brandy. "For what?"

A bead of sweat formed at the earl's receding hairline and began a slow, trickling descent. "Ah . . . I . . . that is . . ."

"You have not caused me undue offense, Calvern."

"I haven't?" Calvern expelled an audible sigh of relief. "Are you certain?"

Ambrose's smile did not touch the corners of his eyes. "If my darling wife manages to snare herself a lover, I'll be the first to offer my congratulations."

"I . . . I'm afraid I don't understand."

"The duchess is as cold as the ice that you're using to water down perfectly good brandy. There's no man in England who would want to climb into bed beside her." Ambrose drained what remained of his drink, then set the empty glass aside for a servant to pick up. "I know that I don't. If you'll excuse me, Calvern, I've spied a more entertaining companion over there."

The duke walked away, but his absence did nothing to diminish the

rumors. If anything, his callous remarks—repeated in hushed tones again and again—enflamed them to a fever pitch, and by the end of the night all of London was on fire.

CHAPTER ONE

Completely oblivious to the gossip that was taking the *ton* by storm, Marabelle Anne Buxton, Duchess of Southwick, was in her rose garden with her hands in the dirt when her sister, Lady Katherine Colborne, came to call.

The siblings, three years apart in age, were as different as night was from day. Demure and soft spoken, Mara (as she preferred to be called) enjoyed books, gardening, and composing music while Kitty had always been drawn to more adventurous activities including but not limited to horseback riding, tight-rope walking, and sneaking out of her bedroom window to meet any manner of midnight suitors.

Even their appearances were opposite, with Mara taking after their father and Kitty their mother. As a result, Mara had dark auburn hair, solemn brown eyes, and a willowy thin build while Kitty was blonde, blue-eyed, and curvaceous.

Then there was the little fact that Kitty was wildly in love with her new husband, while Mara was...not.

"*There you are,*" Kitty declared as she came skipping across the lawn, the hem of her emerald green traveling habit dragging on the morning dew. "I've been looking everywhere. I was half afraid that pack of wild dogs that's been roaming around ate you for their breakfast." She stopped, her nose wrinkling. "What are you doing?"

"Pruning," Mara said calmly as she snipped off a dead rose and tossed it into the tin pail beside her. "If I don't remove the old growth, there won't be any room for new."

"Yes, I can see that." Gloved hands on her round hips, Kitty frowned down at her sister. "But why are *you* doing it? Where's your gardener? For heaven's sake, Mara. You're on your hands and knees. It's not seemly."

Swiping a bead of sweat from her brow, Mara sank onto her haunches, having been ready to take a rest even before Kitty arrived. The weather was unseasonably warm for the beginning of autumn. Generally this time of year

she came out wearing a jacket, overcoat, and even a scarf. But today, with the sun uncovered by clouds, she wore only a light lace shawl over a plain brown dress that had witnessed many a harvesting season.

“Who is here to see me, besides you? Mr. Burrow is tending to the apple trees in the orchard over the hill, and both of his sons were needed elsewhere. We’re reseeding the timothy fields today,” she said with no small amount of pride. “For the most even rows, it’s best if you have multiple people start off at the same—”

“I can assure you that I don’t care,” Kitty interrupted. “*Honestly*. Pruning roses. Seeding Thomas fields—”

“Timothy,” Mara corrected automatically.

“—you’re not a farmer, you’re a duchess. You should be sipping tea in the parlor, not digging in the dirt in the garden!” A sprig of coiled yellow bounced across Kitty’s cheek as she gave an agitated toss of her head. “Why did you bother to marry Southwick if you’re just going to act as you always did? Less you haven’t noticed, we needn’t forage for our supper anymore.”

A pang went through Mara.

A pang of loss. Of loneliness. Of lingering regret.

Eighteen months, two weeks, and four days ago, she thought silently. That was the last time her stomach had ached with hunger. But while her belly was now full, her soul was empty. And there was no amount of gardening that could fix that.

“You’re right,” she said, for often it was better to simply agree with her sister than try and argue. If Kitty said the sky was purple, you could either waste your breath trying to change her mind...or you could smile, nod, and go about your day. “Would you like to go inside? We’ve a fresh delivery of figs. If you pair them with—”

“What I’d like,” Kitty cut in, “is for you to explain why Lady Graham told *me* that Lady Bishop told *her* that the Baroness Halifax overheard Lady Cartwright and Mrs. Shipley saying that you are planning to have an affair!”

“What?” Her head spinning—she must have been out in the sun longer than she’d thought—Mara placed her shears in the pail and rose slowly to her feet. She could have sworn she’d heard her sister say...but no. No, that wasn’t possible. “They said *what?*”

Kitty grimaced. "Please don't make me repeat it."

"But..." She bit her bottom lip, a habit born from childhood when staying silent was the different between a careless knock on the side of the head and a bruise that stayed black for days. "But I didn't tell anyone."

Her sister's jaw dropped open. "You mean it's *true*? Marabelle!"

"It's not true. But it's also not *untrue*. I...I need some water." She went inside with Kitty trailing behind her, firing off a litany of questions that she was incapable of answering. Finding a pitcher of freshly squeezed lemonade in the parlor, she excused the maid and poured a glass for herself, then one for her sister. "We should probably sit," she said, gesturing at a set of matching blue velvet armchairs. A partially open window admitted a light breeze that cooled her flushed cheeks as she contemplated the best way to explain herself...and her decision.

Adultery, the sheer betraying act of it, was not something that Mara would have *ever* considered...under normal circumstances. But there was nothing normal about being rushed into a marriage to a man that intimidated her, enduring a wedding night that terrified her, and being subsequently abandoned at a castle that had never felt like home.

For nearly two years she'd waited here.

She'd grown lonely here.

She'd *withered* here, like a rose left too long on the branch. Yearning... yearning for what, precisely, she couldn't say. But she knew in her heart, in the depths of her being, that it wasn't this. That whatever she was meant to do with her life, it *wasn't this*. She had not survived the death of her mother and the abuse of her father to settle for isolation and desertion. For long days and even longer nights.

Alone.

Forgotten.

Forsaken.

"He never should have asked me to marry him," she said quietly, scratching at a spot of dirt on her skirt with her nail.

"What? Speak up," Kitty demanded. "You know I hate it when you mumble."

"Ambrose." Just speaking his name out loud made her tongue thicken and

the tiny hairs on her nape tingle.

Ambrose Pierce Nathaniel Buxton, 6th Duke of Southwick.

A more domineering man she'd never met. When he had first approached her at the Glendale Ball, she'd assumed it was some sort of jest. Even a cruel prank. Then he'd asked her to dance, and who was she to refuse a duke? Swirling around in his arms, with every pair of eyes in the room pinned on her, she'd felt curiously weightless. As if her feet weren't quite touching the ground. Before she was able to fully catch her breath, the dance was over and he was gone. Until he materialized at her doorstep the next morning, an enormous bouquet of tulips in hand, to take her on a carriage ride through Hyde Park with Kitty as a chaperone.

Her sister had chattered away like a magpie the entire time, while Mara had stared nervously at her lap, hardly daring to lift her chin and steal a peek at the man across from her for fear that if she did it would all turn out to be some elaborate illusion.

The Duke of Southwick, pay attention to *her*?

The idea that he knew her name, let alone where she lived, was astounding.

Even more astounding?

The peck of his lips on her cheek when he had bid her farewell.

He kissed her!

Her, Lady Marabelle Holden, of average appearance and little to no social consequence.

It happened again, the next day, when he took her to the theater and they sat high in a box and more people watched them than the stage. He kissed her once more in Kensington Gardens, the memory of which still made her blush whenever she summoned it. Finally, he kissed her on their wedding day. Right on the mouth, for everyone in attendance to see. Hardly more than a brush, really, but oh, how her knees had quivered! In part from the shock of what was happening, but a little bit...a little bit because back then, she'd still fancied herself half in love with him.

Now she knew better.

"You're talking nonsense," Kitty scoffed. "Of course you should have married him. He's a *duke*, Mara."

Her hand trembled ever-so-slightly as she brought the lemonade to her lips and took a sip. “But...but he doesn’t love me. I don’t think he has *ever* loved me. Nor I...nor I him. Not in a real way. Not in a way that counted.”

“Love?” Her sister’s laugh was sharp and far too cynical for a woman of her age and beauty. “What does love have to do with marriage? Absolutely nothing,” she replied before Mara could respond. “It’s a fairytale spun up by those that didn’t have to hide when they heard heavy footsteps on the stairs. Love is useless. Love is weakness. Love is what we should avoid, not strive for. Father loved Mama, and what did that get her? What did that get *us*?”

A rush of chills pressed ghostly fingertips down the length of Mara’s spine. “Nothing,” she whispered, but that wasn’t completely true. Love, or at least their father’s ill, twisted version of it, had gotten them plenty.

Bruises.

Beatings.

Brutality.

Cowering behind doors and under beds with her hand pressed flush against Kitty’s small mouth so that her sister wouldn’t scream out and reveal their hiding place. Biting her tongue so hard that it bled and then crying herself to sleep with the taste of blood, wet and metallic, flooding her mouth.

Silent tears, she reminded herself.

Always silent, or else *he* would come.

The monster that had killed their mother in the name of love.

That night when it happened-

No.

No, she wouldn’t think of it.

She *couldn’t*.

That part of her life was over. She’d ended it when she accepted Ambrose’s proposal...and unwittingly swapped one type of prison for another.

“He hasn’t been here in months,” she said, meeting Kitty’s gaze over the rim of her glass. “I can barely recall the last time that we exchanged more than a handful of words. I’m sure he has a mistress in London. It’s where he spends most of his time.”

“I’m sure he does,” Kitty shrugged. “They all do.”

“Even William?” she asked, referring to her sister’s husband of six months.

Kitty’s face went blank, like a page being turned over. “I didn’t come here to discuss William, I came here to find out why the entire *ton* is buzzing with news of your pending dalliance. You cannot *seriously* be considering taking a lover, Mara.”

She looked away. “Would that be so inconceivable?”

“For me and most of the women of my acquaintance?” Her sister shook her head. “No. But for *you*? Yes. Don’t you remember all of those times that you scolded me for climbing out the window? You’ve never met a rule that you didn’t want to follow, and now you want to have an illicit affair? Whomever started this rumor has obviously never met you.”

No, they probably hadn’t. Aside from Kitty, she didn’t have any close friends. And even then, sometimes Kitty felt more like an adversary than a confidant. She often grew weary of her sister’s combative nature, but who else did she have to talk to, if not Kitty? No one else cared enough to come visit her.

Not even her own husband.

Inwardly bracing herself, she took another sip of lemonade. It was sweet on her tongue. So sweet that it made her want to retch. Or maybe that was just her own nerves.

“But what if...what if it’s true?” she said.

“What’s true?” Kitty asked, wandering over to a shelf and picking up a crystal figurine of a lotus flower; but one of a hundred wedding presents that had been dropped off at the castle after Ambrose made it clear he didn’t want them littering his residence in London.

“The rumor.”

Tossing the crystal flower from one hand to the other, Kitty laughed. “Don’t be absurd. You wouldn’t.” Then she glanced over her shoulder at Mara’s face and her eyes widened. “Tell me you wouldn’t. If Southwick found out-”

“I didn’t tell anyone. There’s no one here *to* tell.” She rose from her seat and poured herself more lemonade. When she offered to do the same for Kitty, her sister shook her head again and frowned.

“You must have told someone, because it’s all that anyone is talking about. It’s only a matter of time before your husband finds out. Mara, this is *not* how affairs are done. You’re supposed to make *some* attempt at discretion.”

“I had planned to make all the attempts! I didn’t want people to know, least of all Ambrose.” The mere idea of her husband being cognizant of what she was planning filled her with dread. She could already picture his reaction. Those icy blue eyes raking across her with thinly veiled contempt. The disapproving pulse of his jaw. ‘*Another disappointment, Marabelle. Why am I not surprised?*’

“I’m just so lonely, Kitty,” she said despairingly. “Trapped here in this large empty house all on my own. I want...I want companionship. I want to discuss my day. I want to fall asleep next to someone night.” She squeezed her eyes shut as the truth was squeezed from her. “I want someone to know that I exist.”

“I know that you exist and this house isn’t empty, Mara. It’s filled to the brim with furniture, clothes, paintings....jewels! Why, look at that diamond pendant around your neck. It’s enormous,” said Kitty, not bothering to hide her envy. “You have everything that we ever dared dream of, and you want to risk it all for what? Some nameless lover that will keep you entertained for the span of a few weeks before Southwick has every bone in his body broken and you banished to some cottage in Scotland, never to be seen or heard from again? Don’t be absurd.”

“It’s not absurdity to want attention, and Ambrose isn’t going to care. He hasn’t cared about anything else I’ve done over the past year and a half, or even bothered to inquire into my well-being since Christmas. I could be dying or dead, for all he knows.” When bitterness threatened to creep into her tone, she swallowed it down. This was exactly why she wanted to seek out a male companion. So that she *didn’t* become hard, resentful, and discontented. So that she didn’t become...well, so that she didn’t become like her husband. “You said it yourself. Women in our situations have affairs all of the time. It’s practically expected.”

“Yes, but you’re not like the rest of us.”

As Mara had always been plagued by the notion that she didn’t quite fit in with her peers no matter how hard she tried, that little nine-word sentence

stung more than it should have.

“How is that?” she asked.

“You’re mannerly and decorous. Exasperatingly so.” Kitty flung out an arm. “And having relations with a man that is not your husband is bad. Entertaining, certainly. Wickedly exciting. But very bad.”

“I wouldn’t have relations with him,” she exclaimed, startled. “Why would you say that?”

Her sister eyed her closely. “Mara, what do you think an affair entails, precisely?”

“Spending time together?” she ventured.

“Time in *bed*, you mean. Naked.”

“Nak...no. No, no.” Blushing from the roots of her hair to the middle of her décolletage, Mara slid bonelessly into her chair. “I wouldn’t...that is...I don’t want that. I hate that.”

Kitty’s lips twisted in a humorless smile. “You hate fucking and it’s the only thing that William and I are any good at. Maybe we should just switch husbands. I’m *jesting*,” she said when Mara’s mouth dropped open. “Trust me, you wouldn’t want him. Although there’s no denying that Ambrose has a certain dark appeal. You know, I must admit that I was caught off guard when you announced your engagement. He never struck me as the sort of man that you’d ever be interested in.”

“He wasn’t.” On a sigh, Mara let her head slump back. “Until he told me I was pretty.”

And I was foolish enough to believe him.

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